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Beyond the Panopticon?

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review of: **Ackroyd, S. and P. Thompson (1999) *Organizational* Mis*behaviour.* London: Sage.**
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After a long hiatus the issue of worker resistance is now back on the research agenda for those who critically study work and organization. Ackroyd and Thompson's book *Organizational Misbehaviour* attempts to address the serious neglect of employee opposition in analyses of organization over the last ten years or so. Building and expanding upon their influential *Sociology* article, 'All Quiet on the Workplace Front?' (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995), they make a serious attempt to revive the notion of the recalcitrant worker whilst ferociously criticising the many so-called radical studies that have prematurely heralded the demise of resistance in the contemporary workplace.

Ackroyd and Thompson use the term 'misbehaviour' to describe the many forms of worker resistance and opposition that they argue is still widespread in most organizations. They define worker misbehaviour as including the widest range of behaviour – "from failure to work very hard or conscientiously, through not working at all, deliberate output restriction, practical joking, pilferage, sabotage and sexual misconduct" (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 1-2). In other words, misbehaviour is all of those things that employees do at work but are not supposed to do. The term 'misbehaviour' is being employed ironically here, with not a little smidgin of sardonic humour. They take the position of managerial authority and then undermine its gaze by portraying worker recalcitrance as a legitimate and valid mode of conduct practiced by men and women who find themselves caught within webs of domination and exploitation. Under these conditions, in which so many working people find themselves today, there is an irrepressible drive to self-organize, maintain some meaningful self-determination and find ways to break the rules.

Organizational misbehaviour, according to the authors, consists of a number 'appropriations', whereby workers regain control over a sphere of their working lives that had previously been governed by their employers. This is an excellent way of approaching the subject because rather than resistance being conceived as a negative

reaction to power the authors instead frame misbehaviour as an *active* set of practices that attempt to recover a degree of autonomy at work. Workers not only resist domination following a managerial manoeuvre but also take the initiative, taking the lead on various political issues. The book goes on to classify these appropriations into four types: the appropriation of time (time wasting, absenteeism), the appropriation of work (effort bargaining, soldiering), the appropriation of product (theft, fiddling) and the appropriation of identity (joking, sex games, class solidarity). These classifications are very broad ranged and refreshingly multi-dimensional. They offer the immediate advantage of expanding upon our traditional conceptions of resistance. In the past, research has tended to privilege overt, open and collective practices of dissent such as strikes, picketing and other forms of industrial action. But with the inclusion of the last category, in particular, a whole new realm of workplace practice is rendered visible as modalities of resistance that were ignored in the past. Resistance at the level of identity has tended to take a back seat to more 'material' practices of opposition (perhaps reflecting the concerns with Fordism and industrialism). However, because power now targets the very selves of workers via corporate culture engineering and self-managing teams, we must look at how identity becomes an important site of misbehaviour. We now find that opposition may be covert, subjective, subtle and sometimes unorganized (not to be confused with disorganized). This does not necessarily mean that such practices are any less effective, because in the age of stringent team normalisation and 'identity cleansing' the logic of resistance has shifted. Take the authors interesting comments regarding humour and irony:

> Ironic, sardonic and satirical commentary on management initiatives have become in the current context significant forms of misbehaviour. Management today has an interest in trying to incorporate the sentiments of its employees and to harness their goodwill by doing so. (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 103)

Such an acknowledgment of the diverse forms of misbehaviour is undeniably timely, but there is little discussion regarding the ways in which these forms of resistance interact with each other. Collinson (1992, 1994) for example, argued that resistance through counter-identities unwittingly prevented workers from challenging their second-class status because irony, humour and the rest tended to give workers an illusionary sense of elevation and thus secured their consent to domination. On the other hand, we could imagine that cynicism and class-consciousness would be important companions to other forms of rebellion, supporting rather than impeding dissent. Such complexities and overlapping could have been explored a little more in the book.

A good deal of the book seems to be geared toward reprimanding the organization studies literature for being oblivious to the many ways in which workers resist power. The organization behaviour literature, for example, seems to see organizations as one big happy family, with benevolent managers giving rational orders and workers faithfully obeying. Such a picture, maintains the book, is outright misleading and misses much of what goes on in today's workplaces. If we are to gain a richer and more accurate understanding of how people work together then it is argued that we should keep the abiding politics of misbehaviour in mind. The dark underside of organizational life is of as much importance (if not more) to consolidating our understandings of contemporary workplaces as the saccharine 'everything's OK' narrative that many textbooks and journals invariably foist upon readers.

By far the most vitriolic comments, however, are reserved for those who write under the rubric of critical organization studies. And here, Ackroyd and Thompson really have an axe to grind. They quite rightly point out that much of the research on corporate culture engineering, surveillance, team normalisation, JIT etc. tends to take a position that is over-deterministic and dangerously totalising. That is, one is sometimes left with the impression that workers are merely passive clones of the corporate machine who are unable to think for themselves or resist. They argue that Sewell and Wilkinson (1992), Deetz (1992), Townley (1993; 1994), Willmott (1993), Barker (1993), Smith and Wilkinson (1995) and Casey (1995, 1999), for example, naively overstate the extent and effectiveness of new management practices and in doing so write worker resistance out of the picture. They lament, "writers are approaching their subject with the assumption that management has become – for the first time in its history – really effective in controlling behaviour" (1999: 6). Worker resistance features little in this stream of research not because it was not there but because of the obsessive preoccupation these authors seem to have with system integration and reproduction. As a result, the ways in which power is challenged, reversed and fails is left entirely out the picture, frustrating Ackroyd and Thompson no end.

Ackroyd and Thompson lay much of blame for this state of affairs with the Foucauldian perspective and its increasing dominance in critical organization studies. In the last chapter of the book (a rough reproduction of their 1995 article) they formulate their key argument that the Foucaudian approach in organization studies has succeeded wonderfully in explaining how workers are controlled (the docile and useful body) but has failed miserably in explaining how they resist and exercise their agency against and around various forms of domination. Even though they concede that Foucault does give a cursory mention of resistance in his analyses of power, the authors of this book hint that there still seems to be a totalising tendency inherent in his approach and this is why the aforementioned studies inspired by his work spend so little time studying worker misbehaviour. They write of Foucault:

> …there is the problem that power is everywhere and nowhere, the impression can be given that it is a force from which there can never be any escape. Resistance is part of the formal picture, but is under-theorised and the dice is loaded against it…in the desire to avoid explanations at the level of the subject, human agency gets lost in the constitution of the subject solely through discourse… (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 157-158)

In rightly admonishing a particular group of Foucaudian organization scholars for forgetting about resistance, the authors make the rather rash, and I would say specious, accusation that the texts of Foucault leave little room for resistance because they 'see power everywhere, and therefore it is inescapable.' Of course, this is an outlandishly absurd misrepresentation of Foucault's position on power and resistance and such sloppily contrived caricatures tend to mar the final pages of their book. I do not remember reading in any of Foucault's texts that 'power is everywhere' or that resistance is about 'escaping power' or that because power totally saturates us we 'cannot resist'. I am by no means defending the Foucauldian perspective because I would agree with Ackroyd and Thompson that his work is probably not the most useful to understand contemporary work organization – however, you must have a good understanding of his texts before you critique them in such a pugnacious manner and the authors do not convince the reader that they have such an understanding. Moreover,

what about the important books in the field of organization studies that *do* draw upon Foucault to talk about resistance persuasively? Jermier, Knights and Nord's (1994) *Resistance and Power in Organizations* attempts to formulate a Foucauldian approach to resistance in the workplace but receives scant mention in this book. Dorinne Kondo (1990) writes at length about workplace resistance in a Foucauldian vein in her extremely influential *Crafting Selves* and receives no mention whatsoever. Why the glaring omissions?

Despite these shortcomings the authors do make a good case for thinking a little more seriously about resistance and workplace misbehaviour. The book is concisely written, thoroughly researched and exhibits a healthy empathy for workers, which much 'critical' research sadly lacks today. The argument and analysis is organized in a manner that is both sophisticated and accessible and it makes a worthwhile contribution to the study of contemporary organizations.

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