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**The Pitfalls of Pioneering Sociological  
Research:  
The Case of the Tavistock Institute  
on the Dublin Buses in the early 1960s**

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**The Pitfalls of Pioneering Sociological Research:  
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### **ABSTRACT**

Some aspects of the history of social science research in Ireland, such as the work of Arensberg and Kimball, have been repeatedly revisited and reappraised. Others have been largely ignored and neglected. This paper revisits one such victim of neglect: a research project on the morale of Dublin busmen carried out by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the early 1960s within the twin contexts of turbulent industrial relations and fledgling Irish social science research capacity building.

This working paper does not focus principally on the theoretical framework, fieldwork methods or empirical findings of the Tavistock study as published in 1967. Instead it examines the abortion of the project as originally conceived at what should have been its half-way stage together with the party political rows and media spinning that took place over its dead body.

### *Introduction*

Research by members of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations has long held a prominent position in the social science literature on work and organisations. It seems odd therefore that a substantial Tavistock study carried out in Dublin during the 1960s has to date gone virtually unnoticed in discussion of the development of the social sciences in Ireland.

This working paper revisits the neglected study of the morale of Dublin busmen. In doing so it focuses in the main not on the theoretical framework or the empirical findings of the study as published (Van Beinum 1967) but on the wider socio-political context within which the study got bent out of its original shape and became the subject of party political manoeuvres and media spinning. Apart from the published report itself, it has two main sources. The first is accounts by two members of the Steering Committee that 'not only formulated and agreed upon the purposes of the study but continued throughout to play a vital role in it' (Van Beinum 1967: Acknowledgements) – CIE Chairman Todd Andrews and trade union leader turned academic Charles McCarthy. The second is records of the Department of Transport and Power and of the Department of Labour released under thirty year rule of the National Archives Act. Before looking at its study of Dublin busmen, the paper sketches how the Tavistock Institute became in the words of Minister for Transport and Power, Erskine Childers, the 'leading non-profit making organisation in Europe dealing with human relations in industry'.

### *The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations*

The Social Department of the Tavistock Clinic was set up after the war to carry forward the wartime applications of sociological, anthropological, psychological and psychiatric expertise to the problems of peacetime social life... in the immediate post-war years the new conceptual frameworks and methods for intervening in matters of officer selection, group morale, leadership and shell shock all contributed substantially to a dramatically altered perception of the nature of the individual's relation to the activity of production. (Miller and Rose 1988: 182)

Reorganised, and renamed the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in 1947, this group of researchers produced a series of path-breaking studies of industrial work organisation. One of the studies which established the reputation of the Tavistock Institute researchers: concerned the 'longwall' system of mining coal. British coal mining had a long history of bitter industrial conflict. After the Second World War nationalisation of the mines was expected to begin a new, more harmonious era of management-worker relations but did not do so. If ownership was not at the root of conflict in the mines what was? Technology came under suspicion since 'hand got' methods had been displaced by a mechanised 'longwall' system and older miners continued to express a preference for the old system although the conditions associated with it had been anything but pleasant. The Tavistock Institute researchers focused on the social implications of this technological change.

Whatever the technology, the productive operation of coal mining consists of a continuously repeated cycle in which there are three phases: preparation, getting and advancing. In the 'hand got' days, tunnels were driven into the coalface creating pillars of uncut coal. These were divided up into (6-12 yard) places each of which was allotted to a self-selected six-member team. Two members of the team worked on each shift. Each team member had to have all the skills required to work at the face. the team was paid a lump sum based on its output which it divided among itself according to its own rules. The 'longwall' was adopted in order to make use of the conveyor belt. The working of small places by small teams was replaced by the working of several hundred yards of coalface by a large force of narrowly specialised workers, with each shift dealing with a different phase of the operation. The new system brought in a formal hierarchy of grades and task where there had been broad worker equality and it replaced worker self-regulation by extensive managerial co-ordination and supervision: both developments caused resentment. The new system was also prone to breakdown in acrimony because the unpredictability of mining often meant that a phase was incomplete at the end of one shift while the workers coming in were specialised in other tasks and would or could not take up where their predecessors had left off. Longwall methods therefore fell consistently short of the output they should in theory have been able to achieve.

The broad lines of the solution propounded by the Tavistock researchers was that the method needed to be altered so that a social as well as a technical whole was brought into existence. The studies they carried out in Durham involved developing 'compositely organised' mining teams working on longwalls. In this composite organisational design the worker could acquire a wide range of face skills; work-groups are self-selected and share out preferred and disliked tasks fairly; they are paid an equally shared bonus in addition to their flat-rate pay and they proceed to the next phase of the three phase cycle as it arises rather than when a shift changes over. When composite groups were compared with conventional ones (and more composite ones with less composite ones) they had higher output, less absenteeism and were more effective in keeping the production cycle going. Their members also expressed greater feelings of work satisfaction and related better with management.

From this and other studies, a general approach to questions of industrial organisation known as socio-technical systems approach evolved. The socio-technical systems approach starts out from the premise that within every workplace there is an interaction between two-distinct systems, one technological and the other social. This approach has as its aim 'the provision of a precise set of guidelines for creating democratic organisations that are excellent in both human and production terms'. To do this a methodology for analysing an existing work situation and coming up with proposals that raise both productivity and worker satisfaction is needed. Philosophically the socio-technical systems approach rests on a view that group decision-making is more effective than a rigid hierarchy of authority. What is needed is 'to increase the ability of the individual to participate in decision taking and in this way to enable him/her to exercise a degree of control over the immediate work environment' (Mumford 1987: 67)

### *Coras Iompair Eireann*

With over 20,000 employees at the start of the 1960s, CIE, the state-owned bus, railway and road freight company was the largest single enterprise in the Republic of Ireland. Under the terms of the Transport Act 1958 the company was to receive an annual subvention of £1.75 million for a five year period after which it would be expected to pay its own way. Provided with a large measure of commercial freedom, the new Chairman

of CIE, Todd Andrews set about a programme of massive railway line closures and organisational reinvigoration in pursuit of this goal. 1961 was to be a fateful year for this project: Andrews records in his memoirs that 'by 1961 we were within a quarter of a million pounds of breaking even financially' and also that 'we had a quiet time on the labour front until early in 1961' (Andrews 2001: 254 and 261).

During 1961 a dispute over payment for weekend working led to a lockout of Dublin busmen by CIE. In May 1962 the company moved unilaterally to begin to introduce one-man buses into its fleet. When busmen who refused to work the new system were dismissed, an unofficial strike immediately brought the city's services to a halt. This strike saw the emergence of divisions within the union to which a majority of the busmen belonged, the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), as disciplinary sanctions were imposed by its officials on members deemed guilty of taking part in unauthorised demonstrations. Failing to achieve what it considered satisfactory negotiated progress on the one-man buses issue, the company attempted to unilaterally extend their use a year later: the strike that followed differed from that of the previous year in being official. The stoppage in April and May 1963 was to be a critical one: according to McCarthy (1973: 63) 'the company lost heart with regard to one-man operations and never extended the system very much further' yet the dispute's eventual settlement also 'created a crisis in the relations between the men, and the Irish Transport in particular, which was to lead to a breakaway movement and the establishing of a new union for busmen'

*Bringing the Tavistock Institute to Dublin*

It was against this background that the decision to turn to the Tavistock Institute was taken, apparently on Andrews' initiative and with mixed feelings of the part of union leaders (McCarthy 1973: 65):

Our failure to bring the bus workers along with us in the really massive effort to revive CIE was the biggest disappointment of my public service career. I found my inability to cope with them distressing, especially since I believed them to be sound and enlightened nationally. Much of their waywardness - it could not be called militancy - was due to ineptitude and lack of union discipline, but the attitude of the rank and file was sometimes so irrational that it suggested the possibility of contributory factors not easily discernible. I suggested... that CIE and the...unions should jointly commission the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations to make a study of the underlying causes of the poor morale of the busmen (Andrews 2001: 269)

The project that emerged was sponsored by CIE, three unions representing the busmen and the National Joint Committee on the Human Sciences and Their Application to Industry (HSC). The HSC was probably the first body involved in providing public funding support for the creation of a social science research infrastructure in Ireland. It had been set up in 1958, alongside the Irish National Productivity Committee (INPC), to liaise with the European Productivity Agency (EPA) which formed an autonomous part of the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC). During its lifetime it had unsuccessfully sought funding for a research institute, had sent potential Irish research workers abroad for training under schemes operated by the EPA, had organised conferences and seminars (particularly in the area of ergonomics) and collaborated with Dutch researchers on a sociological study of the hinterland of Shannon Airport

EPA was disbanded as part of the process by which OEEC was in 1961 reinvented as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development but 'before E.P.A. went out of existence the [INPC] arranged for it to make a substantial grant to this country to finance research in the Human Sciences field'. With greater access to funds than it had hitherto enjoyed, the HSC helped finance two substantive studies – the Tavistock CIE project and the Skibbereen survey carried out by J.A. Jackson (1967) – prior to its incorporation into a revamped INPC in 1964 (Murray 2004). The Chairman and Secretary of the HSC were, alongside CIE and union representatives, members of a

Steering Committee set up to assist in the general direction of the Tavistock project. In January 1966 Charles McCarthy, General Secretary of the Vocational Teachers' Association and a prominent figure within the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) took over as HSC Chairman and joined this Steering Committee.

*Todd Andrews and Charles McCarthy on the Tavistock Study*

In Andrews' memoirs the account of his motivation in proposing the Tavistock study quoted above is followed by this brief, dismissive reference to the study's report:

Dr. Van Beinum's report did not throw much new light on the problem. Wages, as we suspected, were not the dominant issue; busmen's earnings were not bad by the public-service standards of the time. The major sources of discontent seemed to derive from stresses peculiar to the job itself and the demanding conditions under which the men worked, as well as lack of opportunities for advancement and promotion. Busmen do not appear to differ much from the rest of humanity in their motivation... weaknesses in trade union management and organization were at the root of the labour problems which beset CIE in my time. (Andrews 2001: 269-271)

His fellow Steering Committee member, McCarthy, by contrast, draws attention to the two-phase conception with which the project started out but did not finish up:

It was recognised that such a study could reflect both on CIE and on the trade unions, and in order to overcome this problem, but more important, in order that the study should be a catalyst by which improvements would be made, it was agreed that the survey itself would merely be the first phase; the second phase would be a joint examination of the results and a series of joint measures to effect improvements. The eventual publication (and it was clear from the start that the results would be published) would contain not only the survey, but the steps which both management and unions had taken as a result of it. In this way, improvements would be effected and hostile criticism circumvented. (McCarthy 1973: 65-66)

The first phase, which was carried out by a team of five researchers directed by Hans Van Beinum, got under way in September 1963. Apart from some additional work carried out in 1965 on trade union organisation, its fieldwork appears to have concluded in the Summer of 1964. The report of the study went through three drafts between late 1964 and the end of 1965 (Van Beinum 1967: 4). The key issues investigated were the socio-technical characteristics of the jobs the busmen had to carry out; the management the busmen experienced, directly and indirectly; the relationship between the busmen and their unions and the shared attitudes of busmen towards these matters and towards their position in general. The data collection ranged across semi-structured group interviews with drivers and conductors, observation of a sample of different types of bus “run” and extended interviews with the observed crews, interviews with management at different levels and interviews with trade union officials and representatives. As anticipated, the reflection was unflattering:

Morale is low. The way in which the work situation is perceived is predominantly negative and, without exaggeration our findings can be regarded as disquieting... The coming phase of evaluation and action will be more difficult than the research stage now behind us. It will demand an even greater commitment and support and will require a frame of reference which is securely based in shared values (Van Beinum 1967: 89 and 91)

*Why the Tavistock Study Had No Second Phase*

While Van Beinum expressed the view that such a shared set of values did exist, other evidence suggests that perhaps the only thing CIE management and the unions shared by the mid-1960s was a deep mistrust of one another. The carrying out of the Tavistock fieldwork in late 1963 and through much of 1964 coincided with a lull in overt hostilities, during which the breakaway busmen’s movement failed to find a home in either of the ITGWU’s two rival general unions and went through the process of creating a new licensed union. Thereafter industrial conflict returned with a vengeance as the new National Busmen’s Union (NBU) launched a series of one-day strikes to which the company responded by resorting to a lockout. Nor did the NBU have a monopoly over militancy. In the Summer of 1966 a further protracted strike by Workers Union of Ireland members over garage maintenance workers’ wages took place.

Given the task of holding discussions that might lead to improved industrial relations within CIE, officials of the newly-created Department of Labour discovered in late 1966 that within the leadership of the established ICTU-affiliated unions at CIE there prevailed a mixture of expectation and hope that the NBU would succumb to infant mortality and disappear within a couple of years. These unions treated the NBU as a 'splinter union' with which they did not fraternise or co-operate although their members would not pass NBU pickets. On the part of the NBU there was disinterest in CIE's negotiating structures and in the union groupings that operated within those structures. This was hardly a situation conducive to taking the joint action the second phase of the Tavistock study envisaged.

Before the discussions initiated by the Department of Labour got under way, the Minister for Transport and Power, Erskine Childers, had written to his colleague the Minister for Labour, Patrick Hillery, on 31 August 1966: "no doubt you will wish to examine this [Tavistock] report". By the time they were allowed to lapse in early 1967, with no prospect of progress in sight, not a single reference to the Tavistock study is to be found in the discussion records. What the unions were highlighting was the issue of the subsidy received by CIE, blaming the inadequacy of this (contra Andrews, quoted above) for low wages and an absence of meaningful negotiation on the part of management. For a united front of CIE management and the Department of Transport and Power, on the other hand, the key issue was a multiplicity of malfunctioning unions with Childers in his letter to Hillery of 31 August following his reference to the Tavistock report by the statement:

No enquiry into CIE is worth anything unless it provides for group union reorganisation with statistical and secretarial help, better methods of balloting and plenipotentiary powers for unions, and explanations on the position of CIE. CIE workers are not told of comparable conditions in other transport systems. If CIE is asked "why did you not increase the maintenance workers' wages before" the answer is given above: splinter union negotiation, huge claims by NBU, rivalry in securing better remuneration and the utter inability of CIE to negotiate on a long-term basis so that escalation is non-existent.<sup>1</sup>

*Playing Politics with the Report and Managing Media Coverage of its Publication*

The disinterest in the Tavistock report shown by the participants in the Department of Labour discussions was not, however, universally shared:

Material from the survey was also leaked to the newspapers; it was referred to publicly by some of CIE management, and versions of it were circulating among the busmen. Eventually, the survey itself was published in 1966 but without any follow-through report as was originally intended. (McCarthy 1973: 66)

In fact publication did not in fact take place until August 1967 (more than a year and a half after a final draft was written) and by then the list of those making public use of the still unpublished Tavistock included a Cabinet Minister. Repeated disruptions of the capital city's main public transport service inevitably had political repercussions and the Minister for Transport and Power found himself faced with opposition party calls for a public inquiry into the state of CIE. At a press conference in August 1966 Childers turned to the work of what he termed the 'leading non-profit making organisation in Europe dealing with human relations in industry' to fend off this public inquiry demand:

It is extraordinary that the Fine Gael Party, apparently with the objective of creating agitation among the staff of CIE for political purposes, have ignored the existence of the [Tavistock] report, which has been in the hands of the unions for some months for reprocessing and republication in more usual terms of speech, the document being highly technical in language.

The Tavistock Institute is an independent organisation of international repute. The personnel included Irishmen of eminent ability. I have no intention of holding a public inquiry when such an independent report is available.<sup>2</sup>

Made on the same day as his letter to Hillery was specifying what an 'enquiry... worth anything' must do, this statement was somewhat disingenuous. As regards the handling

of the report's publication, a version rather different to trade union reprocessing was given on 17 November in a letter written by CIE's General Manager:

Latest information is that the Human Sciences Committee will arrange publication in December. The reason for the delay is that the Tavistock Institute was asked to contribute some additional chapters on the methodology employed. Neither the trade unions nor CIE have seen these chapters but it is understood they will not cause alteration of the text in the main body of the Report. It is expected that all three parties will contribute to a press release at the time of publication. This is not certain yet, but there is no doubt about general anxiety concerning the manner in which the Report and its contents are presented to the public.<sup>3</sup>

In fact publication did not take place until the following August and CIE then acted unilaterally to try and influence the report's presentation by the press through briefings given to journalists in which:

The main points made were (a) that the report was four years old and, therefore, out of date and (b) that the conditions which now exist in Dublin City services have altered materially for the better from those of four years ago<sup>4</sup>

The results of this exercise were mixed. The *Irish Times* piece - headlined "Report's Findings Overtaken By Time" - regurgitated the CIE line: the other Dublin dailies' headlines either emphasised the report's findings ("Discontent Rife Among Dublin Busmen") or recalled long-abandoned aspirations of the study's original conception ("New Blueprint for CIE. Report Urges Experiment in Industrial Relations"). Writing to Childers, CIE's General Manager was "satisfied it is unlikely that any of [the newspapers] will be interested in re-opening or developing the subject". He predicted that the report "will be forgotten very quickly"<sup>5</sup> - as indeed it has been, apart from the brief references in Andrews' memoirs and the more extensive meditations of McCarthy (1971 and 1973) on a lost opportunity to experiment with industrial democracy in Ireland.

### *Conclusion*

The Tavistock study came into existence trailing background assumptions about the peculiar mental state of the Dublin busman. To Andrews (2002: 269) 'the attitude of the rank and file was sometimes so irrational that it suggested the possibility of contributory factors not easily discernible'. According to McCarthy (1973: 65) 'CIE and the unions were deeply troubled by the strong feelings which lay behind the [1963 one-man buses] dispute, and, perhaps believing that they had done all that was expected of them, they began to look for the cause in some deeper *malaise* among the men'. Earlier in 1958, when all was still fairly quiet on the CIE labour front, the company's medical officers had suggested as a topic for research to the newly created HSC 'neuroses [sic] in bus crews, a greater problem in Dublin than in rural districts'.<sup>6</sup>

The published report, however, contains a chapter - "Some Considerations About the Relation Between the Role of the Trade Union in Modern Society and the Attitudes of the Busmen" - which parallels, if it does not anticipate, theorisations by the 1960s Affluent Worker team with regard to working class images of society and orientations to work:

Class consciousness is changing into self consciousness. We can speak of the 'privatisation' of the worker, by which we mean the tendency to evaluate the affairs of the world in terms of his own needs, rather than in terms of the needs of the traditional social group of which he is a part (Van Beinum 1967: 79)

While this perspective discounted the Marxist stress on the centrality of class, it did, as noted by Westergaard (1970), represent a 'rediscovery of the cash nexus' upon which Marx had laid so much stress. Placed within a cash nexus context, CIE's busmen cease to appear irrational, neurotic or stricken by some mysterious *malaise*. If commercial logic was to shape CIE's service output, then why should it not determine the wages of the company's employees too? The busmen worked in a service that made a profit but, because the government was determined to limit its subvention to the public transport sector as a whole, these profits were cross-subsidising losses being incurred elsewhere. As McCarthy (1973: 59) notes this was a situation in which the company 'tended to give increases belatedly and after hard bargaining' leaving the busmen 'understandably aggrieved'. Looking back, Andrews (2001: 274) was to conclude that CIE could have

broken even only by closing down the state's entire railway system – a course of action he would have been willing to pursue but one which lay outside the realm of the politically possible.

In the end politics was in command at CIE. Whenever the size of the subvention issue was raised, the standard response of the Minister for Transport and Power was to translate any size of increase into a rise of so many pence in the price of a gallon of petrol. The public transport system had to pay its way because private motoring was government policy's most favoured transport mode. The two-man bus with its open platform at the back is now a museum piece but the public policy bias context of the way in which its threatened demise triggered off an explosion of conflict within CIE in the early 1960s has retained an enduring relevance down to the present day.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> National Archives, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2001/50/228

<sup>2</sup> *Irish Times* 1 September 1966

<sup>3</sup> National Archives, Department of Transport, Energy and Communications RTS 13/42

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> National Archives, Department of Industry and Commerce MIS/1/8

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