VENSTER OP DE ACTON SOCIETY TRUST

In an earlier Venster reference was made to the 60 or so non-University Research Institutions in Great Britain which are responsible for social research in a variety of fields. Among these one of the youngest is the Acton Society Trust. This body was established in 1948 by the Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust for the purpose of promoting "the objective scientific study of political and economic structures in relation to human needs". The work of the Acton Society Trust consequently follows in the tradition of the practical studies initiated by B. Seebohm Rowntree's *Poverty: a Study of Town Life*, and is directed toward the solution of social problems. In particular it is concerned with discovering "what the broad trends of development in western society mean for the individual living in the society: how far do they aid him and how far do they handicap him in realising his potentialities".

The plan of research is determined in broad outline by the Trustees of the Society. So far, they have concentrated on the study of large-scale organisations, largely because the increasing scale of organisation is "one of the most evident trends in contemporary society". But such studies must not be deemed to exhaust their interests. "Long-term plans envisage the study of such other topics as the effects of high population densities, the changing standards of behaviour taught to children, and problems of communication and understanding when and as funds become available".

It is clear from such a list that the Society's approach to social research is purely *ad hoc* and that it is guided in its choice of subjects by what it feels to be novel or threatening in the tendencies of our time. This is especially noticeable in its published studies of large-scale organisations which have been almost wholly confined to the workings of the newly established nationalised industries and hospital services, and from which the Society has felt justified to draw certain policy conclusions, without undertaking parallel studies of older, state and municipal administrative units, and of the workings of large-scale private associations.

A similar lack of sociological sophistication is discernible in the methods of inquiry employed by the Society. Some of its research officers, it is true, have employed statistical and other techniques for the handling of their data and have published unambiguous accounts of the procedures adopted; but the reports are uneven in this respect, and is is not at all clear whether the Society as such

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2) Acton Society Trust leaflet: *Statement of Aims*.
3) Acton Society Trust leaflet: *Notes on the Research Programme*.
4) *ibid.*
is convinced that concern with methodological issues is important. Thus the report on Management under Nationalisation explicitly states that it was "not based on a scientifically constructed sample of management in the nationalised industries. In fact, much of the material was obtained in the course of investigations into a number of wider topics. But the same problems of operational management were seen to recur in each of the investigations, in such a way that their significance could not be overlooked, and it was felt that the findings should be made public". 5) Since the report contains an assessment of the operation of management in the nationalised industries and proposals for the future, it looks as if this is meant to imply that considerations of urgency have more weight with the Society than those of accuracy. Naturally no one wants to rule out the value of serendipity 6) but it is only valuable in suggesting lines for further research. It is not substitute for it, and to base policy statements on it is to base them on a guess.

The Acton Society Trust, therefore, cannot be regarded as a research institute likely to contribute to the development of sociological theory, but for all that, many of its research reports contain empirical information which is of interest and value to theoretically minded sociologists. Those who are interested in social stratification and social mobility, for example, will find Management Succession worth consulting. This is a study of the promotion policies and practices of seven organisations of 7,000-10,000 employees and 44 or more than 10,000 employees. The Personal Officers of these organisations were interviewed for data on the history of the company and its procedures for recruitment, selection, training and promotion of staff personnel above the level of foreman. Details of age, present position, educational background, professional qualifications and career history of 3,327 managers in 27 of the organisations of over 10,000 employees were also obtained by means of a questionnaire, sometimes completed from office records, sometimes by individual managers themselves. This material is presented in a number of useful tables. The report is interesting also for its attempt to work out the differential of promotion opportunities for different classes of worker according to their educational background, and according to the nature of the employment they obtained when they first entered industry. The overwhelming significance of the English Public School system and of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge for promotion to top management positions is clearly displayed, and the table provi-


can be read as an example within industry of class distinctions in Weber’s sense of class, namely, in terms of life chances for obtaining goods and income 8).

Another interesting statistical survey published by the Acton Society Trust is one dealing with a comparative study of attendance at work in large as compared with small organisations. This is admittedly an uncompleted survey, but is particularly noteworthy for containing both an introductory hypothesis and suggestions for further research of a sociological nature. The hypothesis is “that the urgency and impact of certain social problems of industry vary significantly and directly with the size of industrial units” 9). Previous work in a coalfield had suggested that “the miners in the smaller pits seemed to take much more interest in the affairs of their own pit than did men working in larger pits. They tended to know the names of their representatives on the consultative committees more often and they voted more readily at the periodical elections for these committees; a much greater percentage of them bought Coal magazine; they were more likely to know the name of their Area General Manager, and so on. All these were, it was felt, important considerations to be borne in mind in any assessment of industrial morale, and they were evidently closely related to the size of the individual pit” 10).

It should be mentioned in passing that none of this information was presented in the earlier report published by the Society on the study made in this particular coalfield. Details on the attitude of miners towards consultative committees, on their purchase of Coal, on their knowledge of officials were certainly provided, but they were classified not according to the size of the pits in which they worked, but according to whether for the purpose of the enquiry they had been “interviewed by four colliery training officers, regarded by the men as being National Coal Board officials” or “by seven other persons, not regarded by them as N.C.B. officials, although employed in the industry. 11)

Be that as it may, the survey of size and morale goes on to correlate size, as measured by the number of miners on the books of the 18 pits in the area, with absenteeism, and with accident rates per 100,000 man-shifts, and shows relatively high correlation co-efficients, of +0.667 and +0.50 respectively. Perhaps even more

9) Acton Society Trust: Size and Morale, a Preliminary Study of Attendance at Work in Large and Small Units, 1953 p. 5.
10) ibid p. 12.
11) Acton Society Trust: The Worker’s Point of View: a Discussion of ‘Reporting Back’ Based on a Study in a Coalfield, 1952, p. 30, and Table p. 32.
important is the correlation co-efficient of +0.60 between absenteeism and what referred to as the 'supervisory span' throughout the whole of the coal industry in 1950. This is the number of miners under the immediate control of a single supervisor. The Society followed this with an inquiry into changes in the supervisory span between 1947 and 1950 and found that there was a positive correlation in most areas between a decrease in the number of men under the immediate control of a single supervisor and a decline in absenteeism. This was also marked by an improvement in output. No explanation for this is offered.

Instead, the Report goes on to compare the results with absenteeism in a large industrial firm controlling a large number of productive units employing from 3,000 to 11,000 workers each, and with a large retail organisation controlling 230 stores employing from 13 to 336 workers. The general conclusion is that "workers go absent for one reason or another proportionally more frequently in large concerns than they do in small concerns. The trend is particularly noticeable in the coal industry; it is fairly marked in the industrial sample, and just discernible in the commercial undertakings investigated."12) Two further lines of enquiry are then suggested. The first relates to the distance the worker has to travel to his place of employment. "Studies have shown that there is no correlation between punctuality, or even absence, with distance travelled. But no studies have as yet been made into the social effect of this separation", that is, into the relationship between identification with the other workers at the place of work and opportunities of meeting them during leisure hours and participating in the local community.

The second line of enquiry suggested relates to communication within the working unit. "An employee's attitude to his work and to the management who employ him can be greatly affected by the number of stages in the hierarchy between him and the local manager. If there are many stages, it will probably take longer to obtain settlement of a grievance, or even a reply to an enquiry. Moreover, such communications may become distorted or attenuated in transmission. This would suggest that it might be worth making an analysis of collieries, or any other industrial units where the administrative structures are comparable in pattern, in terms of the number of stages in the hierarchy". 13). It is not clear whether the Acton Society Trust envisages making these studies itself, but until they are made the interesting correlations between size and other features of organisations will be of little value to sociological theory.

12) *Size and Morale,* p. 42.
13) *ibid* pp. 42-3.
Finally, mention might be made of a very different kind of study. One of the earlier reports of the Acton Society Trust dealt with the accountability of the nationalised industries to Parliament. In this report reference was made to the fact that Members of Parliament may ask questions about the working of the nationalised industries, and a piece of content analysis was undertaken to discover the extent to which there had been a decline of interest on the part of M.P. over time. This analysis is interesting too for the fact that "questions asked concerned the Post Office remain steadily at a much higher level than those for any of the corporations", 14) since the Post Office is a much older organisation and is run as a government department and not as a separate Corporation as is the case with all the industries nationalised since 1945. The analysis also showed a preoccupation on the part of M.P.'s with local problems of management as opposed to those involving overall efficiency. The report in addition dealt with House of Commons Debates on the nationalised industries between the 17th July, 1947 and 25th October, 1950, and thus remains a useful source book of references for any student of parliamentary control of the nationalised industries.

It should perhaps be added that any foreign student anxious to obtain a clear and concise account of the formal structure of the nationalised industries in Great Britain and of the hospital system, will find the Acton Society reports the simplest to read. They are, in fact, written for the intelligent layman. This is partly why they lack sociological sophistication. The intelligent layman lacks sociological tools and concepts, and in the attempt to meet his needs, the authors have no doubt presented themselves to the professional sociologist in a less favourable light than need necessarily have been the case. But for all that criticisms raised at the beginning of this Venster stand. The Acton Society Trust, if it continues its present policy, is unlikely to contribute to the development of sociological theory, although it will undoubtedly produce readable reports which the sociologist will find useful to consult.

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