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# The Historical Validity of the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project<sup>1</sup>

A new line in radical social criticism has emerged among the university students of Norway. It is not unique to Norwegian students.

Insofar as we have believed the Industrial Democracy project to be a radical, scientifically based response to the central human and organizational dilemmas of modern industry, it behooves us to consider the criticisms of the students.

Essentially, their criticism is that the Industrial Democracy project is too late and, in any case, has been too limited in its aims. Because of these faults, it draws attention from the need for a total social transformation and beguiles the working people into hoping for gradual reform when only a violent break with the past can possibly be liberating. This appears to differ from the traditional Marxist critique only in its insistence on total transformation. The Marxists believed that transformation of the class relations in the productive process had to precede transformation of society at large. Our own position would seem to differ from both in

- (a) assuming that the class relations in the productive process have evolved to such a stage of socialization (in the separation of ownership and management, the

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<sup>1</sup>Tavistock Document HRC 210, 1975.

definition of the social character of capital and the professionalization of management) that it is possible to strive realistically for a revolutionary improvement in the concrete productive relations of workers and management. We note, in passing, that the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 left this problem untouched and for the next 50 years the conditions for tackling it did not apparently exist. Similarly, the piecemeal transformations in class relations in the advanced Western societies produced by nationalization of coal mining, etc., appeared to have no radical effect on the concrete day-to-day relations of managers and workers.

Furthermore, we believe that

(b) the transformation of these concrete productive relations does not necessarily involve a conflict in class interests (given the "socialization of industry" mentioned above and the current level of technological development).

(c) that the transformation of the concrete day-to-day relations in production is the key to transforming, or restoring, the other personal, social and institutional relations into which people enter.

The last of these beliefs was not a prerequisite to our engaging in this project.

This would still have been justified in its own right provided it was not going to precipitate

undue trouble or disproportionately reduce the choices people would have to determine their future.

These three basic assumptions are all subject to historical validation.

To my mind, the Norwegian experience already validates our first two assumptions that the Marxist contradiction is *depassé*. Of course, it is reassuring to see the way the British are starting to follow the Norwegian example, but the essential point is that the class structure of Norwegian industry did not constitute a major obstacle to the realization of the project. The major obstacle to its acceptance has been the cultural and personality syndrome that Fromm (1950) called "the fear of freedom." The major obstacles to its spread to other larger capitalist countries would appear to be their complexity and cultural heterogeneity.

This should not surprise us. The fantastic growth in our productive capabilities has confronted us with the elimination of the domination of person over person, not simply a change in the form of domination. To confront successfully the cultures that have emerged over the past centuries as people sought to live with slavery, feudalism and capitalism, it is necessary for them to find common ground in deeper cultural roots. In some societies this will be harder to do than in others and in some, such as the United States, it may well be that it is impossible to confront this task without the guidance of some contemporary examples, such as Scandinavia.

Our last assumption was that the concrete day-to-day relations of production are the keystone to modern societies. This is becoming our most central concern, and yet it is the assumption for which we have the least direct evidence of what it means to a community when its working people are generally engaged in meaningful and challenging tasks.

There is, however, a lot of indirect evidence for making this assumption.

Consider, first, the main contemporary arguments against it:

1. The student radicals have, on occasion, argued that it is the struggle against the universities which is the leading force for social transformation; that it is they who will lead the workers out of industrial bondage. The facts suggest that they are simply reacting to the industrialization of the universities. Admittedly, their reaction is informed with a perspective of the future which was inconceivable to earlier generations, but it is still only a reaction, a riot, not a revolutionary movement. The students suffer from the existing productive relations and may drop out in large numbers but are in no position to transform them from without. Their experience to date only confirms our assumption.

2. McLuhan appears to be arguing that it is the direct effects of the technology of electronic communication which are currently transforming all social relations, including the productive relations. He sees little choice for us in all of this, except perhaps that by gaining conscious insight we may lessen the pain of accepting the changes. Active determination of our future is, according to him, precluded by the numbness, the Narcissus narcosis, that characterizes social relations in general.

Marcuse (1968:25), on balance, agrees with this pessimistic doctrine since he refers to it as the general replacement of psychological identification by primitive mimesis. Contrary to this, we think there is still a point of leverage for change. We maintain that it is by creating meaningful and challenging productive relations

that people will be able and willing to put new content into the web of electronic communication. Insofar as daily work gives a sense of personal worth, identity and growth, people will enter into the web of general social relations as conscious individuals.

Against these alternative perspectives, we are arguing that while they correctly perceive the demise of the old dynamic of the class relation in production, they fail to see that this has laid bare the more fundamental and pernicious contradiction within the concrete relations of production. Labor and the technological progress that is meant to liberate us from poverty and drudgery is still being carried out in the stultifying and degrading traditional mode of domination and subordination. If anything, the scientific rationalization of the traditional mode is intensifying the contradiction between the possibilities for free development of human potentialities and the actualities of daily life in the work force.

The revolutionary content of our project rests on the realization that this contradiction can be resolved only by changes in the techniques of production and that the techniques of production include not only the tools but the concepts for their use; thus a lathe with the concept of tolerance limits is a different technology from one without the concept. Techniques of production that include concepts of personal interest, learning, innovation and decision making have been successfully evolved for a number of branches of industry. These efforts are in line with Marcuse's (1968:31) observation that "as all freedom depends on the conquest of alien necessity, the realization of freedom depends on the techniques of this conquest." These efforts are contrary to the ideological movements of the human relations

schools which see the techniques of management as something distinct from the techniques of production and hence readily susceptible to human manipulation and the eventual masking of the contradiction to which we have drawn attention.

Let us now speculate about our third assumption, namely that the concrete relations in production are the leading part, the key link, in the transformation of society. We have discussed this so-called Phase C of the project for many years but have kept these discussions to ourselves and sought not to raise such questions in public. We neither wished to appear as dreamers nor to discourage people by pointing to the enormity of the tasks that lay ahead. Insofar as the proposed industrial changes could only increase the power of people freely to determine their future, we felt no guilt in hiding our personal thoughts.

What is likely to happen in other areas of social life as the industrial democracy project takes root? The effects on education are perhaps easiest to surmise because we are already involved in the education of managers and others for roles in the new socio-technical systems. Education for production by autonomous groups clearly requires an educational process in which autonomous groups are a basic element; the ability to use experts as resources presupposes experience with using academic staff as resource people; a naturally curious and creative response to the work situation presupposes that these potentialities are not stultified in educational processes; technical and social innovation and creativity presuppose a genuine polytechnical education and a grounding in the basic facts of people/task dynamics and of group dynamics. If such education is required in the reeducation of today's managers, foremen and workers, can we avoid making similar changes in higher, secondary and even primary education?

Similar considerations arise if we consider the quality of community life, leisure,

the fate of the Welfare State and, hopefully, the quality of family life. Rather than dwell on what is patently obvious, let me proceed to my last point.

I have so far concentrated on the comparison of our project with current alternatives. Marcuse (1968:175) has gone beyond this to postulate criteria for testing the historical validity of any project that seeks to transcend the status quo. Following is a brief examination of my projections against his criteria (in italics).

1. The transcendent project must be in accordance with the real possibilities open at the attained level of the material and intellectual culture.

As argued in discussion of our assumptions (a) and (b), the Industrial Democracy project appears to meet this criterion.

2. The transcendent project, in order to falsify the established totality, must demonstrate higher rationality in the threefold sense that

(a) it offers the prospect of preserving and improving the productive achievements of civilisation;

Our experiments to date show that we have every reason to expect that the democratization of work will do just this.

(b) it defines the established totality in its very structure, basic tendencies and relations;

As Marcuse (1968:23) himself points out, "stupefying work where it is no longer a real necessity" is the tap root of the "established totality." The tendencies and relations that arise from this have been partly spelled out in the early papers on socio-technical systems (Emery, 1977), but more has become apparent only in the course of our field experiments.

(c) its realisation offers a greater chance for the pacification of existence, within the framework of institutions which offer a greater chance for the free development of human needs and faculties.

The democratization of work should very materially contribute to the "pacification of existence" and be a major force in the remolding of the "framework of institutions" to better aid the release and development of human potentialities.

This effect is not dependent on most work in society having been redesigned. People will almost certainly wish to tackle these other tasks as soon as they are convinced that accomplishment of the industrial phase is only a matter of time.

Marcuse's analysis is so similar to mine that it is necessary to ask how he came to the pessimistic conclusion that the only possibility for change, and that dubious, lay with those

social fragments that lie outside of the productive process.

The answer to this is that he came right up to the door we are forcing. For example, in writing of the Soviet experiment, Marcuse stated that "if it could lead to self-determination at the very base of human existence, namely in the dimension of necessary labour it would be the most radical and most complete revolution in history" (p.49). Having come this far, he had no key to the door. The thin red thread that runs from the early Lewinian experiments (1936) on the dynamics of person/task relations (e.g., satiation, Zeigarnick effect, substitution, level of aspiration) to the "social climates" experiments and hence to the socio-technical experiments was outside his vision.

These very general thoughts may make it easier for us to formulate the tasks for Phase C of the Industrial Democracy project. There seems to be some urgency about this since people will almost certainly wish to tackle these tasks as soon as they are convinced that accomplishment of the industrial phase is only a matter of time.

## References

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