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TWELVE
CONFLICT IN SEMISKILLED AND UNSKILLED OCCUPATIONS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Having concluded the last chapter with a discussion of free semiskilled and unskilled occupations, we turn in this chapter to an analysis of semi- and unskilled occupations found in organizations. Included in this latter category are laborers, machine operators, and, most importantly, assembly-line workers.

ALIENATION

In our view, alienation is the basic source of stress for semiskilled and unskilled workers in organizations. The concept of alienation is derived from the work of Karl Marx. Yet sociologists have almost always used the concept for their own purposes and largely ignored what Marx intended in his use of the term.[1] The use of the concept by American sociologists has had several defining characteristics. First, it has never been used in the radical political manner that Marx intended. Melvin Seeman pointed out that in his construction of at least one aspect of alienation he "clearly departs from the Marxian tradition by removing the critical . . . element in the idea of alienation."[2] Thus, in the hands of American sociologists alienation was deradicalized. Second,

[1]Joachim Israel, *Alienation: From Marx to Modern Sociology* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971.)

[2]Melvin Seeman, "On the Meaning of Alienation," *American Sociological Review*, 24 (1959), 512.

American sociologists endeavored to make alienation amenable to empirical research by making it clearer and more rigorous so that it could be operationalized, measured, and statistically analyzed. This led them to a conception of alienation that is different from Marx's conceptualization. As a result, there are, as we will see, few empirical tests of alienation directly from a Marxian theoretical perspective. Finally, and most important from a theoretical point of view, American sociologists have almost always transformed Marx's primarily structural theory of alienation into a social-psychological theory. It is not that a social-psychological approach is not valuable, but this has tended to drastically alter the Marxian approach. Let us examine Marx's structural theory and then turn to the American social-psychological orientation and the research on work in unskilled and semiskilled occupations that it has spawned.

Marx's Theory of Alienation from Work

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx begins his analysis of alienated labor in the following way:

> We proceed from an economic fact of the present. The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an even cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation* of the world of men.[3]

Marx begins his analysis of alienated labor with this contradiction. He sees the increased productive power of labor, yet he also sees the corresponding debasement of the worker. Through increased productivity, the worker can produce more than ever yet the rewards go to the capitalist, while for the worker there is only increasing privation. Marx takes the position that this contradiction exists because the capitalists, not the laborers, own and control the workers' activity and the products of this activity.[4]

In capitalism, alienation from work is the result of the lack of ownership and therefore control over those aspects of life that make the human being a *species being*. Marx's concept of species being is crucial not only to understanding alienation, but also to his criticisms of capitalist society and his image of the communist alternative. Species being can be loosely translated into the

[3]Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Dirk J. Struik, ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1844/1964), p. 107.

[4]There is much support in the current literature to substantiate the notion that Marx's analysis of alienation from work rests on the dual concepts of ownership and control. Peter B. Archibald, "Using Marx's Theory of Alienation Empiricially," *Theory and Society*, 6 (1978), 119–132; Ernest Mandel and George Novak, *The Marxist Theory of Alienation* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970); Bertell Ollman, *Alienation*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Wayne Plasek, "Marxist and American Sociological Conceptions of Alienation: Implications for Social Problems Theory," *Social Problems*, 21 (1974), 316–328; Ron J. Stanfield, "Marx's Social Economics: The Theory of Alienation," *Review of Social Economy*, 37 (1979), 298–312; Adam Schaff, *Alienation as a Social Phenomenon* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980); Michael H. Best and William E. Connolly, *The Political Economy* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1982).

idea of human potential. People have yet to fully achieve species being, but it is possible that they will in the future. Prior to capitalism, the difficulties involved in simply surviving made it impossible for people to approach their human potential. Throughout history various societies (for example, feudalism) have prevented the expression of species being. Capitalism, too, impedes species being, but it also provides the tools (such as advanced technologies) that could eventually allow people to reach their human potential.

What is species being? To Marx, species being is a state of natural interconnectedness. People are intimately tied to their activities (their work), their products, other people, as well as their self-expression. Capitalism (as well as all other known societies) serves to destroy this natural interconnectedness. Hence, from Marx's point of view, capitalism needs to be overcome. In its place, he would prefer a communist society. What is communism? From Marx's perspective, *communism* is a society in which there is natural interconnectedness, in which species being fully exists for the first time. Clearly, none of the societies that now call themselves communist approximate this model. In fact, they impede species being as much as, or more than, capitalist societies. Were Marx alive today he would be a critic of *both* contemporary capitalist *and* communist societies.

It is the structure of ownership and control inherent in the social organization of capitalist production that destroys species being.[5] As originally conceptualized by Marx, it is this destruction of natural interconnectedness, of species being, that is *alienation.* More specifically, alienation from work is caused by structural factors that reach their peak in the social organization of capitalist production.[6] Consequently, alienation for Marx is not reducible to social-psychological phenomena. However, while Marx's main focus was on structural causes of alienation, he was certainly cognizant of the social-psychological consequences of alienation.[7] Although Seeman and others refer to these social-psychological consequences as alienaton, in Marx's work they are "simply" the consequences of structural alienation. Under capitalism, the worker may feel powerless, isolated, estranged, but from a Marxian perspec-

[5]In addition to cited works by Archibald, Plasek, and Schaff see the following: George Ritzer, *Toward an Integrated Sociological Paradigm: The Search for an Exemplar and an Image of the Subject Matter* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1981); Richard Schacht, *Alienation* (New York: Doubleday, 1970).

[6]We do not mean to imply that alienation from work cannot or does not exist in modern socialist/communist societies. It can and does, but a thorough examination of this topic falls outside of the space limitations of this book. For an introduction to the theoretical dimensions of the problem see, Ben Agger, ed., *Western Marxism: An Introduction* (Santa Monica, CA: Goodyear Publishing Company, Inc., 1979).

[7]Several observers argue that, for Marx, alienation is *both* objective and subjective. Schacht describes the objective manifestations of alienation as taking on a structural-relative character while subjective alienation takes on a perspective-relative character. In a similar vein, Schaff refers to objective alienation as alienation and subjective alienation as self-alienation. Archibald also argues that according to Marx alienation from work is both a structural and a psychological phenomenon. Writes Archibald: "Thus in Marx's own usage alienation does sometimes appear to be structural, as with the definition of alienation 'as appropriation' " (p. 124). However, Archibald is quick to point out that Marx also often referred to the psychological reactions of individuals to structural conditions as indications of alienation.

tive it is wrong to define alienation in terms of these feelings; rather, alienation is an objective/structural social condition.

Implicit in our interpretation of Marx's theory of alienation from work is the notion that objective/structural alienation can be thought of as an independent causal variable with corresponding dependent, subjective, social-psychological manifestations. There are several authors[8] who conceptualize Marx's theory of alienation in this way, but the clearest exposition of this position is found in Schaff.

> We must look for sources of subjective alienation in appropriate phenomena of objective alienation; to overcome a given subjective alienation it is necessary to eliminate its source in the domain of objective alienation.[9]

Alienation can be seen as an independent, structural variable with various corresponding social-psychological manifestations appearing in the minds, the consciousness, of individual actors.[10]

What, for Marx, is the structural source of alienation? It can be nothing other than the structure of capitalist society, a structure that blocks the natural interconnectedness of species being: it stands between people and their products, their productive activity, other people, and even themselves. One key element of that structure is the social class system in which workers must sell their labor time to capitalists who own the means of production. Because of the capitalists and their system, workers do not have control over their products, their activities, their social relationships, and even themselves.

Empirical Research on Marx's Theory of Alienation

Although it has not often been done, Marx's largely structural theory of alienation from work can be studied empirically.[11] Maurice Zeitlin studied the

[8]See, Ritzer, *Toward an Integrated Sociological Paradigm*; Schacht. *Alienation*; Archibald, "Using Marx's Theory of Alienation Empirically."

[9]Schaff, *Alienation as a Social Phenomenon*, p. 214.

[10]There is a "casual" connection between objective and subjective alienation. However, it should be added that we are not, nor is Schaff, arguing for a simple, undirectional, non-dialectical approach. Hence, the independent-dependent relationship between objective and subjective alienation is only one moment in a complex totality of mutual interaction. People are not totally determined and inevitably constrained by the external structural of objective alienation. While the structure of capitalism may shape and influence people's attitudes and behavior, people, according to Marx, are endowed with consciousness, creativity, and intentionality and can act back upon the structural source of their oppression. As Marx and Engels note, "circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances;" Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, Part One, C. J. Arthur, ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 59.

[11]We disagree with those who argue that alienation is basically a philosophic/normative concept and hence not amenable to empirical verification. See the following: Ollman, *Alienation;* John Goldthorpe et al., *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Igor S. Kon, "The Concept of Alienation in Modern Society," *Social Research*, 34 (1967), 507–528. To be sure, alienation for Marx was a normative concept. The moral revulsion and disdain that Marx had for the alienation of work under capitalism is widely recognized and clearly etched in the passion of his work. Yet Marx was not simply a philosopher of morality and ethics. We would argue that Marx recognized the advantages of the empirical approach and incorporated certain elements into his general methodology. See the following: Archibald, "Using Marx's Theory of Alienation Empirically;" Lloyd Easton, "Alienation and Empiricism in Marx's

relationship between alienation (partly structural) and revolution among industrial workers in Cuba shortly after the Castro revolution.[12]

Rhodes tested the relationship between objective and subjective alienation among a group of students.[13]

In a study of middle and lower echelon workers in administrative bureaucracies in Belgium, Bacharach and Aiken also conceptualized alienation as an objective phenomena.[14]

Finally, Walczak studied a national cross-section of all adult workers employed in the United States,[15] utilizing objective/structural alienation as his independent variable.

Although we do have some research that focuses on Marx's structural theory of alienation, we really know very little about this type of alienation among semi-skilled and unskilled workers in the United States. This is an important failing in the field that points to the need for much more research on the structural aspects of alienation among such workers.

Social-Psychological Studies of Alienation

While the empirical studies of structural alienation in semiskilled and unskilled occupations are few, this is not the case with social-psychological studies of alienation.[16]

Although there are many pieces of social-psychological research to choose from, we focus here on Robert Blauner's definition of alienation, which breaks it down into four social-psychological components.[17] The first

Thought," *Social Research*, 37 (1970), 402–427; Z.A. Jordan, *The Evolution of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967); Al Szymanski, "Marxism and Science," *Insurgent Sociologist*, 3 (1973), 25–38; Richard Schacht, "Alienation, the 'Is-Ought' Gap and Two Sorts of Discord," in Felix Geyer and David Schweitzer, eds., *Theories of Alienation: Critical Perspectives in Philosophy and Social Science* (The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976). In fact, we would agree with Archibald who claims that it is wrong to even ask *whether* alienation is a normative or a descriptive concept, for it is both.

[12]Maurice Zeitlin, "Alienation and Revolution," *Social Forces*, 45 (1966), 224–236.

[13]Lewis A. Rhodes, "Objective and Subjective Alienation of Labor: The Student Case," Paper presented at the International Sociological Association meetings in Sweden, 1978.

[14]Samuel B. Bacharach and Michael Aiken, "The Impact of Alienation, Meaninglessness, and Meritocracy on Supervisor and Subordinate Satisfaction," *Social Forces*, 57 (1979), 853–870.

[15]David Walczak, "An Empirical Test of Karl Marx's Theory of Alienation from Work," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Maryland, 1982.

[16]There have been several empirical studies which are concerned with various dimensions of the workworld but which center on alienation from society and not alienation from work. As a result, we will not consider these studies. The interested reader should consult the following examples: Charles M. Bonjean and Michael D. Grimes, "Bureaucracy and Alienation: A Dimensional Approach," *Social Forces*, 49 (1970), 622–630; Melvin Kohn, "Occupational Structure and Alienation," *American Journal of Sociology*, 82 (1976), 111–180; Donald V. Nightingale and Jean-Marie Toulouse, "Alienation in the Workplace: A Comparative Study in French and English-Canadian Organizations," *Canadian Journal of Behavorial Science*, 10 (1978).

[17]Robert Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). This approach has been used in many studies. More recent are William A. Rushing's *Class, Culture, and Alienation* (Lexington MA: Lexington Books, 1972), and Melvin L. Kohn and Carmi Schooler, *Work and Personality: An Inquiry Into the Impact of Social Stratification* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1983).

element is *powerlessness,* or the feeling of domination by other people, or objects, and the feeling of being unable to reduce or eliminate that control. *Meaninglessness* is the second aspect of alienation and involves people's inability to see their role in relation to other roles and their purpose in the organization. Third, alienated people suffer from *isolation;* they lack a feeling of belonging to the work situation and identification with the workplace. Finally, alienation involves *self-estrangement*—feeling unable to express one's unique abilities, potentialities, or personalities in one's work. According to Blauner: "Further consequences of self-estranged work may be boredom and monotony, the absence of personal growth, and a threat to self-approved occupational identity."[18]

Assembly-line workers. The occupation that epitomizes social-psychological alienation is assembly-line work, in which the major source of alienation is the omnipresent assembly line. Assembly-line workers perform their assigned tasks (such as tightening a bolt, fastening a fender) at set intervals and no variation is allowed. For 8 hours every workday they perform the same task at set intervals. Respite comes when the line breaks down, an event many workers hope for and sometimes contribute to by sabotaging the machinery. Walker and Guest have said that the assembly-line worker is "the classic symbol of the subjection of man to the machine in our industrial age."[19] In Blauner's estimation, it is the automobile assembly-line industry in which "technological, organizational and economic factors" combine to produce the most alienating work environment.[20] More recently, a scathing critique of work on a French automobile assembly line concluded that such work is "destructive to health, reasonable existence, and human dignity."[21]

A spot-welder on one automobile assembly line describes his job this way:

> I stand in one spot, about two- or three-feet area, all night. The only time a person stops is when the line stops. We do about thirty-two jobs per car, per unit, forty-eight units an hour, eight hours a day. Thirty-two times forty-eight times eight. Figure it out, that's how many times I push that button.[22]

Says another welder: "What's there to say? A car comes, I weld it. One hundred and one times an hour."[23] Another assembly-line worker describes the effect such work had on him:

> Sometimes I felt just like a robot. You push a button and you go this way. You become a mechanical nut. You get a couple of beers and go to sleep at night.

[18]Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom,* p. 26.

[19]Charles R. Walker and Robert Guest, *Man on the Assembly Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 9.

[20]Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom,* p. 182.

[21]John Calder, Introduction to Robert Linhart, *The Assembly Line.* Translated by Margaret Crosland (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), p. 10.

[22]Studs Terkel, *Working* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 159.

[23]Barbara Garson., *All the Livelong Day* (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin, 1977), p. 88.

> Maybe one, two o'clock in the morning, my wife is saying, "Come on, come on, leave it." I'm still workin' that line. Three o'clock in the morning, five o'clock. Tired. I have worked that job all night. Saturday. Sunday, still working. It's just ground into you. My wife taps me on the shoulder.
>
> Tappin' me didn't mean nothin'. (Laughs)[24]

Assembly-line operations in settings other than the automobile industry are just as alienating. United States Department of Agriculture chicken inspectors are required to inspect up to seventy birds per minute which adds up to over 35,000 daily. Line hypnosis is an assembly-line affliction where the inspectors "lose awareness and concentration" and the "birds become just a blurred yellow vision."[25]

These, of course, are but a few descriptions—several volumes could be filled with such images of assembly-line work. What is it about the assembly line that makes it such a nightmare for many people?[26]

For one thing, assembly-line workers are almost totally powerless. They are unable to control the pace of the line. The machine pace is set by the organization and is designed to get the maximum productivity from each employee. Once the speed of the line is set, there is little the workers can do to affect it, and consequently they are unable to control their own work pace. This is perhaps the most demoralizing aspect of their job, and differentiates their work from virtually all other occupations. There is some degree of powerlessness in virtually all occupations, but most workers are able to have some control over the pace of work or the variety of work. Even the lowliest clerks can generally vary their own work pace and make their work more interesting by changing the tasks they perform.

Assembly-line workers are also characterized by an inability to control their immediate supervisors. For one thing, it is difficult for them to interact with their foremen. The combination of noise, job pressure, and need for continual attention to the line make it almost impossible to communicate with anyone. Even if assembly-line workers could communicate with their supervisors, they would have little chance of affecting their behavior. In fact, they have few resources which they can use to gain something from their superiors, for they have few skills and are easily replaceable. Their almost total unimportance to the organization further increases the assembly-line workers' sense of powerlessness. They lack even the power to withdraw occasionally, because their absence from the line would be noticed immediately. It is also hard for them to quit, because they have few skills and would find it extremely difficult to find other positions.

For a variety of reasons, assembly-line workers find their jobs meaningless. They are unable to see what their very specialized task has to do with the work of others on the line or of those who work at other levels in the organization. They also are unable to see what tightening their bolts have to do with

[24]Terkel, *Working*, p. 175.

[25]Kathy Sawyer, "On the Chicken Line: Trying to Catch the Bad Ones, Quickly," *The Washington Post* (September 2, 1979), p. A1.

[26]For a dissenting view on this see, William H. Form, *Blue-Collar Stratification: Autoworkers in Four Countries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), especially pp. 113–137.

the finished product (and in many cases they do not even know what the finished product is). Finally, the intrinsic nature of the job contributes to a feeling of meaninglessness. It is so specialized, uninteresting, and unimportant that it is difficult for anyone to derive any satisfaction from their work.

The assembly-line workers' problems are compounded by their isolation. The noise and demands of the line prevent interaction on the job, making it difficult for an informal work group to develop. The workers are also isolated from all levels of management in order to allow managers to maintain what they consider to be proper distance from workers. Assembly-line work is frequently found in large plants, and plant size also serves to inhibit the development of personal relationships. Huge cafeterias, parking lots, and rest rooms are scarcely designed to encourage social interaction.

Finally, those on the assembly line are particularly prone to self-estrangement. The work is boring and monotonous, requiring continual attention but little real involvement in the task or the organization. Hence, the workers spend a good part of their time daydreaming. No real skills or abilities are needed and they are unable to express themselves in their work.

The focus here on semiskilled and unskilled occupations is not to say that workers in other types of occupations are not alienated. Studies have demonstrated that even high-status professionals,[27] semiprofessionals,[28] and white-collar bank employees[29] can also be alienated. Nevertheless, the bulk of the evidence indicates that unskilled and semiskilled workers are more likely to be alienated and more likely to exhibit a high degree of alienation.

Alienation and Technology

Blauner's previously cited study examines alienation in four types of industries and points out the effect of technology on alienation. The automobile worker's alienation is attributed to the technology of the assembly line.[30] As we have seen, the machine controls the pace of work; the speed is set by external forces and is invariable; the line requires constant attention; interaction is made impossible because of the nature of assembly-line work; the contributions of individuals are small and they don't know how they contribute to the final product; and few skills or abilities are needed to perform the work. Blauner compares the automobile industry to three other industries (printing, textiles, and chemicals) in an effort to determine the relationship between technology and alienation.

[27]George Miller, "Professionals in Bureaucracy: Alienation Among Industrial Scientists," *American Sociological Review,* 32 (1967), 755–768.

[28]Leonard Pearlin, "Alienation From Work: A Study of Nursing Personnel," *American Sociological Review,* 27 (1962), 314–326.

[29]Louis A. Zurcher Jr., et al., "Value Orientation, Role Conflict, and Alienation from Work: A Cross Cultural Study," *American Sociological Review,* 30 (1965), 539–548.

[30]In a cross-cultural study comparing different technologies in four societies, Form has reaffirmed the primacy of technology in determining worker's actions. See William H. Form, "Technology and Social Behavior of Workers in Four Countries: A Sociotechnical Perspective," *American Sociological Review,* 37 (1972), 727–738.

Printers. Printing, a skilled occupation discussed in Chapter 11, is the least alienating of the four occupations Blauner studied. Perhaps the major reason is that printing had been virtually untouched by technological change at the time of Blauner's study. (Since that time computer technology has radically transformed printing, but we will restrict ourselves to Blauner's discussion of the technology of printing as it existed several decades ago.) Much of the work was still done by hand or by traditional machine methods. Other factors also contributed to the relative lack of alienation among printers. Printing plants were comparatively small; management, generally, was by traditional rather than bureaucratic means; there was high job security; and, as we saw in the last chapter, labor unions in printing were quite powerful. Above all, however, is the fact that the machine had not taken over the printing industry and the printers retained their traditional skills and control over the means of production. The printers' job was complex and required the mastery of a series of diverse skills. An apprenticeship period of from 4 to 6 years was necessary before one could be considered a journeyman printer. The complexity and diversity of the work militated, at least until recently, against its standardization and mechanization. The skill required enabled printers to set their own pace and determine their own techniques, tools, and the sequence in which they would perform their tasks. Each occupation in printing was different and this gave the printer great latitude in terms of decision making, initiative, and judgment. Further, printers were relatively free to try out new ideas, move about the plant, and work without supervisory control. Because of these factors, printing was by far the most meaningful occupation in the Blauner study. It allowed those in the occupation the opportunity for self-actualization. As a result, printers were highly pleased with the intrinsic aspects of their work. Blauner neatly summarized the position of the printer at the time:

> In some ways, the printer is almost an anachronism in the age of large-scale industrial organizations. His relation to his work is reminiscent of our picture of the independent craftsman of preindustrial times. Craft technology, favorable economic conditions, and powerful work organizations and traditions result in the highest level of freedom and control in the work process among all industrial workers today.[31]

Textile workers. Blauner found textile workers more alienated than printers, but less alienated than automobile assembly-line workers. This is because at the time the textile industry, technologically, was a throwback to the early days of industrialization. The basic job in this industry was tending a number of machines which did most of the production. The jobs themselves required little skill because most of the necessary skill had been built into the machines. Because textiles was a machine industry, the workers were faced with unvarying work pressure, an inability to control that pressure, and an inability to choose techniques or to move around freely. Further, the technology which forced each worker to handle several machines also had the need, built in, for close supervision. In a craft technology, close supervision is not

[31]Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom,* p. 56.

needed and is even resented, because of the strong sense of craftsmanship among skilled workers. In the assembly-line technology, close supervision is not needed because the machines control the work pace and the quality. In the textile industry, however, neither the machines nor the norms of craftsmanship insured quality or quantity production. Further, the textile industry was composed mainly of small, marginal firms that had to get maximum productivity to stay in business. Despite these alienating aspects of textile work, it was not as alienating as the automobile assembly line. Blauner accounts for this in several ways, citing the traditional, more personalized nature of the organization; the social cohesion of the workers resulting from their life in small Southern towns; the small size of the plants, which allowed for considerable interaction; and the fact that most textile workers (almost half of whom were females) had few career ambitions. Above all, however, is the fact that the machine-tending technology allowed the workers more freedom than their counterparts on the assembly line.

Workers in continuous-process industries. Most theories have accepted the notion that as technology advances work will become increasingly alienating, but Blauner found that in the technologically advanced continuous-process industry there is, in fact, a decline in alienation. In continuous-process industries such as chemicals

> . . . the flow of materials; the combination of different chemicals; and the temperature pressure, and speed of the process are regulated by automatic control devices. The automatic controls make possible a continuous flow in which raw materials are introduced at the beginning of the process and a large volume of the product continually emerges at the end stage.[32]

Few employees are needed in such industries, and these employees are generally thinly spread throughout the numerous buildings that make up a particular plant. Because the number of employees is already minimal and because the amount of production is determined by the machine, not the individual, there is a high degree of job security in continuous-process industries. The employee does little physical work; instead, "the work of the chemical operator is to monitor these automatic processes: his tasks include observing dials and gauges; taking readings of temperatures, pressures, and rates of flow; and writing down these ratings."[33] Employees have a great deal of responsibility for the maintenance of smooth operations and for the care of expensive machinery. In performing these tasks, they work in small groups of from three to seven people. There is little standardization of work and most of the time is spent in waiting for, or trying to prevent, a breakdown and trying to repair it when it occurs. Because of the nature of their jobs chemical workers have considerable freedom in terms of time and movement. There is no continuous pressure; rather, the work routine is highly erratic. The work environment is relaxed and employees can set their own pace except in the case of an emergency. They are also free to determine the quality of their work and

[32]Ibid., p. 125

[33]Ibid., p. 133.

the methods they will employ. There is much free time and few employees and this provides the basis for the development of highly cohesive work groups. There is ample chance for advancement in the organization for those who are deserving. All these factors, which stem primarily from the nature of the continuous-process technology, enable chemical workers to be less alienated than assembly-line or textile workers.

Other studies. Shepard has replicated and expanded upon Blauner's research.[34] In the replication phase, Shepard compared craft, assembly-line, and automated, continuous-process workers in the automobile and oil industries on five (rather than four) dimensions of alienation. In general, Shepard found the same curvilinear relationship between alienation and technology uncovered by Blauner. That is, alienation increases as we move from craft to assembly-line technology, but decreases as we move from the assembly-line to automated, continuous-process technology.

Shepard extended Blauner's research by attempting to discover whether the relationship between alienation and technology also held for white-collar clerical workers. Without going into details, we can simply say that the same basic relationship existed (that is, computer workers were less alienated than office machine operators and nonmechanical clerks) although not nearly as strongly as is the case for blue-collar workers. Similar support for the Blauner thesis in white-collar work has been reported by Kirsch and Lengermann.[35]

Other Alienation from Work Studies

While the social-psychological conceptualization of alienation has been widely utilized, not everyone concerned with alienation from work has followed the Seeman/Blauner tradition.

Aiken and Hage do not utilize the Seeman/Blauner approach, but they do conceptualize alienation as an individually perceived, subjective reaction.[36] In fact, Aiken and Hage's alienation scale is really a job satisfaction scale. Many sociologists have been prone to equate alienation and job satisfaction, but for our purposes it is best to keep these concepts distinct.[37] It should not be assumed that just because people are dissatisfied with their work that they are alienated. As we have seen, alienation has very specific structural and social-psychological characteristics.

[34]Jon Shepard, *Alienation and Automation: A Study of Office and Factory Workers* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1971). For further confirmation of Blauner's thesis on blue-collar workers see, Stephen Cotgrove, "Alienation and Automation," *British Journal of Sociology,* 23 (1972), 437–451; Michael Fullan, "Industrial Technology and Worker Integration in the Organization," *American Sociological Review,* 33 (1970), 1028–1039.

[35]Barbara A. Kirsch and Joseph J. Lengermann, "An Empirical Test of Robert Blauner's Ideas on Alienation in Work as Applied to Different Type Jobs in a White-Collar Setting," *Sociology and Social Research,* 56 (1972), 180–194.

[36]Michael Aiken and Gerald Hage, "Organizational Alienation: A Comparative Analysis," *American Sociological Review,* 31 (1966), 497–507.

[37]See, for example, George M. Torrance, "The Underside of the Hospital: Recruitment and the Meaning of Work Among Non-Professional Hospital Workers," in Audrey Wipper ed., *The Sociology of Work: Papers in Honour of Oswald Hall* (Ottawa, Canada: Carleton Unversity Press, 1984), pp. 211–231.

In any case, Aiken and Hage argue that they are interested in studying alienation from work and alienation from expressive relations, two categories that they see as comparable with Marx's notion of alienation from the process of production and alienation from fellow workers. They operationally define alienation from work, that is, the process of production, in the following manner:

> How *satisfied* are you with the progress you are making towards the goals which you set for yourself in your present position? On the whole, how *satisfied* are you with your present job when you consider the expectations you had when you took the job?[38] [Emphasis added]

These are but two questions in the Aiken and Hage alienation from work scale; the other five components in this scale also measure one's satisfaction with various components of the job. To measure alienation from expressive relations Aiken and Hage operationally define this concept in terms of employee satisfaction with one's supervisor and with one's fellow workers.

Aiken and Hage proceed to relate alienation to two components of formal organizations—centralization and formalization. The findings indicate that alienation, as conceptualized by them, is positively related to both dimensions of formal organization.

Aiken and Hage use a social-psychological measure of alienation, albeit one that is different from the Seeman/Blauner tradition. Another approach is to view alienation in behavioral, rather than social-psychological terms. Thus, for example, absenteeism[39] and turnover[40] rates have been used as behavioral indicators of psychological alienation.

COPING WITH SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL ALIENATION

Workers' Actions

There is a rich literature in occupational sociology on the efforts of individuals in unskilled and semiskilled occupations in organizations to flesh out their worklives. Let us now turn to a discussion of worker actions directed at coping with alienation in these occupations.

Sailors. In a study of the sailor aboard ship, Zurcher describes the "underlife" that develops there to make life more palatable.[41] Some of the informal practices are recognized by the authorities on board, while others per-

[38]Aiken and Hage, "Organizational Alienation," 501.

[39]Frank Hull, "Organizational Level Correlates of Alienation as Indicated by Absenteeism and Turnover Rates." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Sociological Society, 1979.

[40]Frank Hull, Nathalie S. Friedman and Theresa F. Rogers, "The Effect of Technology on Alienation from Work: Testing Blauner's Inverted U-Curve Hypothesis for 110 Industrial Organizations and 245 Retrained Printers," *Work and Occupations,* 9 (1982), 31–57.

[41]Louis A. Zurcher, Jr., "The Sailor Aboard Ship: A Study of Role Behavior in a Total Institution," *Social Forces,* 43 (1965), 389–400.

sist although they often conflict with the smooth running of the ship. Examples of the first type are bypassing chains of command to cut red tape, use of the grapevine for information, and the use of "unofficial, pirated, or homemade parts to maintain machinery in full operation."[42] All these functions do help in the operation of the ship and grant a measure of individuality to the sailor. But there are also what Goffman calls "secondary adjustments," which seem to be dysfunctional for the ship while they are functional for the sailor in retaining some individuality within a total institution. Examples of such secondary adjustments are deals to get a better bunk, snacks, haircuts, first priority on leaves, private use of the ship's property, and deviations from the prescribed mode of dress.

Letter carriers. The letter carrier is another example of an occupation in which people seek to make their worklives more meaningful through a variety of informal practices.[43] Despite the formal rules and supervision, the actual work behavior of letter carriers is quite different from their formal job description. Because they are on their own most of the time, they have little difficulty reorganizing their work routine to suit them better. For example, the work route is designed to take 8 hours to complete, but carriers are normally able to complete it in much less time. When the route is being timed, they are careful to follow the rules of the post office exactly, but once the routine has been set they utilize a variety of shortcuts which may violate formal rules, but which enable them to complete their route sooner. Such "illegal" shortcuts as criss-crossing streets, using personal automobiles, walking on lawns, and failing to deliver all the mail enables letter carriers to have an hour or more of free time each day.

A threat to these informal practices is the substitute carrier, who may not know the informal norms of mail delivery and therefore may do the work more efficiently than the regular carrier without breaking the rules of the post office. To protect themselves from this, carriers have instituted a norm, which is known to the substitutes, that substitutes must take longer than regulars to do the job. If substitutes violate this norm, the regular carriers have a number of sanctions at their disposal. They may not tell the substitutes how to work the route, or they might "forget" to tell them of some vicious dogs to be wary of, or they might actively interfere with substitutes' work by placing the sacks of mail they need in the wrong pick-up boxes.

Assembly-line workers. As mentioned earlier, the occupation that best embodies all the characteristics of alienation is the automobile assembly-line worker. Two recent studies by Runcie[44] and Houbolt[45] analyze the various

[42]Ibid., 394.

[43]Dean Harper and Frederick Emmert, "Work Behavior in a Service Industry," *Social Forces*, 42 (1963), 216–225.

[44]John F. Runcie, "By Days I Make the Cars," *Harvard Business Review*, 58 (May/June, 1980), 106–115.

[45]Jan Houbolt, "An Empirical Critique of Blauner's Concept of Powerlessness on the Automobile Assembly Line." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society, 1982.

means developed by the assembly-line worker for coping with alienation from work.

Runcie spent 5 months as an employee in an automobile assembly plant in a medium-sized city in the Midwest. In general, Runcie found that workers cope with the monotony and boredom of the assembly line in one of two ways: workers either take off (physical withdrawal) or stay in the plant and find ways to make their jobs more meaningful.

In terms of withdrawal, Runcie cites the high absentee rate in the plant. As one utility worker suggested, "People take time off because they're bored. They get tired of the same old routine."[46] Runcie notes that during particular times of the year, for example deer-hunting season, so many workers were absent that other workers were asked to work two shifts. However, even during the rest of the year, absenteeism was still a problem. Runcie says, "On many mornings the line could not start due to the shortage of workers. Often we would stand around waiting for the company to find people to fill the holes in the line."[47]

Absenteeism is not the only method used by automobile assembly-line workers to cope with alienation. While on the job, workers have devised several ways of coping. Although not a major coping technique, Runcie found that sabotage does exist. Automobile assembly-line workers do, on occasion, let cars go by without doing their work. According to Runcie: "Sometimes they take their frustrations out on the car or the tools themselves—breaking tools, banging tools against the bench, or causing air wrenches to emit high-pitched shrieks."[48] As we will see shortly, psychological mechanisms and games are also utilized by workers to cope with alienation. Further, as one worker told Houbolt:

> I've taken my portable television and watched a football game or baseball. I've had it down there several times. I can watch it by getting ahead on the job.[49]

Both Runcie and Houbolt found that drugs are also used by workers as a means of coping with alienation. In relation to drug-taking and supervisor indulgence, one worker told Houbolt:

> As long as you do that job without stopping the line, that's the main thing. Basically they don't give you too much trouble. Guys drink, smoke pot right on the line, as long as you do your job it's all right. You're not supposed to, but you keep it hid . . . but the foreman also knows it's going on.[50]

As a means of coping with boredom one worker said, "If I smoke (marijuana), I can stare at a spot on the floor all day long and not get bored."[51] While drugs

[46]*Runcie*, "By Days I Make the Cars," 109.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Houbolt, "An Empirical Critique of Blauner's Concept of Powerlessness on the Automobile Assembly Line," 3.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Runcie, "By Days I Make the Cars," 109.

are taken on the job, often with tacit supervisory knowledge, as a means of coping with alienation, drug-taking can lead to serious risks involving production and the health and safety of the worker. While many workers may be able to "run their jobs as good as when they're straight,"[52] many cannot. One worker told Runcie:

> On second shift I've seen them take a guy and hide him 'cause he was so messed up. I don't like to get stoned when I'm working 'cause I don't know if I've done the whole car or not.[53]

It has been suggested that alcohol is a drug also used by employees as a means of coping with alienation from work. However, recent empirical evidence casts doubt on a simple and direct relationship between alienation and drinking behavior. Fennell, Rodin, and Kantor found only a modest relationship between job stress and frequency of drinking.[54] More relevant to the discussion here on alienation is a recent study by Seeman and Anderson.[55] They studied the relationship between three types of alienation and frequency as well as quantity of alcohol consumed. Alienation from work was defined in terms of self-estrangement, or the lack of intrinsic satisfaction in one's work, as well as a generalized sense of societal powerlessness—or the lack of control or sense of mastery over one's life outside of the workplace. The third type of alienation was social isolation, or the respondent's lack of attachment to relatives, friends, and neighbors.

Seeman and Anderson found that societal powerlessness, not alienation from work (self-estrangement), was consistently related to both frequency of alcohol consumption and the average amount of alcohol consumed on each occasion. In terms of at least one dimension (network support) of the isolation type of alienation, Seeman and Anderson found, contrary to expectations, that workers who were integrated into a network of friends tended to drink *more* per occasion than those who were isolated.

Seeman and Anderson also analyzed the interrelationship of the various types of alienation. They found that drinking behavior is most troublesome for those who experience high societal alienation (powerlessness), are tied into a network of support, and intrinsically involved in their work.

In addition to alienation from work, Seeman and Anderson studied the effects of four other work-related variables. Neither job satisfaction, attitudes toward status attainment, career mobility, nor substantive complexity at work were found to be related to frequency or quantity of alcohol consumption. Thus, although the relationship is neither simple nor clear-cut, alienation (societal powerlessness) seems to be the best predictor of occupationally related drinking problems.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Mary L. Fennell, Miriam B. Rodin and Glenda K. Kantor, "Problems in the Work Setting, Drinking, and Reasons for Drinking," *Social Forces*, 60 (1981), 114–132.

[55]Melvin Seeman and Carolyn S. Anderson, "Alienation and Alcohol: The Role of Work, Mastery, and Community in Drinking Behavior," *American Sociological Review*, 48 (1983), 60–77.

Working fast and getting ahead on the job is another method used by workers to cope with alienation. Workers can get ahead on the assembly line by working as fast as possible, thereby getting ahead of themselves and gaining time for a breather. This allows them to exercise a measure of control over their work. Other methods for exercising "control" over the line include trading jobs, alternating jobs, and doubling or tripling up on jobs. One worker in the Houbolt study describes the doubling-up process as follows:

> One guy will *just do thirty* jobs, a half hour's worth, and the other guy will do whatever he wants for that hour and then catch up the *next half hour*. He can leave the line and wander around. Now that's against the rules, but the foreman just looks the other way.[56]

Besides allowing the worker a modicum of control over the production process, doubling up gives the worker a break from the monotony and boredom of the assembly line. Further, these shortcuts allow free time for other activities which may include reading a newspaper, napping, letter writing, or playing checkers.

Restriction of output. The richest descriptions of informal practices designed to alleviate alienation come from studies of the effort to restrict production. The famous studies at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company in Chicago, first brought these informal practices to light.[57] In one portion (the "bank wiring room") of the studies there was a complicated incentive system that was based on both group and individual productivity. The individual incentive system was designed to get high productivity from workers by tying their earnings to their productivity. By also tying earnings to group productivity, it was felt the group as a whole would prevent slacking off by any of its members. However, both these techniques failed to maximize productivity. An informal group norm developed that defined what was a "proper day's work." The individuals chosen for this portion of the study had been from the same department, but they had not been friendly previously. As soon as they were involved in the research, friendships were established and two cliques developed. Despite the cliques, all the workers shared the norm of how much should be produced. Those who turned out too much work were called "rate busters" and those who turned out too little were labeled "chiselers." No one was supposed to "squeal" on anyone else, nor were they supposed to act "officiously."[58] The group had a variety of sanctions at its disposal. If individuals deviated from the norm, they would be "binged" by fellow workers. (Binging was a sharp punch on the arm.) The group also used less direct means of sanctioning, such as name calling: "If a person turned out

[56]Houbolt, "An Empirical Critique of Blauner's Concept of Powerlessness on the Automobile Assembly Line."

[57]Fritz Roethlisberger and William J. Dickson, *Management and the Worker* (New York: Wiley, 1964).

[58]Rodman reports a similar treatment of squealers by Canadian infantry recruits. See, Hyman Rodman, "Informal Behaviour of Infantry Recruits," in Audrey Wipper, *The Sociology of Work: Essays in Honour of Oswald Hall*, pp. 99–100.

too much work, he was called names, such as 'Speed King' or 'The Slave.' "[59]

In his analysis of this portion of the Hawthorne studies, Homans feels that the workers' restriction of output is a reflection of the "conflict between the technical organization of the plant and its social organization."[60] In the face of technical norms and orders from the top, "the industrial worker develops his own ways of doing his job, his own traditions of skill, his own satisfactions in living up to his standards."[61] Industrial workers also develop subgroups to protect themselves from technical norms and especially from technological changes that might disrupt their work routine or the routine of the informal group. The sentiments of the informal organization and its protective practices serve to make the worklife of the industrial worker more meaningful. More generally, we can say that these practices are designed to help the worker cope with alienation caused by technological changes in the workplace.

Beating the system. The informal group in industry also attempts to deal with alienation by developing methods of "beating the system." Roy's study of a machine shop shows that much cheating was done in order to make the production quota and that a great deal of loafing, swindling, and conniving also existed.[62] Roy was a participant observer and noted that

> . . . we machine operators did "figure the angles," we developed an impressive repertoire of angles to play and devoted ourselves to crossing the expectations of formal organization with perseverance, artistry, and organizing ability of our own.[63]

For example, the workers would take longer to do a job when it was being timed in order to set piecework rates. They would run the machines at slower speeds or utilize extra movements such as "little reachings, liftings, adjustings, dustings, and other special attentions of conscientious machine operation and good housekeeping that could be dropped instantly with the departure of the time-study man."[64] When the time-study person made a job difficult, the workers revised it to make it easier. The set process was streamlined even though it might be harder on tools or reduce the quality of production. A variety of devices were needed to keep these practices from supervisors and inspectors. Finally, there were collusive arrangements with other groups in the plant to beat the system.

Runcie illustrates this point in terms of a truck-driving job he had while

[59]George C. Homans, "The Western Electric Researches," in Amitai Etzioni, ed., *Readings on Modern Organizations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 110. Rodman reports that Canadian infantrymen who do not keep up with their work are called "leadswingers." Rodman, "Informal Behaviour of Infantry Recruits," p. 98.

[60]Homans, "The Western Electric Researches," p. 111.

[61]Ibid., p. 113.

[62]Donald Roy, "Efficiency and 'the Fix': Informal Intergroup Relations in a Piecework Machine Shop," *American Journal of Sociology*, 60 (1954), 255–266.

[63]Ibid., 257.

[64]Ibid.

employed in the automobile assembly plant. In this job, Runcie, as well as two others, were expected to move cars from one section of the repair floor to another. Runcie notes:

> Although three of us were assigned to the task, most of the time two were sufficient; we were only needed if a car had to be moved. We worked out a schedule so that two of us were available at any one time, with the third hiding out of sight, reading a newspaper, napping, or eating lunch.[65]

In collusion with the other two workers, loafing was informally established to the point that Runcie claims during an 8-hour shift on this job: "I actually worked a total of about two and one-half hours."[66]

These activities may be viewed as protective devices. Although protection cannot be minimized, the preeminent function of these activities is to deal with alienation by enhancing the meaningfulness of work for semiskilled and unskilled workers. The informal group, its norms, its cohesiveness, and its efforts to beat the system all serve to make work more meaningful, less alienating.

The informal practices discussed in this section are functional both for the worker and management. Even though some of the informal mechanisms may be contrary to the immediate goals of management, they do tend to reduce alienation, turnover, absenteeism, sabotage, and the like. Without such informal practices management might find itself confronted with a disgruntled group of workers who strike out at management in a variety of ways. Given this, it may be that management should encourage the development of such groups rather than act to prevent their development. If it did encourage informal group development, it might well find that these groups work even more often with the organization than against it.

Games workers play. In another study, Roy examined informal group processes which are not aimed against management but do nevertheless serve to make the worklife less alienating, more meaningful.[67] Roy himself admits that in this study he was interested in how machine operators prevent themselves from "going nuts." He was a participant observer in a group of machine operators who were engaged in work that was repetitious and very simple and that required long hours and a 6-day week. Roy is concerned with devices these operators used to find some meaning in this essentially meaningless occupation. First they found that they could make a little game out of their work: they varied their activity by changing the colors of the material or die shapes used or engaging in some maintenance work on the machinery. These little games, however, were of secondary importance to the informal group activities that took place on the job. Roy observed a variety of minor group processes that served to pass the day more pleasantly and interestingly. During the morning "peach time" was announced, at which point one worker took

[65]Runcie, "By Days I Make the Cars," 108.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Donald Roy, " 'Banana Time': Job Satisfaction and Informal Interaction," *Human Organization,* 18 (1959–1960), 158–169.

out two peaches and divided them among the four workers. Then there was "banana time." The same man who brought the peaches also brought one banana, which was for his own consumption. However, regularly each morning one of the workers would steal the banana and consume it gleefully while yelling "banana time!" The person who brought the banana would regularly protest and just as regularly another worker would admonish him for protesting so vociferously. As the day progressed there was "window time," "lunch time," "pick-up time," "fish time," and "Coke time." Through these rather pathetic little devices workers on an essentially meaningless job endeavored to make their worklife less alienating.

Roy has also pointed to still another game designed to cope with alienation among machine operators—sex play![68] He found that sexual relations between coworkers and various types of games with sexual overtones helped workers deal with undesirable aspects of their jobs. Here is just one example of such a game to give the reader a flavor of this form of activity and its significance on the job:

> I recall a factory job in my early work experience in which the massive boredom of performing simple repetitive operations as a member of a cooky-machine crew was alleviated by the lewd antics of a moronic operative. . . . This mentally but not sexually defective fellow would rescue the rest of us from our pit of painful boredom at intervals by flashing an erection and whirling back and forth with it, to and from the oven, quite gracefully in fact, and by responding to the cheers, laughter, and obscene suggestions of his workmates by imbecilic grinning.[69]

Runcie also found games to be a technique workers used to cope with the boredom and monotony of the automobile assembly line. Runcie and his fellow workers played "football" with a foam rubber ball wrapped in electrical tape and "basketball" where workers threw various production materials, such as screws, nuts, and bolts, etc., into a styrofoam cup. Another game played was called "hooting." Runcie describes the game as follows:

> A worker hoots at the top of his lungs, others pick up the cry and the hooting goes up and down the line until it dies out sometime later.[70]

While these games are not directed at management, Houbolt describes a game that was directed at what was perceived as undeserved abuse by a foreman.

> So what we ended up doing was that every time we had the slightest problem, OK . . . we would go "Yoohoo," and have the foreman checking out the problem. Just like the rules say. We had him running around all day, all of us, we all joined in. We call ourselves the Odd Squad. At the end of that day, the next day, we gave him a hard time up to lunch. After lunch we didn't see him anymore.[71]

[68]Donald Roy, "Sex in the Factory: Informal Heterosexual Relations Between Supervisors and Work Groups," in Clifton D. Bryant, ed., *Deviant Behavior* (Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1974), pp. 44–66.

[69]Ibid., p. 45.

[70]Runcie, "By Days I Make the Cars," 109.

[71]Houbolt, "An Empirical Critique of Blauner's Concept of Powerlessness on the Automobile Assembly Line," 5.

As Houbolt points out, this game tortured the foreman without violating the formal rules of the organization. Such incidents are quite amusing until one realizes that these are adults striving desperately to cope with a meaningless and alienating worklife.

Most analysts who have examined the games workers play, and more generally the range of informal group practices, see them as efforts to reduce alienation (and a variety of other discontents on the job). They have usually been seen as social mechanisms developed by workers in opposition to management. A very different perspective on this is taken in a recent study by Burawoy in which he concludes that these games "are usually neither independent nor in opposition to management."[72] Furthermore: "Management, at least at the lower levels, actually participates not only in the organization of the game, but in the enforcement of its rules."[73] Rather than challenging management, the organization, and ultimately the capitalist system, these games actually serve to support them. For one thing, playing the game serves to create consent among the workers about the rules on which the game is based and, more generally, to the system of social relations (owner-manager-worker) which define the rules of the game. Second, since the managers and workers are both involved in the game, the system of antagonistic social relations to which the game was supposed to respond is obscured.

Burawoy argues that such methods of generating active cooperation and consent are far more effective ways of getting workers to cooperate in the pursuit of profit than coercion (such as, firing those who do not cooperate). In the end, Burawoy believes that games and other informal practices are all methods of gaining acceptance of the system by workers and eliciting their contributions to ever-higher levels of profitability.

Psychological Coping Mechanisms

Assembly-line workers. Many alienated automobile assembly-line workers seek, psychologically, to flesh out their worklives. For example, mental games and daydreaming are quite common. In his job, Runcie claims he tried to pass the time by counting the number of cars he had already completed as well as the number of cars still to come. Not all mental games are this conscious, however. Runcie notes:

> One time I realized that I was doing my job to the rhythm of an aria from an opera I had heard the last weekend. Another time I found myself a thousand miles away, driving an imaginary automobile down a highway I had not been on for years. How many chassis went by during my mental lapses—and whether I even did my job—I don't know and never found out.[74]

Some workers sing songs or recite multiplication tables, while others daydream. One worker told Runcie:

[72]Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 80.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Runcie, "By Days I Make the Cars," 109.

> There's not much you can do, I guess. You just do the work. Daydream, that's the best. Gettin' out of this place. Gettin' off the line for about six hours. Just put your mind in a different place, say you're not here. I daydream about when I was a kid. Then you sit and laugh, and people look at you like you're crazy or something.[75]

Although the work routine itself offers little hope, many rationalize their plight by focusing on extrinsic job factors such as the high pay and job security: the job is a means to an end and not an end in itself, since the activity of work is fundamentally unrewarding.[76] Real advancement is virtually impossible for most assembly-line workers, so advancement becomes "the search for security, the pursuit of small goals in the factory, and the constant accumulation of personal possessions."[77] Another major psychological "out" for this worker is the projection of "[his] unfulfilled ambitions upon [his] children."[78] He cannot improve his own worklife, so he concentrates on his children, seeking to prevent them from working in a factory and encouraging them to go to college: "I never had a chance, but I want my kids to go to college and do something better than factory work."[79] However, these psychological resolutions and the resulting actions are only marginally successful. Many children, despite their fathers' aspirations, do finally go into blue-collar work. More important, for our purposes, the deemphasizing of the job and focusing on other factors only serves to increase the assembly-line worker's alienation. Work becomes little more than "a necessary evil to be endured because of the weekly pay check."[80]

Telephone operators. Individuals in unskilled and semiskilled occupations sometimes attempt to cope with their alienation by overemphasizing the status or importance of their job. For example, the work of telephone operators is similar in many ways to assembly-line work, yet most operators consider themselves white-collar employees.[81] Ignoring the intrinsic similarities to blue-collar jobs, they emphasize the cleanliness of the work, their better manners, and superior dress. One operator contends: "It's not like manual labor, it's more like office work."[82] Another states: "It's the same as any business office. In fact, I think they [telephone operators] should be called communication secretaries because they do a great deal of work for business firms."[83] Others in the telephone company have a more realistic appraisal: "I tell you I simply can't see that they [operators] are classified as white collar people . . . it's just

[75]Ibid.

[76]Ely Chinoy, *Automobile Workers and the American Dream* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

[77]Ibid., p. 124.

[78]Ibid., p. 126.

[79]Ibid., p. 127.

[80]Ibid., p. 130.

[81]Joel Seidman et al., "Telephone Workers," in Sigmund Nosow and William H. Form, *Man, Work and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), pp. 493–504.

[82]Ibid., p. 498.

[83]Ibid.

like an assembly-line. . . . But if you say that they all resent it—they don't want to admit it because it degrades them."[84]

Psychiatric attendants. Another psychological mechanism employed in manual occupations to deal with alienation is generally called a *mythical occupational image.* Low-status workers may "seize upon some aspect of their work which is highly valued, either throughout society or in the work subculture, and build a self-image around it."[85] Simpson and Simpson's study of the psychiatric attendant is perhaps the best example of the utilization of this device. Most of the psychiatric attendants gave extrinsic reasons (salary, not qualified for anything else, and so forth) for taking their jobs, but gave intrinsic reasons (interest in patients, for example) for staying on the job. When the activities the attendants say are most important are compared to the activities they say are most time-consuming, some interesting differences appear. For example, 52 percent of the psychiatric attendants report housekeeping and miscellaneous activities as most time-consuming, yet only 7.8 percent report this activity as most important. Conversely, 28.4 percent of the respondents reported interaction with patients as their most important activity, yet only 4.9 percent reported this activity as most time-consuming. Thus, attendants stress their activities that relate to the care of the patient while they spend the majority of their worktime on housekeeping and miscellaneous chores. By focusing on the highly valued aspect of patient care, the psychiatric attendants are able to maintain a highly favorable self-image. Although all attendants are not satisfied with their work, this exaggerated self-image serves to make the job more tolerable.

Night watchmen. Trice's study of the night watchman also presents evidence that those in manual occupations emphasize a minor, but highly valued, aspect of their work.[86] The night watchman is required to move around his location in order to be sure that there is no trouble. This, however, tends to be dull, routine, and alienating since there is rarely anything wrong. To enhance their occupational self-image, the watchmen chose to focus on several aspects of their job which were regarded by society as being very important. For example, almost all felt that fire prevention was their most important task, despite the fact that for years there had been no fire at the location Trice studied. They also emphasized that they were management surrogates, "representing the company to anyone who came or went in the building."[87] This image was held despite the fact that rarely, if ever, did anyone come into the building during the hours that they were on duty. In sum, an occupational self-image which emphasizes highly valued aspects of the job

[84]Ibid., pp. 498–499.

[85]Richard L. Simpson and Ida Harper Simpson, "The Psychiatric Attendant: Development of an Occupational Self-Image in a Low-Status Occupation," *American Sociological Review,* 24 (1959), 389.

[86]Harrison M. Trice, "Night Watchman: A Study of an Isolated Occupation," *ILR Research,* 10 (1964), 3–8.

[87]Ibid., 7.

makes work in manual occupations less alienating to the individuals in these occupations.

It is interesting to ponder whether this emphasis on a highly valued aspect of the job is really accepted by individuals in the occupation, or whether it is merely for public consumption. If it is truly believed, this involves an enormous task of self-deception. The workers must hold this belief although most of the things they do and are expected to do contradict it. Further, if they do believe in their mythical occupational image, they will be confronted with much status inconsistency, for they will think they have high status while virtually everyone else in the organization has a more realistic view of their position. This is exemplified by the individual in the telephone company who said that he could not see how operators could classify themselves as white-collar workers when their work more closely resembles that of the assembly line. If the individuals in manual occupations hold their image merely for public relations purposes, they are faced with other problems. They cannot enhance their own job satisfaction if they do not really believe in the occupational image they are trying to project. Further, they are unlikely to convince anyone else if they do not believe it themselves. One must question whether occupational myths can ever be truly successful. How can people convince themselves that their self-image is true when they are constantly faced with evidence to the contrary? How can they convince others when they clearly see that the image does not reflect reality? The lack of success of such mythical occupational images points up the frustration of those in semiskilled and unskilled occupations. Despite the difficulties inherent in them, mythical occupational images are an important part of the life of individuals in manual occupations in organizations. As Dubin notes, these occupational myths (or fictions, as he calls them) "are necessary in order that action within the formal organization may proceed."[88] Everyone knows they are untrue, but "the truth, however, is disturbing, so by a kind of silent agreement among members of the organization, this truth is clothed in fiction."[89]

Unions as Coping Mechanisms

Only about 17.3 million Americans belong to labor unions, but the union movement's greatest strength is among unskilled and semiskilled workers.[90] Manual workers can utilize labor unions to compensate for and reduce the alienating aspects of their worklives. As individuals, blue-collar workers were, historically, powerless vis-a-vis management. As a matter of fact, one of the most important reasons for the development of unions was the almost total control of management over workers. Once a union is formed, management is no longer able to fire, promote, demote, or punish workers at will, and if it acts without just cause, workers can bring grievances against it which the union will generally actively support. The mere existence of the possibility of the expensive grievance process has reduced management's dictatorial power.

[88]Robert Dubin, "Organization Fictions," in Robert Dubin, ed., *Human Relations in Administration*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 494.

[89]Ibid., p. 496.

[90]Paul O. Flaim, "New Data on Union Members and Their Earnings," *Employment and Earnings*, 32 (1985), 13.

As a group, through the collective bargaining process, union members have a good deal of power over management, which can no longer arbitrarily set wages, hours, and working conditions. Instead, these conditions must be agreed upon by both parties during labor negotiations. If management does not present a reasonable offer, the union can call a strike which, in most organizations, would severely cripple or totally halt production. It is not only the strike, but also the mere threat of one, which gives the union a good deal of leverage in its dealings with management.

Besides lessening feelings of powerlessness, the union may help to reduce the other three social-psychological dimensions of alienation: meaninglessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. If semi- and unskilled workers seek some meaning in their worklives, they may turn to the union. By being active in the union, they can see their role in relation to other roles within the union structure. Further, they can get a clear idea of the purpose of the union and what is their part in the attainment of its objectives. This is especially true in small local unions. The union can also help alleviate the manual workers' feelings of isolation. If they do not feel as if they belong in the work setting, they can get a feeling of belonging within the union, where they find themselves in an organization with their peers and where all strive for a mutual goal.

Finally, workers may be able to alleviate some of their feelings of self-estrangement by becoming involved in the union. It has been pointed out before that they are frequently unable to express their abilities, their potential, or their personality on the job. The union offers an alternative: frequently, capable workers who have been barred from managerial positions have been able to utilize their administrative skills and fulfill their desire for leadership within the union. At the local level there are low-level administrative positions available and above them are such positions as union secretary, treasurer, vice president, and president. For those who demonstrate exceptional administrative ability there is the possibility, at least, of high-level positions within the national union or even within the AFL-CIO. The union constitutes one of the few remaining sources of upward mobility for talented blue-collar workers.

Union dysfunctions. In all fairness we should point out that in many cases unions fail to fulfill the function of reducing worker alienation, and that occasionally they have instead increased it. Some unions have developed their own hierarchies, which have not been responsive to the needs and demands of the membership. Illustrative of this is the fact that in his book on unions, Hall took as his major theme the "amazing separation that exists between union leaders and union rank and file."[91] In such unions it is not unusual to find leaders who have remained in power for 30 or even 40 years. They have retained their power by systematically excluding members from a say in how the union should be run and by making deals with management which serve their own ends without serving the members' needs. Sociologists who have studied unions have often explained this phenomenon in terms of Robert Michels' "Iron Law of Oligarchy." That is, once in power leaders become more con-

[91]Sylvia Kopald, cited in Burton Hall, "Introduction," in Burton Hall, ed., *Autocracy and Insurgency in Organized Labor* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1972), p. 2.

cerned with maintaining their position than in pursuing the goals they had promised to attain. This problem is especially acute in unions because of the huge gap between the pay of union leaders and the pay that they received as workers, or would receive again if they should fail to be reelected. Once in power, union leaders have a number of devices under their control to solidify their position. They have patronage to dole out, union funds to support their reelection campaigns, and control of the union press with which they can extol their virtues and downgrade those of their opponents.

However, Lipset et al.'s study of typographers has indicated that the "Iron Law of Oligarchy" is neither iron, nor a law.[92] They found that in the typographical workers union there was a substantial turnover of leadership—but they quickly pointed out that there were a number of historical peculiarities and differences in the nature of printers which accounted for this unusual situation. These peculiar conditions exist in few other unions, and therefore many unions *are* characterized by an oligarchical structure.

In those unions which are oligarchical and not responsive to the needs of the members, alienation is increased rather than decreased. Hence many workers who turn to the union to reduce alienation find to their dismay that alienation has increased.

In general it may be concluded that when unions are run with the focus on the needs of the members they may serve to reduce the alienation of manual workers. However, alienation may be increased when they are designed to serve the interests of the leaders. Most unions probably fall between these extremes and hence serve to reduce the alienation of manual workers to some degree.

Employing Organizations and Coping with Alienation

Alienation is costly to employers of unskilled or semiskilled workers. The question management has always had to deal with is: Is the cost of the solution greater than the cost of the problem? In human terms, reducing alienation is certainly a worthwhile investment, but unfortunately management often tends to think more in terms of profit margins than in terms of human work satisfaction. Even looking at the problem of alienation from the perspective of profits indicates that alienation is economically costly. Walker and Guest, among others, found that turnover and absenteeism are highly related to the repetitiveness of work on the assembly line.[93] Sabotage of the assembly line, and glee when the machine breaks down accidentally, are not uncommon in mass-production factories. Many of the workers are careless and this results in low quality, even where the quality is ostensibly set by the machine. An alienated worklife is also likely to lead to hostility toward management, which might take the form of involvement in the union or even wildcat strikes. Given these and other costs, some organizations have sought to reduce the alienation of their unskilled employees.

[92]Seymour M. Lipset, Martin Trow, and James Coleman, *Union Democracy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1962).

[93]Walker and Guest, *Man on the Assembly Line.*

Managerial manipulation. Unfortunately, many of these efforts have been more manipulative than sincere. The most blatant example of managerial manipulation was developed by the human relations school of management theory. This approach was a reaction to the scientific management theory of F.W. Taylor (see Chapter 14 for more on Taylor's ideas), who felt that the needs of the laborer and the needs of the organization could be united if pay was tied to productivity. Since workers were supposedly motivated by economic desires, they would produce more under such an arrangement and the company would be more profitable. But in the original human relations study at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company in Chicago it became quite clear that people were not driven solely, or even primarily, by economic motives. The finding, for example, that the group acted to restrict productivity indicated that social factors were also very important in understanding human behavior in the workplace. This led to the conclusion that if the group was content *and* understood what management was trying to do, it would be more likely to produce up to its maximum capabilities.[94]

An offshoot of this conclusion was the development of a variety of techniques to make the group happier and therefore more productive. Communication was deemed of the utmost importance. The emphasis, however, was on communicating what management wanted rather than on communicating the needs of the workers. It was also felt that if workers were allowed to participate in decision making, they would be more productive. However, this participation often took the form of asking what the workers wanted and then ignoring their desires in the ultimate decision, which remained in the hands of top management. At its extreme the human relations approach came to be known as "cow sociology": as long as the workers were content (as well-fed cows) they would be productive. To make them content, management piped in music, painted walls brightly, and provided comfortable rest rooms. But these devices were extrinsic to the job, and it was the nature of the job that was the basic source of the worker's alienation.

One of the basic assumptions of the human relations school (and scientific management) was that there was no irreconcilability between the goals of management and the goals of workers. However, management's goal of the highest possible profit *is* often contrary to the needs of the workers.

In opposition to the "harmony" view of the human relations school there has developed the structural school in the sociology of organizations. The structuralists recognize "the inevitable strains—which can be reduced but not eliminated—between organizational needs and personal needs; between formal and informal relations; between management and workers, or, more generically, between ranks and divisions."[95] There is inevitable conflict between the worker and the organization which can never be eliminated, but it

[94]Recent statistical evidence calls into question this conclusion. See, Richard Herbert Franke and James D. Kaul, "The Hawthorne Experiments: First Statistical Interpretation," *American Sociological Review,* 43 (1978), 623–643. Franke and Kaul suggest that it was not human relations that led to an increase in productivity, but rather managerial discipline (firing two workers), the economic adversity of the depression (scarcity of jobs and the threat of unemployment), and longer rest periods (reduction of worker fatigue).

[95]Amitai Etzioni, *Modern Organizations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964).

can be reduced to manageable proportions. Because of the nature of blue-collar work, alienation can never be eliminated without a restructuring of the entire organization. Such a reorganization would also be necessary to eliminate the conflict between management and the worker.

One such reorganization worthy of mention at this point is employee ownership of firms. Employees do not buy firms in order to reduce alienation (they generally buy them to save their jobs), but that could be one of the byproducts of their action. Although it is clear that the purchase of organizations by their employees preserves jobs,[96] it is less clear whether employee ownership leads to a decrease in feelings of alienation.[97] One of the reasons for the failure of employee ownership to reduce alienation may be that employees in such firms come to view managers as *de facto* owners; they do not see themselves as the owners.[98]

COPING WITH STRUCTURAL ALIENATION

The preceding examples of coping with alienation have dealt with actions taken independently by the workers, unions, or management. Primarily, these actions have focused on attempting to alleviate the psychological manifestations of alienation. Most of these coping mechanisms are limited, for they address the issue of alienation *only* at the individual level. As a result, they can be seen as only temporarily relieving workers' *feelings* of boredom, monotony, meaninglessness, powerlessness, and so forth. These coping mechanisms help the worker gain some meaning from otherwise routine, meaningless work, but they do not change or alter the structural dimensions of alienation as suggested by the Marxian theory of alienation. These actions do not alter the decision-making processes relating to the structural dimension of control over one's work. However, some companies have come to more meaningfully cope with alienation by altering the structural dimension of worker decision making and control. As the president of one firm that has made such an effort notes:

> More and more companies are finding that to continue to operate they have to have better contact with all their people. You have to stop the alienation. And you don't stop that except by getting at the root causes of alienation.[99]

From our point of view, industrial democracy can be seen as such an attempt.

[96]Corey Rosen, "Job-Creating Performance of Employee-Owned Firms," *Monthly Labor Review,* 106 (1983), 15–19.

[97]David J. Toscano, "Toward a Typology of Employee Ownership," *Human Relations,* 36 (1983), 582.

[98]Tove Helland Hammer and Robert N. Stern, "Employee Ownership: Implications for the Organizational Distribution of Power," *Academy of Management Journal,* 23 (1980), 78–100.

[99]David W. Ewing and Pamela Banks, "Participative Management at Work: An Interview with John F. Donnelly," *Harvard Business Review,* 55 (January/February, 1977), 117–118.

Democratization[100]

The principles of authoritarian control from the top, highly circumscribed worker autonomy, and minute specialization have served to make American industry a bastion of autocracy within a supposedly democratic society. The external control of the worker by increasingly sophisticated machinery has created a lack of control by workers over their workplace. These principles and developments seem to be combined in their most extreme form in the assembly line, which has become, as a result, the symbol of all that is wrong with work in America, in particular blue-collar work.[101] These symbols and the efforts to cope with the abuses caused by them received a great deal of attention in the 1970s. A variety of forces coincided to spark this surge in interest during this period. We will examine these changes and then turn our attention to more recent developments in the 1980s that have served to overturn many of the changes put in place during the 1970s.

Prior to the 1970s, management played its part in the pursuit of greater and greater profits by doing such things as speeding up the assembly line, reducing the content of many jobs until there was little left but the most minute tasks, and increasing the size of its bureaucracies (for example, through the development of conglomerates) so that the worker was further and further removed from the top of the organization. These developments stood in opposition to a variety of trends in the larger society. The workforce, in particular the younger members, were better educated and were entering the workworld with higher expectations about their work and their role in it. But the jobs they were entering were not changing and were still attuned to the older type of workers who seemed more satisfied with, or were at least less likely to manifest their resentment to, traditional work. Along with their greater education, the new workers also seemed to be adopting a new value system that deemphasized money and focused on the ability to learn, to develop one's potential, and to gain more control over one's work. For example, a plant manager at the General Motors car assembly plant at Tarrytown, New York suggested:

> It was during this time that the young people in the plant were demanding some kind of change. They didn't want to work in this kind of environment. The union didn't have much control over them, and they certainly were not interested in taking orders from a dictatorial management.[102]

The failure of management to respond to these new workers led to a rebellion against traditional work.

[100]This discussion is drawn, in part, from George Ritzer, "Work-linked Equity in Sweden: Implications for America," in Irving Louis Horowitz, ed., *Equity, Income and Policy: A Comparative Developmental Context* (New York and London: Praeger, 1977), pp. 49–69.

[101]For white-collar workers, it is the bureaucracy, organized on the same principles, that has become a similar symbol of oppression and lack of freedom on the job.

[102]Robert H. Guest, "Quality of Work Life—Learning from Tarrytown," *Harvard Business Review*, 57 (July/August, 1979), 78.

In effect, the workers were rebelling against the very principles that had made industry and bureaucracy so efficient, at least until the 1970s. A Swedish observer catches the essence of this when he argues that the worker was reacting against

> . . . the principles [of] job simplification, repetition and close control. The worker is viewed as one more interchangeable part, programmed to perform a small task that is precisely specified on the basis of time and motion studies. He is assumed to be a precise element in the production process, motivated primarily by his economic needs and characterized primarily by a predictable degree of strength, agility and perseverance; innovation and dealing with variations in the flow of production are considered beyond his scope and are left to specialists. In order to energize and coordinate some dozens of hundreds of atomized human "parts" in a plant, a rigorous and highly detailed control system is called into play, exemplified in its most extreme form by the balanced, intricately interwoven network of conveyors that constitutes an automobile assembly line.[103]

As a result of the social changes discussed above, this once highly rational system was proving to be less and less efficient. Workers were finding their jobs increasingly dull, tiring, and destructive of their self-esteem. Resentment against the technology and employers grew, bringing with it such costly problems as poor quality, high absenteeism, and high turnover. To cope with these problems, management fell back on its old principles and developed even simpler jobs, even tighter controls, and even faster lines. The workers' reaction was predictable—they found their work even more monotonous, exhausting, and demeaning. The problems of turnover, absenteeism, and quality grew correspondingly. Although this destructive process occurred in many settings, both blue- and white-collar, it was most pronounced on the assembly line. The effects of these problems on the assembly line were great, because it proved to be most vulnerable to serious disruption by these developments. In sum, the most rational technological and bureaucratic developments had failed to keep pace with changes in society, with the result that they were no longer rational. What worked in Detroit in the early 1900s ceased to operate efficiently in Tarrytown, New York (and many other places throughout the world) in the early 1970s.

Since the term "industrial democracy" has been used to denote a variety of things, we need to clarify the term. Industrial democracy embraces three developments that need to be carefully separated.[104] The first is *interest-group* democracy, a situation in which the relationship between union and management brings at least a measure of democracy to the workplace. Through the union the workers have a say, at least theoretically, in how their work is done, and the binding agreement between labor and management prevents arbitrary management action. The second type, *representative democracy,* results

[103]Lars Bjork, "An Experiment in Work Satisfaction," *Scientific American,* 232 (1975), 17.

[104]Eric Trist, "Work Improvement and Industrial Democracy," Paper presented to the Conference of the Commission of European Communities on "Work Organization, Technical Development and Motivation of the Individual," Brussels, Belgium, 1974.

from the institutionalization of a variety of formal committees in which representatives from different levels within the organization meet to discuss issues of mutual interest and sometimes even make decisions. The major example of this is the Yugoslavian workers' councils, although a large number of companies in the Western world have joint committees on a variety of matters of mutual concern to managers and workers. Finally, *work-linked* democracy involves the ability of workers to influence, and sometimes even decide upon, how *their own work* is to be performed. As we will see, all three types of industrial democracy gained strength in the United States in the 1970s, and each played a role in other countries (for example, Norway, West Germany, and Great Britain) as well. Before turning to developments in the United States, we would like to direct our attention to the development of industrial democracy in Sweden which, in the middle 1970s, became the world's laboratory for studying efforts to cope with the aforementioned problems.

Work-Linked Democracy in Sweden

Although no one knows exactly how many programs in industrial democracy were undertaken in Sweden in the 1970s, the undeniable fact is that there were many such efforts. The generally peaceful relations between union and management created a high degree of interest-group democracy. There were also numerous examples of representative democracy, with a wide variety of joint work-management committees existing throughout the industrial world. As of April 1973, Swedish companies with 100 or more employees were required to allow two employee representatives to sit on the board of directors. Thus, democratization took place across a broad front in Sweden. Parenthetically, it should be noted that not everyone was happy with these efforts. Many considered them to be unsuccessful. Nevertheless, there existed an almost universal commitment throughout Sweden to the principles of industrial democracy.

While commitment to industrial democracy was widespread in Sweden, the major experiments were in the area of work-linked democracy. Work-linked democracy efforts ranged from small-scale attempts at job rotation and job enlargement to the program in the Volvo plant at Kalmar in which about $30 million was invested in a plant that had been designed and built on the principles of work-linked democracy. From the Volvo plant case, we can derive a number of insights into the nature of work-linked democracy and see the extent to which Swedish workers gained some real, structural control over various decision-making processes that affect their worklife.

Volvo. No company has been more active in the area of work-linked democracy than Volvo. The company's general manager enunciated the following company policy:

> Here at Volvo, in fact all over Sweden, we are trying to create small groups of workers who develop into skilled and proud craftsmen, small groups under one large umbrella—craftsmen who set their own work pace, their own coffee

> breaks. It costs more, but there is evidence that it decreases the rate of absenteeism.[105]

This general policy was implemented in different ways by the various semi-autonomous units within Volvo.[106] At the Torslanda plant, a large-scale job rotation program was undertaken: "One group will assemble fuel pipes on Monday; fit side windows on Tuesday; fit car interiors on Wednesday; assemble rear parts on Thursday; and fit fuel pipes again on Friday."[107] Such a program is not unusual, but Volvo went further. At the Volvo Lundwerken plant work-linked democracy was implemented:

> Groups of up to nine workers are given a work assignment and they decide for themselves who does what. The teams elect their own foremen—on a rotating basis—and they do their own training, with the cost of the training borne by the company. Production problems are discussed with management at monthly meetings.[108]

At Volvo Skövde:

> . . . the assembly line has been replaced by small "work groups." Built-in "buffer zones" give workers and/or the work groups a chance to determine their own work pace as well as rest periods. The work groups are fully responsible for quality control, processing of raw materials, and tool inventories. Each work group takes care of transport of motors from one workshop to another.[109]

While these efforts to build workplace democracy and replace the traditional methods of doing work are important, they can be seen as mere preludes to Volvo's most important contribution to workplace democracy—its plant at Kalmar. While we focus on Kalmar, the reader should bear in mind that Volvo has not stopped with this effort. For example, in 1980 it built a new Tuve truck assembly plant near Gothenborg which incorporated many of the ideas developed earlier.[110]

The Kalmar plant was created on the basis of the following mandate from the corporate general manager:

> Produce a factory which, *without sacrificing efficiency and economic result* [italics ours], provides the possibility for the employee to work in groups, to communicate freely, to carry out job rotation, to vary the rate of work, feel identification

[105]Derek Norcross, "Sweden's Newest Export—Industrial Democracy," *Parade* (December 13, 1974), p. 15.

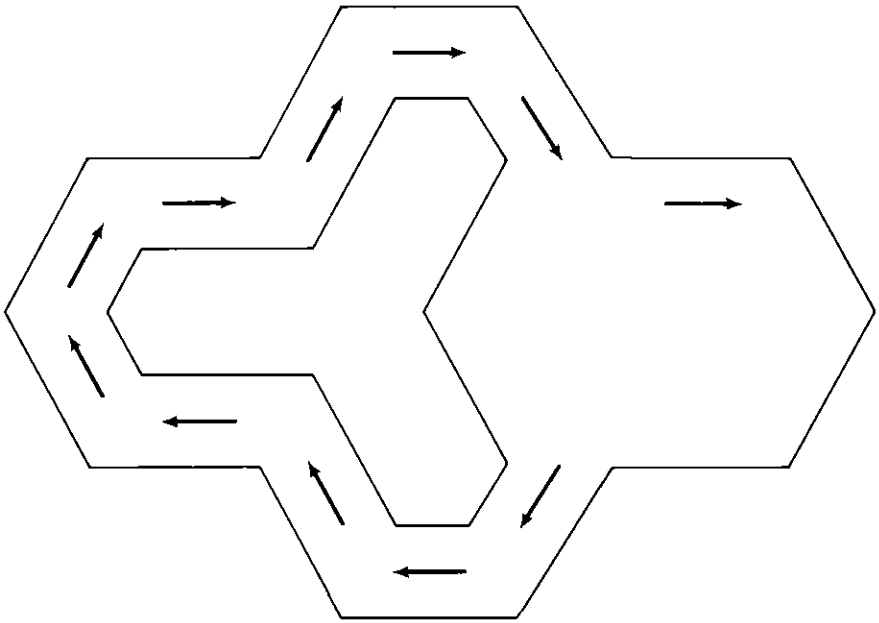
[106]Pehr Gyllenhammer, *People at Work* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1977); Pehr Gyllenhammer, "How Volvo Adapts Work to People," *Harvard Business Review*, 55 (July/August, 1977), 102–113.

[107]Joseph Mire, "Improving Working Life—The Role of European Unions," *Monthly Labor Review*, 97 (1974), 6.

[108]Ibid.

[109]Ibid.

[110]Paul Bernstein, "Efficiency is Up and Absenteeism Down at New Volvo Plant," *World of Work Report*, 8 (1983), 94–95.



Arrows depict path of cars under construction

FIGURE 12.1

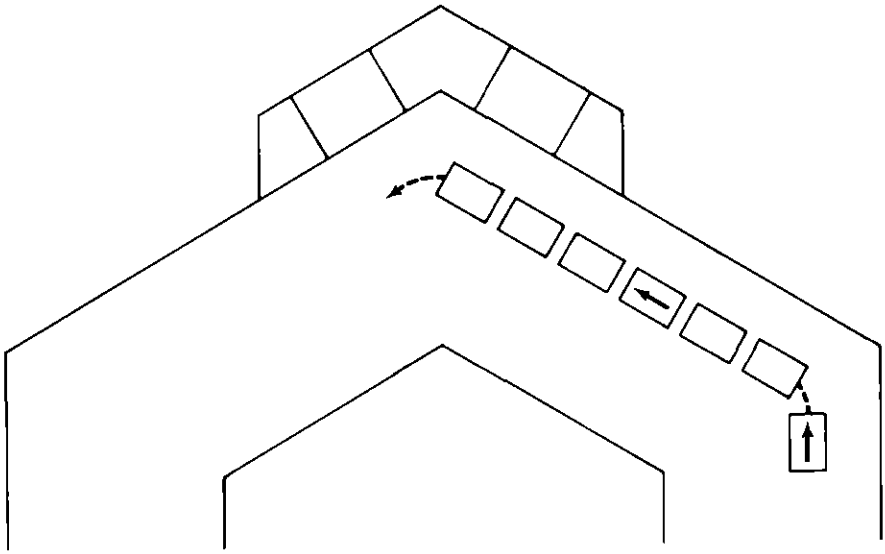
with the products, to be aware of quality, and also be in a position to influence their working environment.[111]

Before discussing this plant, some preliminary warnings need to be given. First of all, Volvo, unlike many of its admirers, did *not* consider the Kalmar plant to be the ultimate answer to industrial ills. Second, the factory was built with the clear directive from the general manager that efficiency *not* be reduced. Third, this development, like many others in Sweden, was the result of a management initiative aimed at coping with pressing problems such as turnover, absenteeism, difficulty in recruiting young workers, and so forth.

Figure 12.1 gives an overview of the Kalmar plant, while Figure 12.2 gives a more detailed picture of one section of it.

The star, or hexagonal, shape of the factory has a number of implications for the work that takes place within it. With the center of the plant devoted to material storage, the actual assembly of the cars takes place along the outer walls. Thus the assembly work is done in close proximity to the numerous windows that let sunlight in and give the workers a pleasant view of the surroundings. More important, the angular construction of the walls allows each group to have its own relatively well-defined area. Each angle represents

[111]Agis Salpukas, "Swedish Auto Plant Drops Assembly Line," *The New York Times* (November 12, 1974), p. 31.



Arrows depict path of cars under construction

FIGURE 12.2

the end of one group and the beginning of another. Each of these groups performs a different part of the general process—electrical system, instruments, safety equipment, and so forth. Each team includes about twenty workers. The differentiation of function, along with the physical structure of the building, gives each group the feeling that it is set apart from those groups that precede and succeed it in the production process. This sense of independent identity is enhanced by the fact that each group has its own entrance, changing room, rest rooms, coffee break area, even its own sauna. All this is aimed at creating an environment in which autonomous or semi-autonomous work groups develop. In other words, the goal is the creation of something akin to a set of old-style skilled workshops under the roof of one large factory. With this method, the anonymous feeling of working in a huge impersonal setting is greatly reduced.

The atmosphere in the plant is remarkable. It is light, colorful, and airy. Great pains have been taken to reduce the noise level. It has none of the noisy dinginess that is characteristic of most American automobile assembly plants. As one observer has noted, the plant generally looks like a large, modern supermarket.

All of this, of course, does not produce cars. The structure of the plant as well as the philosophy ruled out the possibility of an assembly line. To move the cars in the process of being assembled through the various stations, the Volvo engineers developed an electrically driven carrier system. Each car is on a separate carrier that can be controlled by either a central computer or manually by the employees as they work on the car. The workers in each group therefore have the ability to move the car through their work area in any way

they decide. They can collectively work on it as it stands still or moves slowly through their area, or they can set the carrier to move through their area at a set pace, in much the same way as on the traditional assembly line. The one major constraint on workers is that they must produce a set number of cars per hour. The workers in each group have the possibility, if they want, of working quickly and filling up the two-car buffer zone that exists between them and the next group. If they can fill the buffer zone, they will have time for a 10-minute coffee break. Incidentally, the electric carriers have the ability to tilt the car at about a 90-degree angle so that the formerly odious task of working under the car is made far easier and can be done like all the rest of the work.

The workers themselves have the ability to determine how the work within their group is to be done. (There is ordinarily only one foreman for every *two* groups.) They can decide to do a single task, or rotate among a number of tasks, or assemble a car *collectively;* they can use either the "straight-assembly" or the "dock" method. In the straight-assembly method, each individual works at a set station doing a particular task or set of tasks. This is much like the traditional assembly line in that the workers do their tasks as the carriers roll by. In the dock method, the workers work on the car as a team. They can follow the car through the entire process in their area, and when they are finished they return to the starting point and begin again on a new car. This method reduces the repetition of tasks to once every 40 minutes. In either case, the team is free to choose the method it prefers as long as productivity remains at the prescribed level.

Although foreigners were apt to see the "Kalmar concept" as the answer to industrial problems, the Volvo people did not share this exalted conception. In fact, as a result of Volvo's decentralization, different parts of the company did very different things in an effort to cope with their particular problems. As one Volvo official involved in corporate planning put it:

> Today we find not one Volvo model for socio-technical-administrative changes (as is often presumed) but a number of different models, or rather change processes. There is a wide range of approaches with different strategies involved. We thus find different developments—and results—in each plant where factors such as environment and cultural traditions play a crucial role.[112]

Furthermore, the developments at Kalmar are but one element in the future planning at Volvo:

> Within Volvo we look upon Kalmar as *the first step* [italics ours] to a new generation of production technology rather than the ultimate solution to assembly-work problems. At the moment we are are using this as a base to make further development work to be implemented in old as well as in new plants.[113]

Almost as a warning to overeager Americans the Volvo people warned: "We

[112]Berth Jonsson, "Strategy Towards Flexible Production Design." Paper presented at the Conference of Equilibrium Technology, Salzburg, Austria, 1975, 3.

[113]Ibid., 9.

will fail when we try to uncritically copy solutions."[114] Although most workers seemed relatively satisfied with these developments, others quickly became dissatisified with the developments and this dissatisfaction stood as still another warning to foreigners anxious to build "Kalmars" of their own. One Kalmar worker said: "This is certainly different from other jobs I've had. But there is a certain amount of monotony. It can't be avoided."[115] Although hard information is difficult to obtain, one source reports that the Kalmar plant had a comparatively low (10 percent) absenteeism rate in 1979.[116]

Industrial Democracy in the United States

Various forms of industrial democracy have been attempted in the United States since the early part of the eighteenth century.[117] In 1980 Zwerdling provided a guide to firms that had recently attempted some form of industrial democracy.[118] While not all these experiments were successful, Zwerdling discusses work-linked and representative democracy at such firms as General Foods, Rushton Mining, and McCaysville Industries. Workers have been represented on the boards of directors of such firms as Eastern Airlines, Pan American World Airways, and Chrysler.[119] Walton suggested that a significant minority of the *Fortune* "500" companies attempted some significant democratization projects.[120] General Motors, Proctor & Gamble, Exxon, TRW, Mars, Inc., DuPont, Alcoa, Texas Instruments, Weyerhaeuser, and Rockwell have all engaged in some form of industrial democracy. Among these organizations, General Motors was certainly among the leaders in industrial democracy experiments in the United States. In the late 1970s it was estimated that General Motors was engaged in over fifty "quality-of-work life" projects. This prompted one observer of the American scene to suggest that the efforts by General Motors were not only likely to have been the "most extensive of any company in the United States" but may have been more extensive than the efforts of Volvo in Sweden.[121]

Earlier, we noted that coping mechanisms were primarily actions taken by the worker, the unions, or management. With reference to industrial democracy, the current evidence suggests that not only is there a large measure of cooperation among these groups, but that successful implementation can only be achieved with a high degree of cooperation. Initiative for various pro-

[114]Ibid., 4.

[115]Salpukas, "Swedish Auto Plant Drops Assembly Line," p. 31.

[116]Bernstein, "Efficiency is Up and Absenteeism Down at New Volvo Plant," 95.

[117]Henry P. Guzda, "Industrial Democracy: Made in the U.S.A.," *Monthly Labor Review*, 107 (1984), 26–33.

[118]Daniel Zwerdling, *Workplace Democracy: A Guide to Workplace Ownership, Participation, and Self-Management Experiments in the United States and Europe* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980).

[119]Carey W. English, "Companies Learn to Live with Unions in Board Rooms," *U.S. News and World Report* (January 30, 1984), p. 63.

[120]Richard E. Walton, "Work Innovations in the United States," *Harvard Business Review*, 57 (July/August, 1979), 91.

[121]Ibid.

jects usually comes from management. However, once initiated these projects are successful only with the cooperative efforts of the workers and the unions (where, of course, the workers are represented by a union).[122] A vice president of General Motors notes that a "key concept of our quality-of-worklife process is union participation."[123] General Motors is not an isolated case; union and management cooperation was also essential in the development of a quality-of-worklife program established between American Telephone and Telegraph and the Communication Workers of America.[124]

Although there are other examples of industrial democracy in the United States, perhaps nowhere else were these more developed than in the various quality-of-worklife projects undertaken at many General Motors assembly plants throughout the country.

General Motors. The various projects at General Motors can be seen incorporating all three types of industrial democracy. In 1973 General Motors and the United Auto Workers negotiated a national agreement committing both managerial and union interest groups to mutually explore ways of improving the quality-of-worklife. This was the first time a major U.S. management-labor contract formally and explicitly addressed the quality-of-worklife issue.[125] With the National Committee to Improve the Quality of Work Life, the traditional adversary relationship between interest groups was transformed into one where cooperative efforts were aimed at improving the quality-of-worklife. The goal was to bring a measure of dignity and decision-making power to the worker at the factory floor.

Perhaps nowhere were the quality-of-worklife projects better exemplified than in the long-term, wide-reaching experiment at the General Motors assembly plant in Tarrytown. The initiative for establishing the program was originally taken by management.[126] In 1971, when the company decided to move the hard and soft trim departments to a new location in the plant, management started in the traditional manner, that is, from the top down. However, two production supervisors, sensing managerial desire for new approaches, made an important suggestion:

> Why not ask the workers themselves to get involved in the move? They are experts in their own right. They know as much about trim operations as anyone else.[127]

The workers were shown the various plans for the change and were given cer-

[122]Edward E. Lawler III and John A. Drexler, Jr., "Dynamics of Establishing Cooperative Quality-of-Worklife Projects," *Monthly Labor Review,* 101 (1978), pp. 23–28.

[123]Stephen H. Fuller, "How Quality-of-Worklife Projects Work for General Motors," *Monthly Labor Review,* 103 (1980), 37; see also, Irving Bluestone, "How Quality-of-Worklife Projects Work for the United Auto Workers," *Monthly Labor Review,* 103 (1980), 39–41.

[124]Michael Maccoby, "Helping Labor and Management Set Up a Quality-of-Worklife Program," *Montly Labor Review,* 107 (1984), 28–32.

[125]Robert Guest, "Quality of Work Life—Learning from Tarrytown."

[126]Ibid.

[127]Ibid., 79.

tain decision-making powers over the set-up of various jobs. The plans were initiated and the change instituted. The following year employees were involved in the complete rearrangement of the chassis department.

Early in 1977, a quality-of-worklife effort was launched on a plant-wide scale. Between early 1977 and December, 1978 a number of training sessions were conducted. The trainees learned:

> . . . first, about the concept of QWL [quality-of-worklife]; second, about the plant and the functions of management and the union; third, about problem-solving skills important in effective involvement.[128]

Over 3300 workers, union representatives, supervisors, and managers participated in the sessions.

With the introduction of the all-new 1980 X model General Motors cars, employees were given a chance to exercise their newly acquired skills. Together, managers and workers evaluated many of the anticipated assembly processes. The workers, in conversations with supervisors and technical people, were involved directly in establishing the best ways of setting up various jobs involved in the assembly process.

Through a series of regularly scheduled meetings, workers were kept informed of information needed to make intelligent, responsible problem-solving decisions:

> . . . following the plant manager's regular staff meetings, the personnel director passes on critical information to the shop committee. The safety director meets weekly with each zone committeeman. Top union officials have monthly "rap sessions" with top management staff to discuss future developments, facilitate alterations, schedule changes, model changes, and other matters requiring advanced planning. The chairman of Local 664 and his zone committeemen check in with the personnel director each morning at 7:00 a.m. and go over current or anticipated problems.[129]

At Tarrytown, information was disseminated, communication channels were opened, and workers were encouraged to participate and involve themselves in various decision-making processes.

However, despite these changes at Tarrytown, the "intrinsic nature of repetitive conveyor-paced jobs has not substantially changed."[130] Thus, unlike at Volvo-Kalmar, the basic source of worker alienation at General Motors has *not* been altered by democratization. However, structural changes (teams, committees, contracts) have been implemented and decision-making powers altered so that the workers have more say and control over the work process than in the past.

Efforts in industrial democracy like those at General Motors can be seen as attempts to not only help make the worker feel more powerful but also to

[128]Ibid., 83.

[129]Ibid., 84–85.

[130]Ibid., 87.

alter the structural arrangement by which work is performed and decisions are made. As such, these projects can be conceived of as attempts to alter the objective/structural forces that cause alienation as suggested by the Marxian theoretical formulation. In essence, these projects are aimed at changing the ways Americans work so that they are more involved in decisions that affect not only their immediate work processes but other areas in the organization as well. While these changes may be seen as more localized and more pragmatic than the various attempts at industrial democracy in Europe, they can at least be seen as initial attempts to structurally alter the way blue-collar work is performed in the United States.

The question still remains as to the effect of these structural changes on reducing psychological and behavioral indicators of alienation. Does an increase in the participation in decision making and/or an increase in the control over one's immediate work process decrease feelings and behavioral manifestations of alienation?

Research on Industrial Democracy

Research carried out primarily in the 1940s and 1950s by a variety of social psychologists all pointed to the significance of, and benefits to be derived from, worker participation.[131] Blumberg concluded, after carefully reviewing this body of work, that "there is hardly a study in the entire literature which fails to demonstrate that satisfaction in work is enhanced or that other beneficial consequences accrue from a general increase in workers' decision-making power. Such consistency of findings, I submit, is rare in social research."[132]

A body of literature with similar implications is to be found in Europe, generally aligned with the Tavistock Institute of England. Among many others, studies were undertaken in British coal mining,[133] an Indian textile factory,[134] and Norwegian metal working, pulp and paper, fertilizer and chemicals.[135] The dominant figure in the Tavistock tradition, Eric Trist, offers the following as the major conclusions to be derived from the long history of his group's research into industrial democracy:

1. High productivity and a high quality of working life are not necessarily antithetical.
2. The evidence indicates that industries must move away from coercive management.

[131]See, for example, L. Coch and J. R. P. French, Jr., "Overcoming Resistance to Change," *Human Relations*, 1 (1948), 512–532.

[132]Paul Blumberg, *Industrial Democracy: The Sociology of Participation* (New York: Shocken, 1968), p. 323.

[133]Eric Trist and K. W. Bamforth, "Some Social and Psychological Consequences of the Long-Wall Method of Coal-Getting," *Human Relations*, 4 (1951), 3–38.

[134]A. K. Rice, *Productivity and Social Organization: The Ahmedabad Experiment* (London: Tavistock, 1958).

[135]F. E. Emery and E. Thorsrud (in collaboration with E. L. Trist), *The Form and Content of Industrial Democracy* (London: Tavistock, 1969).

3. Technology is not deterministic. That is, different types of work groups and working arrangements are possible within the same technological setting.
4. Increased democracy through the development of semi-autonomous and autonomous work groups leads to improved job satisfaction, self-development, and occupational learning. At the same time, management gains high productivity and quality.
5. Management must reassess its ideology that views the worker as unreliable, unmotivated, and narrowly responding to money.

In a review of virtually every major piece of research done on industrial democracy up to the time of his essay, Singer contends that the bulk of the evidence points to the fact that increased participation by employees in decision making leads to increased acceptance of managerial ideas, greater cooperation between management and subordinates, greater acceptance of change, higher productivity, better morale, heightened motivation to achieve organizational objectives, and reduced turnover, lower absenteeism, fewer grievances, and a reduction in stress and tension.[136]

More recent findings seem to echo the positive reviews of Blumberg, Trist, and Singer. With reference to the various General Motors projects, Bluestone suggests these projects have resulted in:

> . . . a more constructive collective bargaining relationship; a more satisfied workforce; improved project quality; a reduction in grievance handling, absenteeism, labor turnover, and disciplinary layoffs and discharges.[137]

Bluestone continues that from the workers' point of view this all adds up to more self-fulfilling work and the enhancement of human dignity. Walton[138] reports that similar findings emerge from the quality-of-worklife project undertaken at another General Motors plant. Mutual trust between union and management, pride in one's work, commitment to the job and organization as well as equality, flexibility, and informality at work have all resulted from the changes brought about by the quality-of-worklife project. Compared with similar plants, Walton reports that production has not decreased.

While these are glowing, positive reports, not all findings are so favorable. In their study of quality-of-worklife projects, Lawler and Drexler[139] report that in two of the organizations the projects created tension and worsened the relationship between the local and the international unions participating in the projects. Further, "expected gains in performance have not yet been realized in some cases, and this, combined with slow progress, has led to some disagreement about the worth of the projects."[140]

In a review of the quality-of-worklife project at Harman International

[136]Jack Singer, "Participative Decision-Making about Work," *Sociology of Work and Occupations*, 1 (1974), 347–371.

[137]Irving Bluestone, "How Quality-of-Worklife Projects Work for the United Auto Workers," 41.

[138]Richard E. Walton, "Work Innovations in the United States."

[139]Edward E. Lawler and John A. Drexler, "Dynamics of Establishing Cooperative Quality-of-Worklife Projects."

[140]Ibid., 28.

Industries in Bolivar, Tennessee, Macy suggests that while there have been gains, there have also been losses.[141] On the positive side, grievances and absences due to lack of work decreased. Further, jobs became more secure, product quality and productivity rose, there was a decline in minor accidents and overall accidents decreased at a rate faster than the industry average. On the negative side, workers reported more incidence of both physical and psychological stress, perhaps reflecting the added responsibilities and decisions resulting from increased participation. Further, workers reported less satisfaction with pay levels and pay equity which again probably stems from the additional responsibilities which accompany quality-of-worklife projects.

The aforementioned results reflect a large number of indicators and are, in general, mostly favorable. However, what are the results of the changes on feelings of control and alienation? Specifically, do the changes in the way work is structured lead to increased feelings of participation and a corresponding decrease in feelings of psychological alienation?

In terms of increased participation, most employees are skeptical at first. Initially, old timers at Tarrytown reported they were

> . . . wondering about management's motives. We could remember the times management came up with programs only to find there was an ulterior motive and that in the long run the *men* could get screwed.[142]

Management and union leaders also seem dubious at first.

While skepticism and doubt seem typical at the beginning of such changes, once sincerity and trust develop, most employees feel that participation, decision making, and control do increase. While still cautious, the chairman of the local union involved in the quality-of-worklife project at Tarrytown remarks

> I no longer believe that what's going on is a "love-in" at Tarrytown. It's not a fancy gimmick to make people happy. And even though we have barely scratched the surface, I'm absolutely convinced we are on to something. We have a real and very different future. The guys in the plant are beginning to participate and I mean really participate.[143]

At the Bolivar plant, Macy reports an increase in work-group participation, more employee influence over task-related decisions and more work improvement ideas provided by employees.[144] From the above, it appears that an improved climate of participation in decision making has followed from the structural changes in the way work is organized.

National empirical studies relating industrial democracy specifically to changes in worker's feelings of alienation are rare. However, we can get an insight into this relationship from two recent studies.

[141]Barry A. Macy, "The Quality-of-Worklife Project at Bolivar: An Assessment," *Monthly Labor Review*, 103 (1980), 41–43.

[142]Robert H. Guest, "Quality of Work Life—Learning from Tarrytown," 79.

[143]Ibid., 85.

[144]Macy, "The Quality-of-Worklife Project at Bolivar."

Nightingale studied the effects of improved quality-of-worklife and employee participation on job satisfaction, general life satisfaction, organizational commitment, and societal alienation.[145] Approximately 1000 employees were studied in twenty industrial organizations in Canada. Of these organizations, ten were organized along traditional hierarchical lines while the remaining ten were formally participative. Formally participative organizations are those which give "rank-and-file employees the right to participate in decision-making."[146] These decision-making rights are contractually binding on all parties and sanctioned by legal arrangements beyond the organization or by the organizational charter or other collective agreements between union and management. In Nightingale's study, formally participative organizations include producer cooperatives, firms with worker representation on the board of directors, and companies with worker's councils wherein employees have the right to determine wages, hours, work assignments, pace of work, and so forth, and participate in other matters of organizational policy. Nightingale found that employees in formally participative organizations were more satisfied with their jobs and life in general, they were more committed to the organization and experienced less societal alienation. Task enrichment—that is, greater autonomy, utilization of skills, variety, novelty, and mental effort—as well as the extent to which workers were free of conflicting demands, were found to be the two most important predictors of the four outcome variables.

In another study, Whitehorn investigated the extent to which self-managed factories in Yugoslavia were associated with lower levels of both societal and work alienation than the more traditionally organized bureaucratic firms in Canada.[147] Contrary to expectations, Whitehorn found higher levels of societal alienation among Yugoslavian workers than their Canadian counterparts. However, alienation from work was found to be lower among Yugoslavian workers. Whitehorn suggests that the high level of societal alienation and low levels of alienation from work among Yugoslavian workers indicates that the self-managed factory does reduce worker alienation, but it does so amidst conditions of perceived alienation from society.

In the United States, empirical findings relate more specifically to the behavioral manifestations of alienation, that is, absenteeism and turnover, than to psychological alienation. However, in his evaluation of the quality-of-worklife project at Harman International Industries, Macy found that changes in the organization of work did lead to reduced levels of alienation from work.[148]

In terms of behavioral outcomes, Bluestone reported that a reduction in absenteeism and turnover was associated with several of the General Motors quality-of-worklife projects.[149] Macy found that at the Bolivar plant discharges

[145]Donald V. Nightingale, "Work, Formal Participation and Employee Outcomes," *Sociology of Work and Occupations*, 8 (1981), 277–296.

[146]Ibid., 278.

[147]Alan Whitehorn, "Alienation and Industrial Society: A Study of Workers' Self-Management," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 16 (1979), 206–217.

[148]Macy, "The Quality-of-Worklife Project at Bolivar."

[149]Bluestone, "How Quality-of-Worklife Projects Work for the United Auto Workers."

and retirements (involuntary turnover) decreased by 95 percent while voluntary turnover rates decreased by 72 percent.[150] In reference to the quality-of-worklife project at Tarrytown, Guest suggests that absenteeism went down from 7¼ percent to between 2 and 3 percent.[151]

While we do not have definitive data, it would appear that industrial democracy helps to reduce psychological and behavioral manifestations of alienation.

The Future of Industrial Democracy in the United States

Given this overview of efforts to democratize work, we come to the issue of the present and the future prospects of industrial democracy in the United States. The fact is that with the end of the decade of the 1970s came a significant decline in interest in, and attention to, industrial democracy. What factors served to limit (at least for the immediate future) the development of industrial democracy in this country?

For one thing, we must recognize that while some workers want democratization, not all are in favor of such a development. In one study, while a majority of American workers surveyed preferred to work in employee-managed companies, 45 percent did not wish to work in such firms.[152] The basic reason lies in the American workers' acceptance of the traditional managerial prerogative of decision making. In addition, many workers in the United States aspire to one day join the ranks of management or own their own businesses. Hence worker self-management was rejected by some workers who see it as a potential threat to their aspirations. Such employee attitudes serve as a formidable barrier to the growth of industrial democracy in the United States.

Some workers may prefer simplistic repetitive work to the greater complexity and responsibility that comes with democratization. When given the chance to change their work, at least some people will not want to change. We should not force people to change their working pattern in a direction *we* think is best for them. We must beware of *ethnomorphizing* or imposing our values (that is, the values of executives or academicians) on workers who may well not share our orientation.[153] We can easily fall into the elitist trap of arguing that workers do not know that democracy is good for them and that what we need to do is to *educate* them into accepting our way of thinking.

While workers may create various barriers to industrial democracy, managers pose another set of barriers. Managers often resist the usurpation of their traditional prerogatives to make basic decisions. As Best and Connolly point out, surrendering control to workers poses a threat not only to managerial prerogatives, but ultimately to the system of the private ownership of the

[150]Macy, "The Quality-of-Worklife Project at Bolivar."

[151]Guest, "Quality-of-Worklife—Learning from Tarrytown."

[152]Ain Haas, "Workers' Views on Self-Management: A Comparative Study of the United States and Sweden," in Maurice Zeitlin, ed., *Classes, Class Conflict, and the State: Empirical Studies in Class Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop Publishers, 1980), pp. 276–295.

[153]Singer, "Participative Decision-Making about Work."

means of production.[154] However, it should be borne in mind that in the majority of experiments in industrial democracy management *has* retained ultimate control:

> Workers are allowed to participate in corporate decision making only if they do not infringe on the prerogatives of company leaders. When quality of work life programs fail to meet management's goals, the programs are scuttled and any gains in workers' satisfaction are lost.[155]

While managers may fear that worker participation in the decision-making process may erode their traditional power base, recent empirical evidence suggests that power equalization within an organization may actually lead to greater managerial perception of authority and control.[156] Hence, managers' concerns over the erosion of power as a result of democratization may be unfounded.

Another barrier to democratization is the continuation of the traditional adversarial relationship between labor and management. To be successful, industrial democratization must involve at least some measure of labor-management cooperation.

Democratization has also been impeded by the fact that at least some efforts are not motivated by a sincere managerial concern for real worker participation; in other words, they are another form of managerial manipulation of the worker:

> To the extent that participative management schemes withhold meaningful influence, authority, and allotment of the ensuing profits, labor cannot be faulted for viewing such experiments as shams, as sophisticated attempts at behavior modification.[157]

American unionists may well react negatively to the similarities between industrial democracy and the old human relations movement. In fact, the two *do* have much in common. One Dutch observer of industrial democracy has made this point:

> The current situation is one in which allowing the workers a certain measure of participation is considered to have a useful function in that it can help achieve the goals of the enterprise, which latter, however, are not open to discussion at all.[158]

American unionists may also be swayed by the argument made by many Euro-

[154]Michael Best and William Connolly, *The Politicized Economy.*

[155]Sar A. Levitan and Clifford M. Johnson, "Labor and Management: The Illusion of Cooperation," *Harvard Business Review,* 61 (September/October, 1983), 9.

[156]Klaus Bartolke, et al., "Worker Participation and the Distribution of Control as Perceived by Members of Ten German Companies," *Administrative Science Quarterly,* 27 (1982), 380–397.

[157]Levitan and Johnson, "Labor and Management: The Illusion of Cooperation," 10.

[158]J. J. Ramondt, "Personnel Management and Shop Floor Consultation," in *Participation and Self-Management*; Vol. IV (Zagreb, Yugoslavia: Institute for Social Research, 1973), 241.

pean unionists, in particular those from Great Britain, who argue that work-linked democracy is simply another tool to buttress the capitalist system. Swedish managers have been unequivocal on this issue: "We cannot, or will not, introduce reforms which are inimical to capitalism."[159] Observes Ramondt: "A striking feature of these forms of consultation is that they tend to reinforce power rather than to bring about a redistribution of power."[160]

Another barrier to industrial democracy in the United States is the lack of legislative support for the process. This stands in contrast to the Swedish case where industrial democracy is embedded in the law.[161] As mentioned earlier, 1972 legislation in Sweden gave unions the right to representation on the boards of directors of most firms employing more than 100 persons. A 1973 law gave union officials the right to stop unsafe and dangerous work. In 1974, restrictions were placed on traditional managerial rights to hire and fire workers. In 1976, Sweden passed the Act on Employee Participation in Decision Making which prevented management from refusing to discuss any labor relations issues on the grounds that it has the exclusive right to make such decisions. Currently, Swedish lawmakers are discussing a bill that would set up funds derived from payroll taxes and taxes on corporate profits. Worker representatives would oversee these funds and be responsible for investment decisions. Through these funds, workers could purchase control of capitalist enterprises. This process could lead to the end of the distinction between labor and management. To further democratization in the United States, similar legislative changes would be needed.[162] However, the strength of the free enterprise ideology in the United States is likely to continue to bar such legislative changes.

Although all of the above are important causes of the decline in interest in industrial democracy in the United States in the 1980s, two other factors are of overwhelming importance. The first is the decline in a number of important American industries which has led workers to be more concerned with simply keeping their jobs than with democratizing them. The second is the growth of automation and robotization which has meant that instead of democratizing work, management is seeking to eliminate as many jobs and human workers as possible. As a result of these two developments, the hopes of the 1970s for democratizing work have been replaced in the 1980s by a rear-guard action by workers to hold on to their jobs. Most workers do not now have the luxury of worrying about such "niceties" as democratic work environments.

In the end, management in the 1980s seems to be in the process of making the decision that automation and robotization are preferable to democra-

[159]Lars Erik Karllson, "Industrial Democracy in Sweden," in Gerry Hunnius, David Garson and John Case, eds., *Workers' Control: A Reader on Labor and Social Change* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 179.

[160]Ramondt, "Personnel Management," 241.

[161]Andrew Martin, "From Joint Consultation to Joint Decision-Making: The Redistribution of Workplace Power in Sweden," in John A. Fry, ed., *Industrial Democracy and Labour Market Policy in Sweden* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1979), pp. 5–14.

[162]Steven Deutsch, "Work Environment Reform and Industrial Democracy," *Sociology of Work and Occupations*, 8 (1981), 180–194.

tization. Both processes are aimed at solving the same set of problems—alienation, absenteeism, turnover, sabotage, and the like. Democratization attempts to solve these problems by reducing the level of worker alienation. Automation and robotization deal with the problems by largely eliminating the workers. Robots will never feel alienated, be absent, quit, or sabotage the production process. In this sense, management of the 1980s sees technological change as a more effective response to alienation than the efforts at democratization that gained popularity in the 1970s.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we have focused on the problem of alienation among semiskilled and unskilled workers in organizations. We discussed a variety of approaches to alienation, including the structural orientation of Karl Marx and the social-psychological approach of most American sociologists. We turned to a description of the problem of alienation primarily among automobile assembly-line workers. Because of the nature of their work, they suffer from extraordinarily high levels of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. The high degree of alienation of such workers was compared to the lower levels of alienation of those who work with other technologies—craft (printing), machine-tending (textiles), and continuous process (chemicals).

We discussed actions undertaken by workers themselves to deal with alienation. Among these actions are efforts to beat the system, games workers play on the job, and restriction of output. Although these efforts may help workers get through the work day, they do not deal with the sources of the problem and may, in fact, help buttress the system that creates alienation. For another, we analyzed some of the psychological mechanisms employed by workers to cope with alienation. Among these are mental games, daydreaming, rationalizations of various sorts, and the development of mythical occupational images. We briefly discussed some of the ways unions can help cope with alienation, although we showed how they may well exacerbate the problem rather than help workers deal with it. We also discussed efforts undertaken by management, although many of these turned out to be insincere efforts to manipulate workers rather than serious attempts to deal with the sources of alienation.

The most serious efforts to deal with the structural sources of alienation involve the democratization of work. Our primary focus was on two automobile companies—Volvo in Sweden and General Motors in the United States. Although these efforts were of great importance in the 1970s, they seem to have lost momentum in the 1980s. The decline of "smokestack industries" in the United States has led more workers to be concerned with keeping their jobs than with worrying about democratization. Management seems to be in the process of moving from trying to deal with worklife problems through democratization to dealing with them by replacing many semiskilled and unskilled workers with robots and automated technologies.