Can Socio-Technical Reform in the Work-Organization Overcome the Meaninglessness of Work and the Powerlessness and De-Personalization of the Worker?
The Case of Sweden.

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XI World Congress of Sociology
New Delhi, August 18 - 23, 1986

ABSTRACT

All scholars who write on the alienation from work agree that feelings of meaninglessness of the work, of powerlessness vis-à-vis work and of depersonalization at the workplace are major ingredients in it. Technological determinists think that the meaninglessness of many tasks must be inevitable. Neo-Marxists think all three aspects are ineliminable under competitive market conditions. The socio-technical school of work reform views the three aspects as the result of rigid bureaucratic structure and rigid fragmentation of tasks, resented by workers and employees and dysfunctional to productivity, so that de-alienation may be achieved through organization change effected through management-worker partnership.

   My research was designed to examine the efficacy of such reforms as means of de-alienation from work by interviewing workers and employees whose work roles had been affected by recent organization reform, in ten Swedish work organizations; the results were compared to those observed in a national sample. Centering on the three aspects mentioned, I have observed that the evaluation of my reform sample were higher than those of the national sample. Also, their expressed wish for further improvement was doubly as pronounced as that of the national sample. In addition, most of them reported great improvements as to the meaning of work, the degree of autonomy and participation in decision making and of the quality of their social relations at work. Full participation of workers in the process of change appears as the crucial factor contributing to successful de-alienation from work through socio-technical reorganization.

   Although scholars using the concept of alienation from work widely disagree about its causes, its extent and the feasibility of overcoming it, all agree that feelings of meaninglessness of the work to the worker, of powerlessness of the worker vis-à-vis his or her work and of depersonalization of the worker at the workplace, are the three major elements of alienation from work. Various scholars, Marxist and Non-Marxist, claim that industrial technology in general, or modern electronic technology in particular, inevitably cause at least the meaninglessness of many rank and file work roles, and various Marxist and Neo-

Marxist scholars claim that all three aspects of work-alienation are inevitably caused by profit-maximizing privately owned employers (capitalists) or by all employers as long as the enterprise is not wholly controlled or managed by its workers, or simply by all employees (and perhaps they exist inevitably -- even for working persons who are not in an employment relationship) as long as there exist one or more of the following: market in commodities, a money market and a labour market.

The scholars of the socio-technical school of work reform claim that all three aspects of work alienation are interrelated, that they are not inevitably determined by industrial technology, that electronic technology potentially facilitates de-alienation, that these negative aspects of the working life are the result of rigid bureaucratic hierarchical structure and rigid fragmentation of tasks. These characteristics are not only increasingly resented by modern employees, they also have become dysfunctional to the productivity of most work organizations.

De-alienation can be achieved by conscious organizational change, given a partnership of management with workers/employees in the change process. Reforms of this kind have been taking place over the last two decades in many countries and have long passed out of the experimental stage. In Norway and in Sweden there has been widespread diffusion. Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars deny the efficacy of these organizational reforms in the overcoming of meaninglessness, powerlessness and depersonalization. Conservative management and business scholars deny their economic viability but I shall not deal with this argument here as I have discussed and criticized it in my paper "Dignity in the Workplace." Unfortunately many sociologists accept these arguments unexamined and therefore expect employers to back out of real reform inevitably.

The present paper is the report of a study of Swedish workers and employees in **11** work organizations whose work roles had been affected recently by organizational reform projects with the improvement of the quality of working life as one of their goals. Their evaluations concerning the level of the con- tent of their work, their autonomy/participation in decision-making and social relations/ social support is measured and compared to that of a representative sample of Swedish employed persons.

The members of the Reform sample gave their evaluations about the results of the organizational change in the 3 areas. They were also asked if they wished to have more of the positive work characteristics and the level of their wish was compared to that of the national representative sample. Most of the interviewees work in industrial production, in clerical, lower administrative and personal care occupations, i.e. in work situations which traditionally were supposed to be alienating. The finding is that they are far from evaluating their work as meaningless, that they do not see themselves as either powerless or depersonalized. Most of them see the organizational change responsible for

considerable improvement in content, autonomy and social support. The comparison of their evaluation with the national sample is not sufficient for evaluating the efficacy of socio-technical reform, as it is not possible this way to compare each organization with a similar occupational organization not touched by reform. The level of the evaluation of the national sample was quite high too - apparently reflecting the wide diffusion of reform in Sweden. Finally, the most striking characteristic of the reform sample was the high-level of active wish for further improvement.

Why and how should socio-technical reform in the workplace be effective in overcoming meaninglessness, powerlessness and depersonalization? What has been shown is that the introduction of new technology, which is a fairly constant feature of most modern industries, and the introduction of computer systems, including word processing, into office work, is a good occasion for change in the design of work roles, in the forms of control or supervision and in pay systems. In Norway and Sweden unions have the legal right to consultation in the case of all major technological changes.

Such consultation exists also in some other countries and is often used by unions to limit health hazards and protect employment. Under what conditions can the introduction of new technology be used for the de-alienation of work roles?

  Here the main organizational tool of Socio-technical reform plays a crucial role:

  The semi-autonomous work group or the self-steering team. The major principle of the team is rotation between different tasks of different level of manual, technical and intellectual complexity making up a meaningful portion of the product or service. Instead of allocating individual workers, individually and all day, to the tending of individual machines, or to their programming, maintenance or repair, or to the intake of raw materials, or to quality testing and control, or to the packing, storing, or expediting of the finished product, the new technology is being integrated into the work process of the team, with all being trained to understand it, being able to rotate in programming, tending, maintaining the new fully automatic machine, or the robot, the computer, the word processor, using it as well as performing the same tasks with hand-held tools that they consider better done thus, as well as performing many coordinating, scheduling, planning and training tasks for the functioning of the groups. The result is considerably more variety, interest, completeness and thus meaning, considerably more power over one's work, an end to close supervision and the encouragement of constructive cooperation instead of isolated competition.

Several findings evolved through much trial and error:

1. Pay-systems have to be changed in order to fit and encourage the team and its principles of continuous learning, readiness for rotation and cooperation.

2. Workers vary and grow in their readiness for more responsibility and autonomy.

3. Teams may also be introduced in work settings with minimal physical technology such as the care occupations of looking after pre-school children in day-care centers and of looking after the infirm elderly living either in their homes or in special apartment complexes. Here the problem did not lie in fragmented tasks, but in the fact that the care tasks that were considered meaningful and useful, nevertheless are largely menial, and repetitive from day to day. Teamwork will raise the variety and thus the interest level of tasks and thus their meaning. For example, teams of childcare workers introduce dancing, painting, storytelling into their task mix; care takers of the elderly introduce exercise and excursions. But the team will here be especially useful in overcoming isolation and increase social support. It will also shift control and coordination to the team and thus greatly reduce the powerlessness resulting from conventional hierarchical and bureaucratic supervision of care workers. So the term socio-technical reform is not exact, if understood as limited to the use of physical technology only.

4. Where persons working in the same occupation but are physically dispersed - for example secretaries in industry - the rotating, cooperating team is an impossibility, a different kind of organizational tool for considerable improvement of the quality of work life is the occupational pressure group. This group can redefine the task mix, reject activities that are considered demeaning, disturbing or non-professional, cooperate in the choice of new technology, make it accessible to all members, integrate its use among a variety of other activities, and maintain standing committees for continuing problems. Such a group is especially effective as a consciousness raising group for women workers; it can even function as an instrument for the change enforced, from above. For success the team has to be a full participant and planner in the entire change process.

6. Wherever the attempt is made to include in a team professionals together with non-professionals it should be clear that the principle of full rotation cannot be carried out. Non-professionals are nor permitted - by law- to carry out certain tasks considered professional. As for professionals being ready to share in non-professionals tasks, Swedish experience has shown that women appear to be ready to do this, while male professionals are not. In such situations a different organizational method - the matrix principle - may be the appropriate alternative to hierarchy and extreme specialization.

Recently the 1985 address of the then President of the American Sociological Association, Kai Ericson, was published. His Topic was "Work and Alienation". Although Ericson pleaded for our concentration on Seeman's understanding of alienation from work as meaninglessness and powerlessness, he apparently was unaware of the practical attempts of the socio-technical or industrial democracy reform movement to overcome the alienation of the worker. His major concern was with the conflicting claims made by sociologists for the effects of electronic

technology on the quality of work roles. Robert Blauner expected automation - especially in continuous flow industries - to overcome, without any special conscious reform efforts, the alienating work aspects of work in highly mechanized mass manufacturing industry, namely extreme fragmentation of tasks machine pacing, and close supervision; in contrast, Harry Braverman and his disciples expect micro-electronic technology to intensify the alienating characteristics of industrial jobs and to expand them to office jobs, through the further deskilling of skilled manual and clerical tasks and through the further degrading of the worker - by means of the total control made possible by the computer. Ericson apparently would like to see empirical research to test these conflicting theses. Obviously workers should be asked about their experience of their work. Yet, as Ericson appears to know only of empirical studies which use simple questions of job satisfaction and - rightly - points out the inappropriateness of simple job-satisfaction questions for measuring alienation, he appears to despair of such empirical enquiry.

  Fortunately during the last decade more sophisticated instruments for measuring workers' perceptions and evaluations of the characteristics of their work life have been developed. When used to enquire into the impact of recent technological change on industrial and on office jobs, workers' and employees' reactions were on the average more positive than negative, especially concerning the task characteristics, the interest, the meaningfulness of their jobs. No increase in powerlessness was found; yet stress levels rose = a condition usually not included in descriptions of alienation from work.

  Although some reform projects have been researched extensively, these more sophisticated instruments have unfortunately never been used as yet to measure the perceptions and evaluations of workers of the characteristics of their jobs or work roles before and after the completion of socio-technical change projects. But exactly this would be necessary in order to measure degrees of alienation or dealienation and thus the relative success or failure of reform. In the absence of conditions for such enquiries, and in order to make possible same comparison, I used a 38 job characteristic questionnaire that had been used recently in interviews by the Swedish Institute of Public Opinion of a representative sample of the Swedish population - as well as in several other countries - and asked workers and employees in **11** workplaces where recently organizational reform with the improvement of the quality of work life as one of its goals, had taken place. Though this questionnaire had not been designed to measure alienation or de-alienation, it includes enough questions concerning meaning, power and interpersonal relations.

  Let me illustrate this: 29 of the 38 questions/statements describing the characteristics of the job, permitted 3 possible responses - "this applies to my job","...applies partly", "...does not apply". 9 others requested a choice of degree. The 12 items concerning the content of work include such statements as "my work is interesting", "my work is creative", "I have much responsibility", "my

work is being recognized", "I am useful and productive", "can develop my abilities"; and request the interviewee to mark the degree - from extremely low to very high - of variety in work, of being "able to learn new things", or being "able to use one's skills and experience". On all these items the average results were well above the mid-level of possible positive response i.e.; there were hardly any workers who described their work roles as non-interesting, non-creative, monotonous, useless, stultifying etc. This was true for the Swedish national sample and even more so for the reform sample.

When we consider that 3 of the reform projects took part in the auto industry, in pressing, machining and engine assembly departments which traditionally belonged to the most fragmented and stultifying jobs in mass manufacture, the figures of 62,2 to 69,8 % of the maximal possible positive evaluation of content or meaning characteristics is remarkable. To the claim that progressive automation in industry necessarily deskills jobs, the auto workers evaluation of 70 - 75 % of maximum possible degree of "being able to use one's skill and experience" is a striking refutation.

Is this relatively high level of quality due to organizational change? Those who had experienced the entire organizational change process are asked to evaluate probable changes pertaining to content - whether positive, neutral or negative; interviewees of the 3 industrial projects, which were clearly socio-technical in nature, evaluated those changes as 59,5 to 63,6 % of the maximal positive change possible.

Some of the neo-Marxist critics of work reform concede its capability of raising the level of meaning of many jobs but doubt its efficacy in increasing workers' power in the work organization; they assume that management will not be ready to make any significant reduction in its conventional control over workers/employees.

The Swedish questionnaire included 3 statements pertaining to autonomy and participation in decision making, 2 questions of degree, and 3 yes/no questions; they were in this order: "there is no interference into my work", "I have a say in all major decisions", "I am well informed"; degree of "being able to plan one's own work", degree of "participation in decision making" and the yes/no questions: in case of important changes at work - being personally consulted, one's personal agreement being needed'; the union's agreement being needed.

To these questions the national Swedish sample gave 62 % of the possible maximum positive response, the reform sample 67 % ;"participation in decision making" was described by the national sample as 68,4 % of the maximum possible, by the reform sample higher: 79,2 %.

Finally to items signifying depersonalization. This appears to me a valid ingredient of work alienation - the feeling of being lost, of being treated impersonally, as a cog in a large, impersonal, bureaucratic machinery. But what are characteristics of its absence?

The following 5 statements appear to me as counter indications: "Am treated as a person", "have a good supervisor", "have excellent people as workmates", "suffering no isolation at work", "have an active union".   Here the national sample gave 71 % of possible positive response and the reform sample 76 %.
 Though these Swedish industrial, office and care workers have not yet reached a uniformly high level of meaningfulness, power and autonomy and personal dignity and social support in their work, their work life definitely cannot be described as either meaningless, powerless or depersonalized.

   Another aspect of the alienated worker is his or her passivity or resignation
 vis-à-vis the work situation. These Swedish workers and employees, who have experienced conscious organizational reform, are far from passivity or easy satisfaction with the improvements made. I have already mentioned that their level of active concern, expressed as "wanting more" of the 29 positive characteristics of work, is double that of the national sample. This wish for further improvement is 40,5 % of the maximum in the case of content items, as much as 50,2 % for autonomy and participation items and 32,9 % for personal dignity, and social support items. It can therefore be expected that they will push for further improvement of their working life.

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