1. Het studieveld der sociale wetenschappen

De redactie prijst zich gelukkig, de lezers hierbij een artikel te kunnen aanbieden van Albert Meister. De auteur is als sociologisch onderzoeker verbonden aan het Centro di sociologia della cooperazione in Milaan, een door het Olivetti-concern ondersteunde research-instelling. Het probleem, dat hij aan een bepaald voorbeeld verduidelijkt, is voor Nederland ook van betekenis. Hoewel bij ons de democratische vormen als medezeggenschap eerst veel later, en van buiten, in de bedrijven zijn geïntroduceerd, en in de door Meister aangevoerde Franse bedrijven vanaf het begin daarin aanwezig waren, is het zeer goed denkbaar, dat de structurele problemen ook bij ons voorkomen.

Some difficulties of democracy in industry

The case of the Communautés de travail

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In the following notes democracy in industry is considered as it appears on the plane of "everyday life". There are many papers dealing either with the structure of establishments where the workers are encouraged to take an active part in the management or with the legal provisions aiming at ensuring rights of control by the workers, and it has even been possible to propose a typology of the various forms of workers' control and participation. The International Sociological Association recently set up a sub-committee of sociologists of various countries to study these questions. ¹)

In the West, the measures taken by employers and trade-unions have been analysed and either criticized or admired. And in the Peoples' Democracies, especially in Yugoslavia and Poland, information on Workers' Councils is beginning to pour on to the desks of the experts. Compared with such plentiful information, however, not very much has been published on how these structures work and what the workers think of the various forms of "joint consultation", "factory committees" and "workers' councils".

Another rather neglected aspect in recent Western research is that of

the form taken by property — private, collective, or mixed. Collective
property is so rare on our side that one can understand this lack of
interest. Moreover, organizations of this nature — cooperatives, State
monopolies, nationalized enterprises — have often disappointed their
champions who sometimes would have no more to do with them.
Cooperatives of any kind, our most important instance of collective
property, have lost much of their prestige imitating private enterprises
and cruelly disappointing political hopes. Indeed, no one seems to take
an interest in them, least of all their own members.
The following observations refer to cooperative production groups in
which members themselves own the property of the firm, directors
and executives are elected, and formal provision is made for collective
management by leaders and led. Perhaps these observations cannot be
generalized beyond such limits although parallels with other types of
enterprise and with certain difficulties experienced in the Yugoslav
Workers' Councils have in fact been drawn. The observations are
based on a series of investigations into the French Communautés de
Travail, i.e. production cooperatives with the above-mentioned charac-
teristics.2) Some thirty of these communities are scattered all over
France. The most important of them number from 50 to 200 workers
(mechanical industry and watch-making, cabinet-making, electricity,
etc.).

In the early years (1948 to 1953), these Communautés de Travail
("Work Communities") laid it down in their constitution that every
worker according to his knowledge was to take part in the manage-
ment of the enterprise. The realization of this principle came up
against a number of difficulties which must be examined.

(1) Technical difficulties. At the stage when craftsmanship prevailed
every worker had something to say about production methods, the
quality of the raw materials, and the organization of the firm. There
was little division of labour yet, and his work was the thing which
counted. As the size of the establishment increased (although growth
never went beyond the level of small or middling business), division
of labour became imperative and the whole production process became
more and more technical. The technical expert or engineer alone was

2) See in particular: H. Desroche and A. Meister, Une Communauté de
Travail dans la banlieu parisienne — Essai monographique. Paris, Editions de
travail en France. Paris, Bureau d'Etudes Coopératives et Communautaires,
1956, 44 pp.; A. Meister, Bilan des Communautés de Travail en 1957 (in pre-
paration).
able to grasp everything. The worker obtained only a partial view of
the factory, and his opinion — even if he was asked for it — could only
reflect his relation to his machine and his nearest mates.

(2) Inadequate schooling. The rationalization and technical character
of production cruelly remind the working-man today of his poor
schooling. As to the economic management of the establishment, he
lacks the elementary knowledge for its comprehension and thus cannot
intelligently contribute to it. Such things as accounts and other im-
portant economic documents are beyond him.
As a result of these first two difficulties, collective management as
originally conceived has become impossible, at least as far as the great
majority of the workers in the shops are concerned. It has increasingly
come to be impracticable except by delegation, the meeting of all the
members of the enterprise has been superseded by an elected council
of limited membership. In this way the boards of the Communauté
de Travail regroup executives and workers, these workers virtually
acting as representatives of their comrades in the factory shops.

At this stage further difficulties arise:

(3) The democratic structure of the establishment (board-meetings
for all important decisions, the rank and file to be kept in the know,
etc.) does not go well with the rapid initiative which is necessary in
the struggle for markets. Those in charge, therefore, often enough pay
little attention to democratic controls; they decide and act as the
moment requires and tell the board later. Thus the board becomes
merely a check on the operations of the executive. This freedom of
action claimed by the executive (and comparable with that of the
government in parliamentary regimes) is not so much the result of
any lust for power as of the swift flow of economic life outside.

(4) Antagonism between management and workers is the greatest
tragedy. Although elected by all members of the establishment and
very often ex-workers themselves, those in charge lose touch with the
rank and file. There seem to be several reasons for this. First, the
higher salaries give these men greater purchasing power. One some-
times fails to realize how much the purchase of a car means in terms
of human estrangement and frustration to those who think that it is
their work which pays for the upstart's pleasure. Perhaps this way of
looking at it is characteristic of the rather anarchist égalitarisme of
the French working-class. But it does exist and we have found it in
many investigations.
Economic inequality is not perhaps the decisive factor conductive to this estrangement. The changed outlook of those put in a position of responsibility seems to be much more important. These men must now get out of the factory and move among non-workers (bankers, technical experts, etc.), and by their new activities they gradually come to look at the enterprise as if it were simply an economic unit and the workers merely production factors. This view of things and human beings differs very much from that taken by their comrades in the workshops. For them, with rare exceptions, there is no chance of rising high, their future is settled. Even if they get another job or learn something new, they know that things will stay much the same for them. They may be proud of their firm at times, but they hardly are interested in its being big. What they do want is that it should be good: that human relations should be fair, wages right, jobs safe. Relations with the management have been known to break down to the point that the workers struck although they themselves had elected the bosses.

But there are other difficulties:

(5) Above all, there is a conflict of wills. Those in charge, compelled by economic laws, want to reinvest in the business ever greater proportions of the profits while the workers steadily pull the other way, wanting to get more and more pay. Pay matters much less to those who run the business, for as a rule their salaries are satisfactory, and in any case a rise depends on their own decision. And this forms part of another difficulty inherent in collective management:

(6) The fact, namely, that at the head of the business there are a group of people whose activities, as we have seen, are not in practice subject to any control. Between these men too, of course, there are tensions, each of them working to develop his own department (the inflation of certain administrative departments is designed sometimes merely to assert the power of the person in charge), each surrounding himself with his own henchmen. At the very top, management is collective. These men, since there is no restraint from the workers, deal as they think fit with questions concerning their own remuneration and incidental benefits — what the workers hate is precisely the variety of these indirect advantages and the difference they make between the rungs of the ladder of advancement. In this way production cooperatives (of which the Communautés de Travail are a revived form) and generally the whole movement of consumers’ cooperation are delivered up to the power of their chiefs.
(7) The top-men are elected, but this principle does not seem to be as effective a restraint on personal power and as good a talent spotter as was hoped. The type of business we are dealing with here is of middling size where there are never enough people suitable to be put in the higher posts. Elections, in the circumstances amount to no more than a vote of confidence for these officers. It is usually easy to find workers to replace a foreman, but the higher one goes the harder it gets to find men able and free to fill vacancies. The size of the enterprise does matter but even in big business it can be difficult to find senior officers.

(8) Finally, there is the conflict between the professed aims of the community and its place in the market. On the one hand, the Communauté de Travail wanted above all to show that business could be run by the workers and that brotherliness could prevail over bossy authority. On the other hand, this made no difference whatsoever to its position in the markets, which was exactly the same as that of any other production unit. In this way the iron laws of industry came to crush the human strivings of the Work Community. Educational fervour petered out, and collective management merely came to mean formal observance of certain usages: the Community was obliged to boost production in order to be able to hold its own against the competition.

The workers are clearly conscious of this conflict and often say that organization has blasted community, in other words, that economic laws have got the better of man. This, at least, is what happened in the larger Work Communities. The development is much less marked in the small groups with less than 30 members.

It is clear that there are two opposed forces in an enterprise: management and workers. There are elected representatives of the workers, as in ordinary private business. Management by the workers has become merely a right of consultation and control of the leaders' activities. Of course, the workers know very well that, having no managerial qualifications, they cannot demand more.

Moreover, the right of control is not usually exercised in respect of production techniques but only at the level of pay and distribution of profits. Thus, the end is near the beginning now, except that compared with ordinary business establishments of similar size the atmosphere in the workshop and the relations between workers and chiefs are generally satisfactory in the Work Communities: they are distinctly better there than in ordinary businesses.
Are our observations capable of generalization and applicable to other types of community and global society? Owing to the marginal position of the Communautés de Travail in respect of ordinary business and in view of the peculiar development during the last few years in France comparisons may have become impossible. Besides, as we have said, this field has not been studied very much and comparisons cannot be attempted on any solid basis.

Has the little world of Work Communities gone through a development similar to that of the soviets which were crushed under the juggernaut of the Five-Year Plans? Has the expanding Russian economy so reduced the relative frequency of man that the soviets have had no choice but to re-elect their officers? Has not the very structure of the Workers' Councils, designed as it was to create direct democracy, proved impotent as the size of the enterprises grew and production processes became ever more technical? The available data are too scant for us to give clear answers to these questions.

Mao Tse-Tung stated in 1957 that "the masses take a direct part in productive labour but find it hard to take a direct part in the exercise of power. Thus, the rank and file of the people find it almost impossible to take an all-round view of the situation the country finds itself in and of its difficulties. On the other hand, the leaders who exercise the power have long-range aims in mind and see the great common interests. They are therefore inclined to neglect the particular situation and immediate needs of the people". 

3) Precisely the same thing, on a very different scale of course, is true of the little groups examined here, and the efforts to bridge the gap have all but failed. Such efforts, however, were frequently made and ranged from educational arrangements calculated to prepare workers for managerial activities to the establishment of control commissions for the inspection of business accounts,—not to speak of the many recipes and programs of human relations for sale on the French market of applied psycho-sociology.

The tendencies revealed by the inquiries seem to agree well with Claude Lefort's interpretation, to wit, "that an ever-present conflict tears at the organization of the factory, cooperation is smothered and irreversible irrationality engendered by the social caste-system; that the management is permanently caught in a conflict — insurmountable because due to the very fact that there is a management — between its efforts to promote the cooperation and initiative of the producers and,

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on the other hand, its policy forcibly to keep these same producers in isolation and insecure". 4)

In view of these conflicting interests the question arises whether after all trade-unions are not the only honest instrument of real power at the disposal of the workers; of a power, that is to say, focused — as it used to be — on wages, hours, and conditions of work: all of which are things which collective or social property of the means of production alone cannot secure.

De kleine groep in experimenteel geding

Een poging tot verheldering

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Wie de discussies naleest, gevolgd op de inleidingen door de socioloog Bouman en de sociaal-psycholoog Duijker over de kleine groep en in het bijzonder de experimentele aanpak daarvan — zie de verslagen in het Jaarboek van de Nederlandse Sociologische Vereniging (34) —, kan zich niet aan de indruk onttrekken dat er van een systematisch misverstand tussen de beoefenaren van beide wetenschappen gesproken moet worden; een misverstand, naar het mij voorkomt, dat voornamelijk voortvloeit uit het feit, dat zij zeer verschillende verwachtingen ten aanzien van het experiment koesteren, die in vele gevallen niet terzelfder tijd bevredigd kunnen worden. Wanneer de sociaal-psycholoog zich vergenoegd in de handen wrijft, omdat het hem gelukt is een variabele vrij zuiver te isoleren (wat een winstpunt voor zijn theorie betekent), verzucht de socioloog gemeenlijk dat hij met de resultaten van het experiment weinig of niets kan doen, omdat deze zo ver van zijn sociologische werkelijkheid afvallen. Dit artikel wil tot een wederzijdse verheldering van gezichtspunten bijdragen, door enkele princiële aspecten van de functie en structuur van het sociaal-psychologisch laboratorium-experiment te belichten.

Een toelichting op enkele termen is wellicht niet ongewenst. Wij verstaan onder experiment die methode, waarbij het verband tussen onafhankelijke en afhankelijke variabelen wordt nagegaan, door de eerste te laten variëren onder

4) "Sur l'article de Morin", in Arguments, 1957, I, 4, pp. 19-21.