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*Working for Ford Forty Years On*

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This paper is an extended version of a contribution to a symposium in *Work, Employment and Society*, addressing *Working for Ford* 40 years after it was published. I am very grateful to Huw Beynon and also to Stephen Ackroyd and Jacques Bélanger for comments.

**Abstract:** Huw Beynon's *Working for Ford* achieved celebrity when published in 1973. An assessment 40 years later identifies the lasting value of the book. Though written from a clearly stated point of view, it did not present a biased account, and it included much information permitting alternative assessments. It is also possible to construct an explanation of why the situation was as it was; this explanation turns on the technology of car plants, distinctive strategies adopted by Ford management, and the active role of workers. Though the particular events analysed in the book were of their time, the book is of more than historical interest. Its lasting value is four-fold: it explains how and why workers engage in immediate battles for control of the workplace; it indicates that workers do not choose such battles willingly and are often aware of wider concerns while lacking the means to pursue them; it points to substantial areas of continuity with the contemporary organization of labour and struggles for workers' dignity; and it permits reflection on the possibilities of organized alternatives to current forms of work organization.

**Key words:** Beynon; car industry; Ford; social class; sociology of work; workplace industrial relations

Huw Beynon's *Working for Ford* was first published in 1973. A second edition was published in 1984; it omits some aspects of the 1973 edition, updates developments in Ford globally since 1973 and adds a chapter debating the strategies that trade unions and workers might or could adopt in response. These two versions are cited below as '1973' and '1984'. This essay reflects on the book's lasting contribution to the sociology of the workplace.

The book is a study of the Ford Motor Company's factory at Halewood in Liverpool, mainly during the period 1967-71. As the 1973 edition's cover cogently stated, it does two things. It 'describes what it is like to work in a car factory'; and it explores the nature of trade union workplace organization, militancy, and workers' economic and political aspirations. It does so through a vivid portrayal of the brutality of life on the shop floor and battles to challenge managerial control. Darlington (1994) brings the story forward to 1993 in much the same style.

The book achieved celebrity (over 1000 citations according to Google Scholar) and notoriety in equal measure. For many years every serious student of industrial sociology or industrial relations had read it and had an opinion on it.<sup>1</sup> Much of the dust has settled, and the more strident reactions at the time (see 1984: 11-14) can be passed over. But for the reader coming afresh to the book, it may help to outline what the fuss was about. Beynon's style was deliberately provocative, for he did not set out to measure such issues of industrial sociology as work group cohesiveness or the balance of 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' orientations to work. Indeed, he did not even cite perhaps the most celebrated studies of industrial sociology of the time, the Luton *Affluent Worker* books (Goldthorpe et al., 1968, 1969), even though these also addressed male workers in factories, just as Beynon did. Critics had three types of complaint. Firstly, the methods were more those of the journalist than the sociologist. Secondly, the analysis was one-sided in expressing the views of workers and, in particular,

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<sup>1</sup> In 1978, the Industrial Relations Research Unit was recruiting for two new research associates. One was to work with me on a study of workplace industrial relations, and we established that at least one candidate for the job was unaware of Beynon. We then interviewed candidates to work on industrial democracy, where such knowledge was not needed. One of them, indeed, had specialized in Latin American economic development. He brought the house down when he said in passing, 'I've read *Working for Ford* of course'. But then he was Anthony Ferner.

shop stewards rather than managers. Thirdly, it was an extreme and crude portrait of factory life. I touch on each of these below.

More interesting is the question of the lasting value of a book that was clearly of its time: it was written at a time of strikes and workplace militancy when the car industry and its labour relations were a matter of national debate. That era is long gone. Halewood itself remains. During the 2000s it ceased to produce Ford vehicles; by this time, Ford owned Jaguar, and the company switched to the production of Jaguars. In 2008, the Jaguar Land Rover company was sold to Tata, and Halewood is now a robotized factory producing a single Land Rover model and employing 2000 workers, as compared to the 14,000 in the plant in the early 1980s. A historically informed understanding of the nature of work certainly is essential but pointing out what has changed since 1973 would not help us to grasp the contribution of the book. The present purpose is to consider the book's lasting value, as an account that continues to throw light on wider issues of work, precisely because it was conducted within a very particular context. The focus is the book, and not the wider issues of workplace industrial relations though I touch on those in the conclusion.

This value needs to be set in the context of debates that have developed since the 1980s. Some scholars argue that the concerns of the book – male manual workers in factories, analysed through the lens of class – are now of mere historical interest. Factories no longer dominate the landscape, and class is not the major source of identity. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argued soon after the appearance of Beynon's second edition, we cannot ascribe objective class interests to workers, and nor does the development of the capitalist mode of production generate class consciousness. This view has become taken for granted in writings on work; as I have pointed out elsewhere, a 'labour process orthodoxy' dominated by an image of class-based worker resistance has been constructed and then maintained through repetition (Edwards, 2010). As Kelly (1988: 300) had noted long previously, what some labour process writers like Braverman (1974) might or might not have said cannot be taken as representative of Marxist writings on class. Studies such as *Working for Ford* simply did not take the view ascribed to this orthodoxy. One reason to return to them is for historiographical accuracy; another is to draw out the substantive import of what they said. In that Beynon is probably read less than he was – and indeed the writings of some scholars suggest that they have either not read him at all, or done so through the foggy lenses of post-modernism – we need to establish what he said.

In establishing its contribution, I will also draw on a work published a year earlier (Beynon and Blackburn, 1972), but less well-known (81 Google citations). This was an account of a study, designed and written by the two authors but with the fieldwork conducted by Beynon in 1966, of a factory producing a 'range of luxury foods' (Beynon and Blackburn, 1972: 13). Like Halewood, it was organized by the Transport and General Workers' Union, though the union's role in the workplace appears to have been smaller. Unlike Halewood, two-thirds of the workers were women, and the book offers several pertinent insights on women's 'orientations to work', as the language of the time had it, as well as other matters of lasting import.

The paper proceeds in three stages. It begins with the book's main arguments. It then considers the nature of the workplace regime at Halewood and how it can be understood. Attention then turns to the 'factory class consciousness' identified by Beynon. Finally, some wider reflections are offered.

## The Book: Key Themes

One myth is that Beynon produced a highly fanciful account, based on what shop stewards told him outside the factory. In fact, he first entered Halewood in 1967, with the company's agreement. He interviewed 36 shop stewards and 43 workers and shadowed the stewards' convenor (the chair of the stewards' committee) or his deputy for a day a week. He attended meetings and talked informally with stewards and workers. He maintained regular contact, after the end of his permitted time within the plant, up to 1971 (1973: 67; 1984: 13). Beynon, in a personal communication, notes that problems of access prevented the use of formal questionnaire methods on a large scale. As he put it, 'I knew that I hadn't produced a *false* account' (1984: 14, emphasis original). The 1973 edition contains details of questionnaire responses and other evidence of formal inquiry; some of this was removed from the 1984 edition.

It is certainly an account from the point of view of shop stewards and workers, and arguably more the former than the latter. But this fact is scarcely disguised. As Darlington (1994: 206) points out, Beynon also focused heavily on the Assembly Plant which had important differences from the Body Shop. This was not deliberate but according to Beynon (personal communication) reflected difficulties of access to shop stewards in the Body Shop. The picture painted may be skewed to the extent that the Assembly Plant did not represent Halewood as a whole, and perhaps discussion of the specifics of the Assembly Plant would have identified its distinctiveness and flagged to the reader what kind of general lessons should be drawn. Yet the point was to address the experience of work and not to make comparisons.

The reader, moreover, is given a substantial amount of contextual information about the workers, the plant, and the company. On the basis of this information, it is possible to disagree or to ask where Halewood stood in comparison to other car factories. As the one-time Employee Relations Director of Ford. Paul Roots, pointed out, '[c]ars are mass produced by the same methods all over the world, so if doing work is the cause why doesn't every country have our strike record?' (quoted in 1984: 368). An answer to Roots's question is sketched below. If we return to Goldthorpe et al. (1968, 1969), the contrast could scarcely be more striking. Like Beynon, they investigated named firms, in their case three in Luton. Though all these firms were large multinationals, including the car giant General Motors whose Vauxhall plant was studied, there was no discussion of any kind of their labour strategies, and remarkably little about what actually happened on the shop floor. These studies addressed particular questions of interest, but the actual content of work remains largely invisible.

Beynon was not, it would appear, hostile to the conventional industrial sociology which, his critics suggested, should have been his *métier*. He did not, though, choose to make this point part of his counter argument. Beynon and Blackburn (1972) deployed the tools of the structured interview survey of a sample of workers to address such issues as expectations about work and attitudes to supervisors. They did so, however, in ways which hinted at some kind of affinity with *Working for Ford* as we will see below.

Other ethnographic studies of car plants also began to appear, and many painted a picture similar to Beynon's (e.g. Linhart, 1981). Hodson's (2001) assembly of such studies confirms that what one called 'chaos on the shop floor' (Juravich, 1985) was common.<sup>2</sup> This is not to

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<sup>2</sup>Hodson (2001: 299, 303) includes both *Working for Ford* and the Beynon and Blackburn study among his 'workplace ethnographies'. The latter plainly does not meet his own criteria of an ethnography, while the former's inclusion seems to stretch the definition, for it did not entail direct

say that Beynon provided a representative account in the sense of demonstrating that the events that he described were 'typical' rather than unusual. Nor did he endeavour to contrast Halewood with other factories.

He proceeded in 1973 in three main steps. First, he outlined the history of Ford as a company, in the UK, and at Halewood. The information on the industry and managerial strategy is more than background, for it locates the plant in the wider nature of the industry and it explains some things that were distinctive about Ford. In particular, the company insisted that work loads were decided by management, in contrast to the situation in much of the rest of the UK industry, where they were determined by informal bargaining on the shop floor. An assertive management clashed with workers who brought with them a Liverpool tradition of militancy. This tradition was important but not determining: 'there are some docile labour forces on Merseyside' (1973: 68). Also important were at least two other things. The first was the organization of the plant by a single trade union, the TGWU, which made the workplace a central feature of its activities, in contrast to many of the craft-based unions whose branches were based on localities rather than workplaces. The second was the factory itself. Placed in an environment of unremitting toil and supervised by assertive managers, workers responded. Though some had had trade union experience, many had not. Leadership was not simply imported from outside; it was forged in the workplace.

This leads to the second theme, of relations at the point of production. The demands of the work are described graphically, followed by a detailed account of struggles over the frontier of control: efforts by workers to bargain about the speed of the line, together with their tactics for doing so. Importantly, these efforts are seen to spring in part from the workers themselves and in part from the ways in which shop stewards co-ordinated these work group activities. As we now know more clearly than was the case in 1973, work groups vary in the degree to which they actively challenge management control, and the degree to which such activity becomes co-ordinated also varies. As Beynon found later, in the very different environment of a chemicals factory, work group activity can be limited (Nichols and Beynon, 1977). Though Beynon himself did not put it this way, several features of 'ChemCo' militated against the kind of assertive bargaining practised at Halewood. These included the character of the work force (a less militant history in the region), the technology (output on assembly lines depends much more directly on workers' immediate efforts than is the case in process factories, and there are many more opportunities to bargain about the pace of work), and the managerial strategy (ChemCo management had a much less abrasive and confrontational style than Ford). The links between work group and union were also different. At ChemCo, unions were kept away from the factory floor and were to a degree 'incorporated' by management. At Halewood, there was a close and mutually supportive relationship between work group and the workplace trade union.

The third theme is the nature of this workplace activism. Perhaps one of the most celebrated aspects of the book is the characterization of workers' views of the world in terms of 'factory class consciousness':

it understands class relationships in terms of their direct manifestation in conflict between the bosses and the workers within the factory. . . In as much as it concerns itself with exploitation and power it contains definite political elements. But it is a politics of the factory (1973: 98; 1984: 108).

Beynon was clear that he was not condemning or belittling such consciousness. He set out to explain its origins and also its ambiguities, notably the dependence of the workers on the

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observation over at least six months together with a focus on a specific work group. See Edwards and Bélanger (2008).

viability of the plant and the fact that for several a job at Halewood was the best that they were likely to obtain. He also stressed that the consciousness was not complacent or inward looking.

For a decade and more [shop stewards] have been made aware of the movement of capital, of the logistics of model sourcing and of the threat involved in each new phase of investment and plant location. . . . [They] *know* how multinationals operate (1984: 375, emphasis original).

Factory consciousness emerges out of workplace struggles. The fact that it does not translate directly into a wider political consciousness has to be understood and not condemned.

### **Halewood as a Workplace Regime**

A significant review of the 1984 edition paired Beynon's work with that of Burawoy (1985) on factory regimes (Storper, 1987). As it noted, the central contribution of Burawoy is to stress that the factory regime is a core part of the politics of capitalist societies. That is, the workplace is the site in which surplus value is created, and in the process of production political and ideological relations are forged. To argue or imply that the workplace is unimportant in some kind of post-class or post-industrial world is to misunderstand its place in the circuit of capital. But for Burawoy (also 1979), the review went on, the defining feature of capitalism is the simultaneous securing and obscuring of surplus value. Relations in the workplace are characterized by hegemony. Yet the outstanding feature of Halewood is the absence of hegemony and the presence of open struggle. Underpinning reasons highlighted in the review and mentioned above include the community traditions that workers bring with them to the workplace.

How, then, do we understand the character of the Halewood regime and its causes? As mentioned above, this is not the kind of question that Beynon, here or in his later work, wishes to pursue. But he offers many clues and would not, I hope, see it as illegitimate. It is certainly the case that Burawoy cannot see it as illegitimate, for much of his work has been based on the comparative analysis of workplace regimes – albeit, arguably, regimes that prove tractable to his analytical preferences and not those like Halewood that might seem to be anomalies.

Why is this issue interesting? At the time, it was clearly important to understand why industrial conflict took the character that it did, and why, for example, car firms differed in their experience of conflict. Turner et al. (1967) addressed such questions. Later accounts (Edwards, 1986: 242-3; Edwards and Terry, 1988) place Ford in the context of other parts of the industry. For present purposes, it is not the detail but the structure of the account that is interesting; and this structure then allows us to see that Beynon was offering an explanation and not just a description of a workplace regime, which in turn suggests that the account was accurate. In other words, if we can see why things were as they were, we can read *Working for Ford* as a lot more than a particular story.

The 'dependent variable' has two connected parts: why conflict was so intense, and why it took the form that it did. These both need elaboration. On the first, intense compared to what? In brief, Halewood was like the British-owned car assembly plants of the Midlands in having high levels of strikes and also extensive day-to-day struggles over the pace of work. Some car plants, such as Vauxhall, had less overt conflict, as did other parts of the engineering industry.

On the second question, the feature of Ford in general was that the firm opposed the principle of 'mutuality' that developed in the Midlands. This principle meant that work loads and effort levels were set through bargaining and then enshrined in agreements, formal and informal.



Ford resisted this, and argued that work loads were for managers to determine. It is true that during the 1960s Halewood shop stewards developed means to challenge management, such that in some cases stewards were able to set the pace of the line, and also that these work group controls became generalized so that there was some 'consistency' of forms of regulation that 'had been built up unevenly throughout the plant' (1973: 142; 1984: 153). But this was always a control wrested from management and not something enshrined in mutuality. Ford was in some respects distinctive, in particular its refusal to engage in industry-level collective bargaining. In other respects, it cannot be sharply distinguished from other firms. The picture of mutuality in the Midlands can also be exaggerated through reliance on some cases, notably Standard (Melman, 1958), that were in fact atypical. At Austin's Longbridge factory, there was a long history of managerial efforts to assert control and intense shop floor battles (Jefferys, 1988). The difference was that Austin's management swung between assertiveness and toleration of shop stewards, while Ford maintained a more consistent policy. In short, there were differences of degree, but workplace relations did not fall into neat categories.

In terms of explanation, I draw on a framework developed elsewhere (Edwards et al., 2006; Bélanger and Edwards, 2007) which identifies three main sources of variation: technology, the product market, and the institutional context. Two points need to be made about the following. Firstly, I focus on Halewood and do not make systematic comparisons; these can be found in the references just given. Secondly, the structure of the explanation is not one of treating variables as independent. We are interested, rather, in how they interact and in how it can be that a factor that does not seem to explain variation can none the less be part of the explanation, using a logic laid out elsewhere (Edwards, 1986: 269-78; Edwards, 2005). In brief, though it is convenient to speak in terms of 'factors' and 'variables', we are in fact dealing with 'causal powers': the ability of a cause to have an effect. These powers need to be shown to exist, but they may, firstly, not be activated or, secondly, counteracted by other influences. We seek an account that teases out what the relevant causal powers are, and why they do or do not have effects.

Let us begin with the technology, for this is commonly seen as having no causal power. As we saw in Paul Roots's comment, the technology of the car industry was relatively standard. Turner et al. (1967) showed that the car industry in other countries was less strike-prone than that of the UK. In other words, the same technology had different outcomes, so it cannot explain these differences. Yet the relentless drive of the assembly line looms large throughout the book and notably in Chapter 5. Beynon did not of course ascribe causal primacy to technology. But the technology is a constant that still has effects: workers are spread out along an assembly line performing repetitive tasks with little autonomy or discretion, and this fact defines key parts of the job. As Goldthorpe et al. (1968: 18) reported, 67 per cent of the car assembly workers in the Vauxhall plant at Luton found their job monotonous. The fact derives from the hardware of the technology. In addition, there is a related but separate technical division of labour: the breaking down of tasks into elements and the combination of these elements into jobs. This distinction was made very clearly by Beynon and Blackburn (1972: 156).

No-one who has seen a packing line in operation can doubt that its profitable operation sets limits upon the actions of any packer. . . . A packing line is not reducible to its technology. The worker relates to a belt through a particular structure of social relationships in the work situation. The technology is mediated through the culture of the work force and through a series of formal rules.

Beynon is here clear that the technology does not determine behaviour but also that, as hardware plus a social organization, it exerts important effects.

It is in principle possible to conceive of a car factory with extensive rotation between tasks, though there are clearly limits to this. Then there are other aspects of technical organization that could be more fluid. Car factories could, for example, run for eight or fewer hours a day though in practice they had two- or three-shift systems that posed further demands on workers. Both the technical hardware and the associated division of labour at Halewood offered minimal autonomy to workers, certainly when compared to experiments being undertaken in Sweden. When combined with other factors, the technology had causal effects on how workers related to their jobs.

Among these other factors, managerial strategy and tactics loom large in Beynon's account. These are part of the institutional context. This context shapes the way in which the specifics of relations at the immediate point of production operate. In other words, we can consider a factory regime as embracing these concrete details and the wider structure in which they reside. This structure embraces rules, collective agreements, and the expectations that unions can generate so that the free choice of management is constrained (Bélanger and Edwards, 2007: 719). A wider context embraces national systems of industrial relations and the strategy of firms.

Managerial strategy and tactics were influenced by the product market in both the short-term and the long-term. In the short-term, fluctuations in market demand affected how assertive managers were on the shopfloor, with reductions in demand encouraging an assertion of managerial prerogative. Darlington (1994: 205) gives illustrations of this. In the long-term, as Beynon's 1984 edition stresses, the changing global regime at Ford allowed managers to shift production between sites, or to threaten to do so. This context of potential job loss shaped much of what went on between 1971 and 1984. In particular, they were connected in that the overall strategy of producing cars under a managerially determined regime translated into the day-to-day actions of managers and supervisors, who were intent on maintaining discipline and fighting any encroachment on the frontier of control. I stress this because such a connection was less clear in the Midlands car plants. At the level of the point of production, there was continual bargaining over pay and work loads, a process encouraged by the fact that piecework was the traditional form of payment, a practice that Ford always resisted (see Terry and Edwards, 1988); workers were probably even more prone to the narrowness of factory consciousness than were those at Halewood, because shopfloor bargaining was ever-present and because it seemed to provide some buttress against assertive managers on a day-to-day level and against underlying competitive forces. The 'mutuality' that characterized many Midlands firms was anathema to Ford.

It is harder to make sharp contrasts at the level of strategy. It is true that some Midlands firms, particularly the smaller ones such as Standard, lacked the integrated approach of Ford and were prepared to build their product market strategy on conditions that were favourable in the short-term but which then turned unfavourable. They were then stuck with a workplace regime based on mutuality that they found hard to shift. This explanation does not work for the larger firms, notably Austin. One view says that they were technologically unsophisticated and thus relatively prone to manage the shopfloor through negotiation rather than managerial authority. But some accounts of Austin argue that, up to the 1930s at least, they were no less technically advanced than the big American firms (Tolliday, 1985). They were also capable of aggressive management on the shopfloor when they chose (Jefferys, 1988).

It is impossible to offer a definitive answer as to why Austin behaved in one way and Ford in another, but some progress can be made. Consider what Turner et al. (1967: 347-8) say about

Vauxhall and its comparative industrial peace. The numbers in square brackets are inserted to flag different classes of influence; they are taken up below.

For a motor firm, it had for some time [1a] a remarkably low degree of union organization . . . And [1b] this has combined with its effective domination of its industrial locale to enable it to develop an unusually close relationship with the district union officials. [2] Its . . . abandonment of a production-bonus payment system for a comparatively simple time-wage system has limited the appearance of internal anomalies in its wage-rate structure. It has, on the other hand, [3a] no arrangement for the formal negotiation of work-loads; but these are [3b] not excluded from its grievance procedure, and the Company has not asserted their determination to be a 'managerial prerogative'. . . . [4] The relative isolation of its main Luton plant from other car factories may, in association with the Company's general personnel policy, have constituted an advantage. [5] [Its] non-affiliation to the EEF [the Engineering Employers' Federation] has exempted it from the delays and uncertainties of engineering conciliation procedure . . . [6] And as in the case of Opel in Germany General Motors seems in any case to have been content to work within and gradually modify an existing organization, rather than – like American Ford – set up satellite companies in its own image. [7] Above all, Vauxhall seems to have displayed a general sophistication in its treatment of labour problems.

These authors then contrast this account with another largely strike-free firm, Rolls Royce, stressing that there were few common factors and hence that there is no 'single and conclusive explanation' (p. 350) of why these two firms diverged from the rest of the industry.

Turner et al. in fact unnecessarily weaken their account. The point is to explain how factors work in combination, so that the same result (low strike levels) can emerge from different causal processes. We need, however, some reason to think that certain things are in fact *causes*, a point to which I return having contrasted Vauxhall and Ford on the seven items listed above together with an eighth (low hourly wages) added later by Turner et al. (p. 349). This last factor was probably very important at Halewood. When the plant was set up, standard rates were agreed with the local unions at a level below that of Ford's main site at Dagenham, and as Beynon makes clear pay parity with Dagenham was a major source of conflict throughout the 1960s. The company admitted publicly in 1968 that the policy had been 'disastrous' (Friedman and Meredeen, 1980: 206).

In terms of the debate on managerial strategy which began to develop in the 1980s, we can say that Ford had a more cogent strategy than the Midlands car firms. But, as the parity issue demonstrated, its strategy was not wholly coherent and tactical errors were common.

Table 1 gives the list of factors. In relation to item 4, Turner et al. are interested in isolation from the rest of the car industry, which they hold to be true of both Luton and Halewood, whereas it makes more sense to consider isolation from militant local traditions, whether or not they come from the industry itself. On this basis, I contrast the two cases.

**Table 1: Factors in relative industrial harmony at Vauxhall and Ford**

	<b>Vauxhall</b>	<b>Ford</b>
Union organization [1a and 1b]	Weak	Strong
Time payment system [2]	Yes	Yes
Negotiation of work loads [3a]	No	No
Insistence on prerogative [3b]	No	Yes
Isolation [4]	Yes	No [see text]
Affiliation to EEF [5]	No	No
Autonomy of local managers [6]	Yes	No
Sophistication of personnel policy [7]	Yes	No
Low wages [8]	Yes	Yes

There seem to be enough differences in Table 1 to suggest that an explanation has been offered. This is particularly so when we add in history and action. Much of the point of *Working for Ford* is to analyse the ways in which shop stewards built an organization that increasingly challenged management. Once the relevant processes of struggle are set in train, the effects of initial conditions are amplified.

To be anything like a complete explanation, the account needs two further things: further analysis of the proximate factors listed, such as why GM and Ford as companies took different views of their subsidiaries; and some evidence or argument that the factors listed are indeed causes. On the former, plausible accounts could be developed drawing, for example, on the fact that GM was an agglomeration of different firms, and indeed the exemplar of the multi-divisional firm, whereas Ford had a more unitary structure. This might explain high centralization in Ford.

As for the second, a factor such as isolation call to mind the celebrated idea of the ‘isolated mass’ which leads to strike-proneness (Kerr and Siegel, 1954). This was readily dismissed as an adequate explanation of strikes (Edwards, 1977), and Vauxhall stands as a pertinent counter-example. But isolation along with other factors can have effects, and these effects can be to reduce militancy, as at Vauxhall, or increase it, where other factors are at play which help to create a solidaristic work force aligned against management, as in parts of the coal industry. Of the factors listed in Table 1, it is not hard to think of arguments as to why they are causes. This does not mean that any possible differences are causes. Given the history of Liverpool, it is possible that a substantial number of Halewood’s workers were Catholics. But in this case, religion may have played little or no role on the shop floor, whereas in, say, factories in Belfast at the time it most certainly would have done. In this case, it is not the fact of Catholicism that has causal powers. We need to add an important rider to this statement: with respect to the phenomenon under study. That is, religious affiliation has reasonably direct causal influences on, depending on the religion, eating habits and styles of dress. The workplace, by contrast, is affected only indirectly by religion, and we need to consider what the causal powers might be. Emmett and Morgan (1982; see Edwards, 1986: 280) provide a good example in discussing the work of Cunnison (1966). In this case, there was a long tradition of employing Jews, and divisions between Jews and gentiles were

important in the formation of social groups: Jewishness had implications for how one behaved at work. Had the same workers gone to Halewood, the significance of religion might have been zero.

Finally at this point, to return to the contrasts between Ford and the large Midlands firms, there were differences on many of the items listed in Table 1, such as affiliation to the EEF, the pay system, and 'isolation'. We would also need to place these in the context of business structure. Austin was merged into the British Motor Corporation in 1952. This firm never managed to integrate its constituent parts or to formulate a cogent strategy (Williams et al., 1983). Its shopfloor relations increasingly reflected its financial problems. Ford, by contrast, survived more effectively. It certainly did not manage its shopfloor relations in a sophisticated way, and some of its actions made problems worse rather than better. But it had a policy of a kind and was able to ride out the shopfloor challenge.

All of this tells us two things. Firstly, Halewood exemplifies the experience of work under conditions loosely labelled Fordism, with the proviso that Fordism came in many forms and hence the conclusion that the overall regime of accumulation does not explain what goes on in a particular workplace. The rich and detailed picture remains valuable in understanding this period. Secondly, Beynon offered insights into why the experience was as it was, in a depth that is rare. The kind of causal discussion sketched above could not be essayed in relation to many contemporary debates about, say, call centres, because we lack the detailed information on what was happening and why.

We can complete consideration of the nature of the explanation by returning to Beynon and Blackburn (1972: 160-1). They argue against the view that we should explain attitudes in terms of the effects of separate variables. Rather, the four groups that they identified were 'valid social units' with 'group properties'. Attitudes had to be understood in a holistic way. Among the groups were married women and, notably for a study of its time, the authors began their characterization with this group rather than men. They argued that these part-time women workers attached low importance to their work because they stressed family and other interests. Low expectations led to an uncritical view of the work, though these workers also clearly experienced deprivations and discontents. As the authors also noted, the then dominant idea of 'orientations' might have value but it was critical not to define an orientation in terms of its major feature, for orientations have many aspects. In other words, we cannot reduce orientations to instrumentality or whatever but need to consider their varying components and the interaction with the work situation.

In the case of Ford, Beynon chose to emphasize orientations driven by the workplace regime. A study in the style of Beynon and Blackburn might well have found variations on this theme, or some groups of workers who relatively passively accepted their lot. Yet the aim of the book was to paint a sharp picture of a collective reality. Read in that way it was indeed, as Beynon said, not false but also not necessarily 'representative'.

### **Class and Class Conflict**

Beynon was 'strongly influenced' (1984: 21) by the work of E. P. Thompson (1968) in two linked respects. Firstly, he sought a 'lasting and authentic' statement of workers' own experience. Secondly, he was attracted to Thompson's treatment of class 'as involving relationships, struggle and action' and class consciousness 'as being culturally determined and therefore relative' – though admitting that the approach had an 'attractive looseness'.<sup>3</sup> We have considered the first respect, and now need to address the second.

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<sup>3</sup> This is not the only, or even the dominant, view of class, of course. It is what I have called the view of class in terms of process, relationships, and dynamics of contest – as opposed to class as

The fact that Thompson's view was loose can be accepted without destroying its fundamental insights. Key to these is the idea of class as a relationship and of consciousness as something that emerges out of concrete struggles. If we start from this simple position, many misunderstandings can be avoided. It is not the case that consciousness emerges in any automatic way from structural conditions. Nor is it necessarily the case that members of the working class will share feelings of solidarity with other members of that class. Indeed, we might say that such solidarity tends to be the exception. Workers enter jobs with all kinds of prior experiences and expectations, and within the workplace they are defined in terms of specific roles. The production line workers studied by Beynon had major differences from skilled craft workers in terms of qualifications and power in the labour market. Their primary concern, moreover, was to make a living and to enjoy the fruits of their labour. Ideas of class emerged out of this daily reality rather than being inherent in the fact of being a worker.

Much of the burden of *Working for Ford* is thus the ways in which leadership actively created a sense of solidarity and also opposition to management. Such opposition can clearly be seen in terms of class, in that managers and workers were directly opposed over the terms under which work was done and profits generated. But this is class as a fluid and complex relationship, and it is about the immediate politics of the workplace. Politics in the sense of national politics were left to the political parties, and, moreover, the Halewood workers tended to keep to themselves rather than forging wider links with other workers (1984: 374).

Thompson (1978: 49) spelt out his own view in an important and neglected passage:

people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially but not exclusively in production relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes.

This is in a paper significantly sub-titled 'class struggle without classes'. That is, class struggle occurs as a product of relations of exploitation, but classes do not necessarily exist as self-conscious groupings; whether such groupings emerge is contingent on many factors. Thompson himself argued, of course, that the working class was indeed 'made'. A more nuanced statement might say, 'in the process of struggling they generate opposing definitions and meanings, which may generate specifically class identities but may not'.

In the case of Halewood, there clearly was struggle. This was also understood by workers as more than simply competition over resources; it entailed a clear divide between them as a group and managers as another group. Struggle was thus recognized in class terms even though the word 'class' might not have been used. But it was limited in the sense stressed by Beynon, namely, its focus on the factory. There is also a second sense: had Beynon done a Beynon-and-Blackburn style investigation, he might have found significant variation in attitudes to managers and willingness to engage in industrial action. The extent to which class

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classification, that is, allocating people to class positions (Edwards, 2000). The two are in principle connected. As Atkinson (2009) argues, they used to be intimately linked with work experience being seen as part of class, but later work by class analysts weakened the link by looking at occupation and not work in relation to such features as autonomy. The most recent classificatory approach breaks them by measuring class in terms of cultural and social capital and such economic dimensions as household income; occupation disappears as a source of classification (Savage et al., 2013). Its categories might better be termed 'economic and social position'. Atkinson's call to forge new links using Bourdieu, a source also central to Savage et al., is not convincing. Contrast Hebson's (2009: 41) insistence that the 'material realities of paid work' continue to underpin class-related perceptions. Armstrong (1983) remains the best statement of class-as-process in relation to production relations.

was generated in a wider sense of solidarity with other workers and broader political action remained highly constrained.

The idea of class as a relationship that is made and unmade runs through Beynon's work. The account of Halewood gives one illustration of the relevant processes. To argue or assume that class in this sense is a thing of the past is an error.

### **Concluding Remarks: Historical Alternatives?**

It will help to bring the story up to the 1990s. According to Darlington (1994: 210-20), during the 1980s Ford management adopted a more conciliatory approach to the unions, alongside the introduction of new technology and an increasing focus on the comparative efficiency of the plant. There was a dramatic shift in productivity: a 40 per cent reduction in the number of jobs and a rise in the number of cars produced from 786 per day in 1982 to 1100 per day in 1990. The change is captured by the remark of a senior shop steward who had worked in the plant since the 1960s:

everyone seems to be working to one end: to make the plant viable and profitable. Now, 'profitable' was a dreadful word for a shop steward to be using because we used to say, 'that's management jargon'. But it's not, you know, it concerns everybody [because without profit] there's no work for people (Darlington, 1994: 218).

There were periodic disputes, but new technology, team working and the erosion of demarcations had transformed the nature of the workplace. Darlington himself stresses the 'potential for future resistance' (p. 228), though other commentators, with the experience of a further two decades of change, would be more inclined to stress the generation of consent and the re-organization of control.

One reading of *Working for Ford* – if we set aside any idea that shop stewards were simply out to cause mischief – is thus that managers chose to impose an aggressive regime, that workers and stewards fought back and that in the context of product market conditions at the time and the other factors discussed above were able to assert a degree of counter-control. This was, however, always vulnerable once product markets changed and once new ways of organizing work began to emerge around 1980. On this reading, workplace resistance is – though understandable and interesting in the same way in which, say, Luddism is interesting – a thing of the past.

Such a view raises the issue of management and its motivations – an issue that many workplace studies like *Working for Ford* address through the eyes of the shopfloor rather than the boardroom, so that it is hard to be more than speculative. Why was it that it took until the 1980s to introduce a more consensual style of management, and indeed address some the basics such as the cleanliness of the factory? As the aphorism has it, 'managements get the shop stewards they deserve'. There were alternative models of car production in other countries, but the institutional contexts of both Ford as a company and Britain as a production location did not put pressures on the firm to pursue them. Without such pressures, managers across many firms defaulted to a command-and-control style. Given the assertive traditions of Ford and the nature of car production, such a style took a particularly aggressive form at Halewood. It can also be argued that the possibility of shopfloor resistance was among these pressures, in that managers were aware of the dangers of provoking resistance and needed to re-organize production with this in mind. Indeed, just-in-time systems are in principle highly vulnerable to stoppages, so that the need to ensure consent is more pressing than it is in a traditional Fordist factory. The rise of such systems thus remains dependent in part on the threat of workplace resistance. If we want to understand the history of workplace change, we need to grasp the grounds for such resistance, and studies like Beynon's explain what they are. Re-organized and robotized factories reflect their heritage.

A better reading thus treats Halewood as an example of a particular type of regime which, while clearly reflecting its time, also has historical resonance. The challenge to managers of gaining consent does not go away.

Such a reading then raises issues about workplace action from the point of view of workers. As noted above, writers such as Darlington identify the potential for continued resistance. He concludes his analysis, of two Merseyside plants in addition to Halewood:

it is possible that during the 1990s the mood of shop-floor bitterness against the previous years of work intensification, vented through spontaneous rebellions, could provide revolutionary socialists with a few inches more elbow room to gain the sort of influence that might play a decisive role in the long term (Darlington, 1994: 292).

In his own conclusions about a strategy for labour, Beynon identified such an approach, but made no prediction as to its likely success. A solution did not lie in an intellectual blueprint.

It lay – if it lay anywhere – in a conscious process of people thinking and acting upon that whole range of ‘refusals’ which made up the working class in struggle. There, perhaps, in learning from each other’s struggles – past and present – in documenting and assessing them, lay the ground for an authentic strategy for labour (1984: 390).

He went on to identify two concrete developments: action to support workers in other factories; and ideas around the planning of industry and production for use rather than exchange.

We know with the benefit of hindsight that these kinds of possibilities have not been realized. Does this mean that the shop stewards at Halewood were fundamentally wrong and that they could have channelled their opposition to Ford into actions other than factory-level bargaining? Were their struggles for nothing? To ask such questions is to fall into the trap of engaging in what Thompson famously called ‘the condescension of posterity’ (quoted in 1984: 21). Stewards acted according to their lights in the circumstances of the time, and given the power of these circumstances there was probably little else that they might have done. We can ask the question in a different way: in principle, were there alternatives that workers and stewards might have been able to develop?

My own view is that the late 1970s were probably too late for alternatives to be feasible. I recall thinking about this at the time, on the basis in particular of a study of a factory not very different from Halewood in that it was marked by years of shopfloor conflict in a context of products that were poorly designed and under threat from imports (see Edwards and Scullion, 1982).<sup>4</sup> What was necessary was space and time for new products to be designed and built, along with a reconstruction of the workplace regime around some kind of mutual gains model. This was not practicable for many reasons and became unthinkable with the election of the Conservative government in 1979. The late 1940s might have been a more promising time, with the potential for widespread production re-organization and modernization, using wartime joint production committees as a basis for a different kind of workplace regime (Edwards and Terry, 1988: 226-31), though we know that leading firms were not thinking on these lines and that the motivation and ability of government and unions to change their

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<sup>4</sup>This factory was unimaginatively anonymized as the Large Metals Factory, and not that effectively in that Dave Lyddon correctly guessed its identity and published the fact. Given this, and also the fact that ownership has changed so that the organization that exists on the site is not the same one as was there in 1978, maintaining anonymity has no value. The factory was the Castle Bromwich factory of the then British Leyland company (the successor to the British Motor Corporation). Its main products were bodies for Jaguar, Rover and Austin vehicles. It is now a Jaguar assembly plant, much reduced in size and modernized and robotized.



minds were also weak. The point, however, is that such possibilities can reasonably be imagined. History was not pre-ordained.

If we return to Halewood, workplace struggles brought benefits to workers. Firstly, the frontier of control was shifted in their favour. Secondly, the relevant actions gave workers a sense of purpose and dignity. Thirdly, they at least expressed the possibility of a regime different from that under which labour was performed, even though the possibility was not expressly identified as well as facing major external obstacles. We can put this last point in theoretical terms in relation to the two sets of interests that workers pursue: control of the immediate point of production, and the longer-term development of the forces of production (Bélanger and Edwards, 2007). The shop steward quoted above from Darlington was expressing the latter, and Beynon's comments on alternative models of production address the same idea.

Among the ideas developed at the time of Beynon's second edition was the Lucas Alternative Plan. This was produced during the 1970s by the shop stewards in the company, arguing that job losses at the time were not inevitable and that new and renewable technologies were feasible ways of generating what are now called green jobs. Re-reading the account of the plan (Wainwright and Elliott, 1981) draws attention to such things as hybrid vehicles, then dismissed as utopian but now produced by mainstream manufacturers. The unsuccessful efforts by the Lucas workers to promote such a technology can be seen to have been realistic in terms of its practicability. It was not successful in the political circumstances of the time, however, in that managers did not wish to engage with ideas that challenged their authority, and they were under no real pressure from governments or other bodies to do so.

There were, in short, ideas that connected control and developmental interests, and, as Beynon demonstrated, workers were aware of some of the relevant possibilities. That they did not produce an Alternative Plan can be attributed to the greater degree of co-ordination across Lucas factories (the celebrated Combine Committees) and the leadership of some key players in that firm. Even if they had done so, the lesson from Lucas as to the chances of success is not encouraging. One can none the less see what might have been possible with organization and will, particularly at times such as the late 1940s when alternatives to established systems of industrial governance were at least conceivable.

Finally, what of the book's contemporary relevance? Beynon himself speculated on 'the end of the industrial worker' in an essay of 1992. While acknowledging the decline in the scale of manufacturing and transformations in its organization, he also argued that the rise of the service economy did not signal a *post*-industrial society but rather an *extended* form of industrialization based in the rationalization and commodification of many services in both the private and public sectors. There was therefore a '*continuity* of manual labour, maintained within different sets of relationships and contexts' (Beynon, 1992: 182, emphasis original). This is an important insight that many accounts of post-industrial or post-bureaucratic organization fail to grasp. Much modern work in call centres, retail stores, or distribution centres has many parallels with the demanding and tightly controlled regime at Halewood. The difference is that the Halewood workers had more means to do something about it. At the same time, these modern regimes are probably less arbitrary than that at Halewood, and some basics such as health and safety have genuinely been addressed: continuity within different relationships and contexts indeed.

The experience of Halewood thus continues to repay attention for several reasons. Firstly, we need to be clear as to what Beynon said, in contrast to the constructions of labour process orthodoxy. Secondly, the case exemplifies one type of work under what is loosely termed Fordism, stressing that such a regime was highly differentiated and not the monolith that is

sometimes portrayed. Thirdly, it shows why and how workers engage in collective struggle; given continuities with current regimes, lessons in relation to mobilization and leadership remain salient. Fourthly, despite its being written as an account of life in the raw, and not a formal explanatory inquiry, the book also acts as a very good example of how differences in workplace regimes can be understood and then explained. Finally, the book permits reflections on alternative possibilities. Workplace struggles could have taken a different form, with wider effects on managerial strategies. As capitalism continues to evolve and to generate new forms of questioning, the nature of these struggles continues to offer lessons, many sobering but some encouraging.

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