HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND MATERIAL PRODUCTION:

the culture of the shop floor

Paul E. Willis,

S.S.R.C. Project: The Transition

from School to Work.

C.C.C.S.,

Birmingham University.

March, 1975.

The noise on our line is what drives you almost mad. You can never
really get used to it, and I have been there ten years (and in
another factory ten years before that). It would drive you mad,
if you let it. Imagine nine men beating hammers and mallets on
steel. If there were some sort of rhythm to it, it wouldn't be
so bad.

<div align="right">Bryan Slater, a line worker (1)</div>

The sound of work. Perhaps one of the most startling and pervasive
sounds of our time, and yet one of the most neglected, in the glossy,
consumer -oriented, vision of our society that so many accept - often
in contradiction of their own experience. Excruciating noise is probably
the most unpleasant sensual concomitant of industrial work. Its
invocation serves to remind, even those that pride themselves of their
penetration of the consumer-egalitarian-liberal mythology, that, not only
are commodities produced under specific and determinate social conditions,
but that they are also produced under specific and determinate experiential
conditions. What is the human meaning and actual experience that lies
behind our easy use of cars, cosmetics, clothes and buildings? What
degree of frenzy, activity, boredom and suffering has been objectified
in to the thousand articles on glamorous display in the department store?
Is the meaning and pleasure of these things as they are consumed any more
important than the meaning of drudge of their production? It is often
forgotten that the main reality for most of the people, for most of the
time, is work and the sound of work - the grind of production, not the
purr of consumption is the commonest mark of our industrial culture.

'Culture'! In what sense can we link factory sounds with culture?;
in what sense can we link work with culture? It is one of the fundamental
paradoxes of our social life that when we are at our most natural, our
most everyday, we are also at our most cultural; that when we are in roles
that look the most obvious and given, we are actually in roles that are
constructed, learned and far from inevitable. Whenever we are under
pressure, late, worried; whenever there is little time for self reflec-
tion, pretense whenever we are pushed and thankful for any role, any
role to get us through time and the hour; then it seems we act in the
obvious single way, the way dictated by 'reality'. So too with work,
for many dead time, human time sold for the possibility of a real life
later, it seems the most obvious and self evident category of human
experience, the area where manners, culture and artifice intervene least
into our daily existence.

This view is wrong not because it mistakes the nature of work, but because it mistakes the nature of <u>culture</u>. Culture is not artifice and manners, the preserve of sunday best, rainy afternoons and concert halls. It is the very material of our daily lives, the bricks and mortar of our most common place understandings, feelings and responses. We rely on cultural patterns and symbols for the minute, and unconscious social reflexes that make us social and collective beings: we are therefore most <u>deeply</u> embedded in our culture, when we are at our most natural and spontaneous, if you like, at our most 'work-a-day'. As soon as we think, as soon as we distance ourselves, as soon as we see life as parts in a play, we are in a very important sense, already, one step away from our real and living culture.

Clearly this is a special use of the concept of culture. Essentially it can be thought of as an anthropological use of the term, where not only the special, <u>heightened</u>, and separate forms of experience, but <u>all</u> experiences, and especially as they lie around central life struggles and activities, are taken as the proper focus of a cultural analysis.

Given this perspective, it should be clear that, not only can work be analysed from a cultural point of view, but that it must occupy a <u>central</u> place in any full sense of culture taken to mean <u>a whole way of life</u>. Most people spend their prime waking hours at work, base their identity on work activity, and are defined by others essentially through their relation to work.

Consider the stereotypical cultural role of women in our society. A central and defining feature of womanhood in our society is still a very definite set of expectations about her in relation to work. She is supposed to take a 'light' job, with relatively low status and rewards, and be prepared to give it up without complaint in order to take on the 'more important' job of having children. So complete is the denial of 'real' work to women, that even exceptionally and manifestly demanding domestic tasks are not allowed as serious work. The woman at home is simply a 'housewife' complementing presumably, in the unspoken couplet, the 'work-husband'. Her role is to provide the <u>emotional</u> home for the family, and to wipe the brow of the 'bread winner': this is seen not as work but as a service, or a state of being. It is common assumptions amongst us all about the appropriate work role - and remember we are talking about averages here, we all allow exceptions - that women should play which provide, both for men and women themselves, the really central assumptions about what

womanhood is, or should be. It is no accident that the fight for liberation
has focussed on work and it's complex of related issued for this is at
the heart of woman's whole cultural identity.

In speaking of work and culture, then, in the same breath I am not
positing some esoteric link between Shakespeare and employment statistics,
but a simple proposition that work, and the massive experience of it, is
right at the centre of our living culture, considered as a way of life.
Work is a living and active area of human involvement - it makes,
and is made, by us.   It affects the general social nature of our lives
in the most profound ways.   If this is unclear or surprising, then
that in itself is an indication of the type of society in which we live,
the unequal distribution of power and the kind of picture of itself which
the dominant order gives back to society.   Direct forms of creating our
conditions of life are hampered, and more important, presented as
impossible.   To many it seems that we are simply cogs in a vast machine
obeying its own laws of development; our roles are pre-given and it is
useless to fight for movement in any but the prescribed channels.   There
is a systemmatic blocking at all kinds of levels, by the invocation of
this massive, adamantine, ahistorical society, of any awareness that
our life and culture is not a force set above us, but a product of what
men and women do and make. We cannot, of course, produce just what culture
we wish - the structures of capitalism see to that - but it is all the
same our product: it can be re-appropriated and, ultimately, refashioned.
The first step in this is a genuine self-recognition and an understanding of
the interconnectedness and the wholeness of human culture.   It is precisely
this potential which is destroyed in the dominant ideology of a mechanical,
inevitable, mass, impersonal society.

In arguing for the importance of the 'culture of work', I am not
suggesting that there is one massive experience of the work place shared
by all, nor am I suggesting that there are as many 'cultures' as there are
jobs or workers.   Though it is a simplification, and though there is
undoubtedly a varied continuum between them, I want to suggest that we can
posit two main cultural poles of the work experience - that of the working
class, and that of the middle class.   These two cultures are different
from each other, and in their own ways express opposition to each other.
At this point in our society they are not of equal strength: the middle
class culture subordinates that of the working class. It is the hegemonic

I'm going to concentrate on the working class culture of the shop floor for three reasons: (1) it relates, numerically, to the vast majority of our society, (2) because it is systemmatically misrepresented by middle class agencies and particularly the mass media, (3) because in any understanding of the total configuration of the culture of our society and its likely future direction it is surely necessary to document and demonstrate the great submerged social and personal experiences by which the fabric of life is reproduced: to know the ice-berg of human meaning that lies below the mere tips - the commodities and the department store.

Before that though, let us take a brief look at the middle class culture of work to which the working class one is partly counterposed. Here I am concerned to spell out the formal dimensions of what might be termed the 'managerial ethic'. It is an ideal type which does not encompass actual experiences if work, but which certainly described the dominant frame within which the varied middle class experiences of work are commonly understood by those involved.

The middle class pattern can be understood along three crucial parameters, all of which ultimately resolve to the question of power and control. Firstly, there is a relative weakness of informal, group based, structure within this culture. It is 'dead straight', and does not develop its own private practices, language and social habits. It moves along the dimension of the 'formal', is given by the 'formal', and does not subvert the formal. This is very different from the rich informality, based on a rejection of the formal, which characterises shop floor culture. The concepts of the 'career', 'staff', 'job satisfaction', 'self improvement', 'job status', all belong to the middle class pattern, and demonstrate the accepted fusion of self and job - the formal definition of the job is lived out without irony. It makes sense to chart both your inner most self and your future with maps provided by your work and your superiors. This obedience is based ultimately on the expectation that short term rule following will bring long term control and gratification. If shop floor workers come together on the basis of their lack of power - the 'intimacy of the impotent' - then the middle class culture comes together on the basis of its potency. It appears, at any rate, as if the formal rules are benign, can be trusted, and will bring success; the game is worth the candle, so why risk disqualification.

The second clear characteristic of this culture is its basic rationality. Decisions about future prospects and career movements

are based on careful self-assessment, and rational analysis of ability
and opportunity. All actions are placed within an intricate grid of
means, ends, feedbacks and cost effectiveness. The over-riding impetus
is towards a purpose, and a purpose which can be identified and quantified.
The fundamental functional logic of management is 'management by objectives':
set your target, aim at it, moniter your progress, correct course, achieve
it. The same logic and rationality underlies all the levels of a
culture which is so undifferentiated from its formal task. The belief
that lies anterior to the belief in rationality is, of course, the belief
that it is worth being rational, that you have the power to put your
careful plans into operation - that you have choice and control. For
most working people rationality of that type is simply a waste of time -
the same thing will happen no matter what you decide to do.

Finally the middle class cultural frame of work is able to present
itself as the only sensible one, and to brand all others as deviant,
anti-social or silly. It mobilizes an image of society I touched on
earlier, where the present social organization is presented as inevitable
and unchangeable, and, what are in fact only, middle class practises,
are projected as the only sensible way of doing things. 'The way things
are' demand the same things from everybody, and it is useless to kick
against the 'system' in order to make your own world. What we are
presented with is an undifferentiated notion of a mass culture of
work, a single unified community of production which has one common
purpose - to increase the 'national cake'. This can be shared by all -
in differing proportions of course, but what of that if all shares are
bigger. This suppresses all together the questions that may interest
others more: how and on what terms the cake is made? who chose the
ingredients?, why the cake is cut horizontally to give icing to some
and sponge to others?, why those who weren't even in the cookhouse get
the biggest portions? If you ask any of these questions you are a
trouble maker. The ability to so present just one culture and its ways
of thinking, as the only culture, is, of course, a function of the
power to put your definitions in to the force, right through from the
educational system to the mass media.

Well, if the middle class culture of work is the hegemonic one, it
follows that within it or without it, believe it or not believe it,
we are all perfectly aware of it. My main purpose now is to examine
the submerged alternative: the culture which is associated with the
actual reproduction of the material conditions of our lives.

The first thing to say about this culture is that it exists in hard conditions set by others (2).It is also worth remembering that for all the talk of 'massive' wage settlements in the face of Union 'blackmail' since the war, the income of wage earners, as a proportion of GNP, has not changed in the last 50 years.

The system of capitalism still means essentially, despite its contemporary 'human face', that labour is bought, detached from the individual, and directed towards the production of commodities for the profit of others. This labour is directed, emphatically, not for the satisfaction of its providers, but for the profit of its new owners. If this requires work in inhuman and meaningless circumstances, then, there is nothing in the logic of capitalism to prevent this. Writing in a completely different context, and addressing a completely different problem, G.C. Mathew, (3) claims that fully 79% of the ESN (educationally sub-normal) could be placed in normal employment, since such employment requires only a mental and emotional age of 12. Now whilst one may welcome this news on behalf of the ESN, what are its implications for the other 95% - the regular incumbents of these jobs? It must be that they are doing work which 12 year olds could do.

The main ravage on human sensibility of boring, repitLtive, mindless jobs is a numbing sense of boredom and meaninglessness-sheer unhappiness if you like. This is most dramatically shown up by the many working class accounts of how time drags at work. It is the mark of alienation that time and the task to be done become utterly divorced. A job is undertaken not out of interest, but merely because one's bought labour is directed there. Without an intrinsic interest in the job, then, the full focus of the detached consciousness is thrown on to the passing of time. This focus itself, to say nothing of the actual drudgery of the job, slows time down to a painful existential drag. Here's a young lad who has just left school and started to work in a car components factory. The example is taken from my own, current, research (4);

> I knew I'd be working eight to five /.../ but I thought,you
> know, go to school 'that's nothing', it's only an hour before
> I normally go to school, and an hour after, like I did at
> school', but it's a lot longer, seems to drag /../ like now /../
> me and Les, we're always looking at that clock, thinking to
> ourselves, 'so many hours before we leave', something like
> this /..../. The worst part of the day is about quarter to

nine, in the morning, and it's really rotten, you think of
the time you've still got to the end of the day, especially
if that three quarters of an hour has dragged /..../ when I
first start like I don't usually look up at the clock and see
what time it is /./ I start working, then I look at the
clock, it's before nine o'clock, I think it should be about
half past nine, that's the time it really gets you,' God
blimey, it's dragging, the time, I wish I warn't here, I wish
I could be at home in bed, sort of thing.

The absolutely central thing about the working class culture of
the shop floor is, however, that, despite the bad conditions, despite
the external directions, despite the subjective ravages, people do
look for meaning, they do impose frameworks, they do seek enjoyment
in activity, they do exercise their abilities. They do, paradoxically,
thread through the dead experience of work a living culture, which
isn't simply a reflex of defeat. This culture is not the human remains
of a mechanical depredation, but a positive transformation of experience
and a celebration of shared values in symbols artefacts and objects.
It allows people to recognize and even develop themselves. For this
working class culture of work is not simply a foam padding, a rubber
layer between humans and unpleasantness. It is an appropriation in its
own right, an exercise of skill, a motion, an activity applied towards
an end. It has this specifically human characteristic, even in
conditions of hardship and oppression.

What are the elements of this culture? Well in the first place
there is the sheer mental and physical bravery of surviving in hostile
conditions, and doing difficult work on intractable materials. It is
easy to romanticize this element of course, and in one way it is simply
charting the degree of brutality a heavy work situation can inflict.
But in another way it is the first and specifically human response —
the holding of an apparently endless and threatening set of demands by
sheer strength and brute skill. Already in this there is a stature
and self respect, a human stake on the table against alienation and
the relentless pressure of work to be done. Not much you may say,
especially if you have never faced the prospect of long punishing
labour, but it is the vital precondition of more developed cultural
forms, and accomplishes the basic and primitive humanization of a
situation. It halts the rout of human meaning, takes a kind of control
so that more specifically creative acts can follow. This primitivist
base of work experience is also the material of a crude pride, for

the mythology of masculine reputation — to be strong and to be _known_
for it. Here is a retired steelman describing the furnaces in a
steelmaking area of the west of Scotland as they were before the
second world war:

> They were the cold metal, hand charging sort and they catered
> for strong men, only very strong men. About one steel
> worker in every ten could stand up to them successfully, which
> was one reason why the furnacemen were looked up to in the
> world of heavy industry. That they got the biggest pay packets
> was another reason. They also had the biggest thirsts and that
> too was a prideful possession in that part of the world /..../
> a legend grew up about the steel smelters. /.../ The whole district
> and for miles beyond it was a hotbed of steel works, iron
> puddling works and coal mines. It was a place given over to
> the worship of strength and durability. Indeed it needed
> strength to look at it, and durability to live in it.(5)

In a much less articulate way, but for that perhaps more convincing,
the following extract shows the same elemental self esteem in the
doing of a hard job well. It also shows that in some respects the
hard environment can become the most natural environment. There is also
the grudging recognition of the profound charge this kind of acclimitization
can make on a normal social life, _even at the same time_ as being one of
the major ways in which the hostile work environment is made habitable.
The example comes from my own current research and is of a foundry man
talking at home about his work:

> I work in a foundry .. you know drop forging ... do you know
> anything about it .. no .... well you have the factory know
> the factory down in Rolfe St. with the noise ... you can hear it
> in the street ... I work there on the big hammer .. it's a
> six tenner. I've worked there 24 years now. It's bloody noisy,
> but I've got used to it now .. and its hot ... ...I don't get
> bored .. there's always new lines coming and you have to work
> out the best way of doing it .. You have to keep going ....
> and it's heavy work, the managers couldn't do it, there's not
> many strong enough to keep lifting the metal ... I earn 80,
> 90 pounds a week, and that's not bad is it? .... it ain't
> easy like .. you can definitely say that I earn every penny of
> it ... you have to keep it up you know. And the managing
> director, I'd say 'hello', to him you know, and the progress
> manager .... they'll come around and I'll go .. 'alright'
> (thumbs up) ... and they know you, you know .... a group
> standing there watching you .... working .. I like that ....
> there's something there ... watching _you_ like .. working ...
> like that .. you have to keep going to get enough out ..
> that place depends on what you produce /..../. You get used
> to the noise, they say I'm deaf and ignorant here, but it's
> not that I'm deaf like ... it's that you can hold a conversation
> better, talk, hear what people say better at work ... I can
> always here what they say there, I can talk easy, it's easier ...
> yet in the house here, you've got to make ... pronunciations
> is it? .. yeah, you've got to like, say the word, say it clearly,
> and that's hard sometimes ... sometimes I can't hear straight

away ... they say, 'you silly deaf old codger' .... it's not
that .. it's just ... well it's just getting used to the
noise, I can hear perfectly well in the factory ... If I
see two managers at the end of the shop, I know, like I know
just about what they're saying to each other.

It may be objected that the pattern of industrial work has
changed: there are no rough jobs today. Besides, it can certainly
be argued that there is nothing heroic about the elemental qualities
of strength and pride. They are not only made anachronistic by
today's technology, but are insulting, oppressive and right at the
poisonous heart of male chauvinism and archaic machismo.

Be that as it may, two things are clear. Rough, unpleasant,
demanding jobs do still exist in considerable numbers. A whole range
of jobs from building work, to furnace work to deep sea fishing,
still involve a primitive confrontation with exacting physical tasks.
Secondly, the basic attitudes and values developed in such jobs are
still very important in the general working class culture, and
particularly the culture of the shop floor; this importance is vastly
out of proportion to the number of people actually involved in such
heavy work. Even in so-called light industries, or in highly
mechanized factories, where the awkwardness of the physical task has
long since been reduced, the metaphoric figures of strength, masculinity
and reputation still move beneath the more varied and richer, visible
forms of work place culture. Despite, even, the increasing numbers
of women employed, the most fundamental ethos of the factory is
profoundly masculine.

Let us go on from this general minimum proposition to look at some
of the more specific and developed human patterns of the work place.
A clear mark of the lived and contemporary cultural culture of the shop
floor is a development of this half-mythical primitive confrontation
with the task. It is an active fascination with the industrial process,
and a positive interest in technology. This is not merely a meeting
of demands, but a celebration of mastery. Here is a description from
a toolmaker of his first day at work (6). It inverts the usual middle
class account of the dark satanic mill. It is clear that industrialism
runs in the blood of this young lad:

On every piece of open ground lay metal shapes; some mere bars
and sheets straight from the steelworks: others gigantic
welded constructs covered in a deep brown rust ... Then I
entered the great main workshops. Each chamber, or aisle as
they were called, was about one hundred and fifty feet across
and anything between five hundred and seven hundred yards long.

Several of these great vulcan halls lay parallel to each other
/..../. Overhead rolled the girdered cranes capable of
carrying weights of more than two hundred tons /../ one passed
over my head. /..../ My startled attitude to the crane's
passage amused the men at work /../ a series of catcalls followed
my passage down the aisle. Mostly the shouts were good natured
advice to get out of the plant while I had the youth to do so.
Such advice never even penetrated my outer consciousness, for
how could anyone abhor this great masculine domain with its
endless overtones of power and violence.

An element of this absorption in technology is a process of
obtaining skills as if by osmosis from the technical environment.
There is a profound air of competence in the culture of the shop floor,
a competence which is always prior to the particular situation. It
is not always based on strict ability, but mixed in with cheek and
confidence; it is enough to pull a worker through any number of jobs
and problems. Here is a man recorded during my own research talking
about his industrial career. He gives us a glimpse of the real paths
beaten between different jobs and occupations, the paths which make
it sensible to speak of the working class not as an abstract group
of those who share similar interests, but as an organic whole with
real and used inner connections:

> Well, I've got four trades really, you know I've only been in
> this job seven weeks. I'm in a foundry now /../ on the track
> you know /..../. I was a metal polisher before. It's a
> dirty job, but it pays good money, and a skilled job, you know
> metal polishing./..../ Yes and I was a fitter down at drop
> forgings, as well, well I mean in the situation today, you've
> got to go where the money is. Polishing is the best money, but
> it's up and down, there was four or five months run of work
> and then it 'ud go dead /../ I got out on it didn't I /..../
> Friend 'o mine got me a job down at the MMC. /...../ I've
> worked in a garage, er ... I worked for the Council paper
> hanging and decorating, I worked for a fella .. chimney-sweeping
> in the winter, decorating and painting in the summer and all
> this but I've always took an interest in what I've been doing
> you know, I mean, I'm pretty adaptable, put it that way you
> know /..../ I've always had a motor of me own, and I've always
> done me own repairs, whenever I've broken me motor, only
> through experience, doing it meself /..../. Paper hanging
> decorating, I've got an in-law, ain't I, that's a decorator,
> give me a lot of tips you know /..../ I bluffed me way in to
> decorating. I said I was a decorator you know, went to work for
> the council. Actually I subcontracted for the council, and
> they give an house to do, an empty house, and I done it see.
> Course the inspector come round from the Council and they was
> satisfied with the work, you know, so you know if the inspector's
> satisfied, you're alright see. It's only common sense really.

In one sense this can be seen as a way of exerting some control
back on a situation that has been taken from you by the bosses. It is
not uncommon now to find very much more massive attempts at direct

control of the work process. Short of the more explicit level of
plant democracy, sit-ins, or formal worker control, it does happen
now that the men themselves actually run production.

This practise rests on what is perhaps the greatest achievement
of shop floor culture, its most human achievement and the basic
organizational from which locates and makes possible all its other
elements. This is the development of the informal group - the
fundamental and most basic unit of resistance, and creative extension
of control, on the shop floor. It is the massive presence of this
informal organization which marks off shop floor culture most decisively
from middle class cultures of work. This informality is not simply
neutral - the open ended product of a free association - but is
directed <u>against</u> the formal. Simply, this is a blanket opposition
to the bosses, but it is also a refusal to accept even the idea of
acknowledged leadership. It is 'the men' who act as a body, and the
actual organizer is recognized only as the symbolic embodiment of
'the men', and is in no way superior or qualitively different from
'the men'.

If all this seems a little far fetched, consider, the following
extract. Again for from my own research, this is a factory hand
on a track producing car engines talking about production in his shop.
Note particularly his refusal to let the man who actually organizes
the work force to be thought of anything other than a normal worker:

> Actually the foreman, the gaffer, don't run the place, the men
> run the place. See, I mean, you get one of the chaps says,
> 'Alright, You'm on so and so today. You can't argue with him.
> The gaffer don't give you the job, the men on the track give you
> the job, they swop each other about, tek it in turns. Ah, but
> I mean the job's done. If the gaffer had gid you the job
> you would.. They tried to do it, one morning, gid a chap a job
> you know, but he'd been on it, you know, I think he'd been on
> it all week, and they just downed tools. /..../ There's four
> hard jobs, actually, on the track and there's a dozen that's you
> know, a child of five could do, quite honestly, but everybody has
> their turn. /..../ That's organized by the men. Especially
> like the man who, the one who's on the track longest, you know,
> who knows what rotation it is see.
>
> PW: He's the foreman or the supervisor?
>   He's nothing, he's nothing.
>
> PW: So why do the men recognise his authority?
>
> Well, they don't recognize his authority. They just ...
> he's been on the track the longest see, and he knows exactly
> the rotation, but if try to figure the rotation out, know the
> rota like, how the men go, I mean I couldn't. I dont' know
> how it works. /..../

PW: He's not the shop steward or anything?
     He's nothing. It's the men run that place.

This solidarity, and sense of being a group, is the basis for the
final major characteristic of shop floor culture that I want to describe
here. This is the distinctive form of language, and the highly
developed humour of the shop floor. Up to half the verbal exchanges
are not serious or about work activities. They are jokes, or 'piss
takes', or 'kiddings' or 'windups'. There is a real skill, which the
young worker can take a long time to learn, in being able to use this
language with fluency, to identify the points where you are being
'kidded' and to have appropriate response in order to avoid further
baiting.

This badinage is necessarily difficult to record on tape or
re-present, but the highly distinctive ambience it gives to shop
floor exchanges is widely recognised by those involved, and to some
extent recreated in their accounts of it. This is again from my
current research, a foundry worker talking about the atmosphere in
his shop:

> Oh, there's all sorts, millions of them (jokes). 'Want to hear
> what he said about you', and he never said a thing, you know.
> Course you know the language, at the work like. 'What you
> been saying, about me;' 'I said nothing', 'Oh you're a
> bloody liar, and all this.

The complexity and expressivity of language at work make one
wonder where Beinstein (7) collected his examples of working class
speech on which he bases his notions of restricted and elaborated
codes. Certainly he could not have witnessed the long chains of
repartee which are common on the shop floor. Though certainly different
from middle class speech, there is certainly no case that such language
is inferior.

Associated with this concrete and expressive verbal humour, is
a developed physical humour; essentially the practical joke. These
jokes are vigorous, sharp, sometimes cruel, and often hinged around
prime tenets of the culture such as disrruption of production or
subersion of the bosses' authority and status. Here we have some
examples of such jokes described by a worker in a mass production
factory. This is again from my current research:

> They er'm play jokes on you, blokes knocking the clamps off the
> boxes, they put paste on the bottom of his hammer you know
> saft little thing, puts his hammer down, picks it up, gets a
> handful of paste, you know, all this. So he comes up and
> gets a syringe and throws it in the big bucket of paste, and

it's about that deep, and it goes right to the bottom, you
have to put your hand in and get it out /..../ This is a filthy
trick, but they do it. /../ They asked, the gaffers asked to
- to make the tea. Well it's fifteen years he's been there and
they say 'go and make the teas. He gus up the toilet, he wets
in the tea pot, then makes the tea. I mean, you know, this is
the truth this is you know. He says, you know, 'I'll piss in
it if I mek it, if they've asked me to mek it. /..../ so he
goes up, wees in the pot, then he puts the tea bag, then he puts
the hot water in. /..../ - was bad the next morning, one of the
gaffers, 'My stomach isn't half upset this morning'. He told
them after and they called him for everything, 'you ain't makin
our tea no more', he says, 'I know I ain't not now' (8).

Always in danger of romanticising our subject, we should pause
now to consider the real status and power of this culture. Given the
vivacity and strength of what I am describing, why is it not more
visible, why has it not taken over more? Well, as I have argued, it is a
subordinate culture and occurs in prior conditions of oppression and
dominance, and the whole nature of the system is such that the worker's
hands are directed by others than himself, and the product of his
hands is taken away: this is the elemental meaning of alienation
in work. But there are more complex reasons for the alienation even with-
in the culture of work, and for its inability to challenge the middle
class cultures of work which sit on top of it and obscures it.

Overall, shop floor culture is remarkable for its combination
of an extraordinary completeness with a special kind of limitedness.
It is complete because it embraces, upon its own ground anyway, several
levels of human potential and activity in massive, immediate, day to
day detail. There is no concern here for corporate aspects of working
class control, and for that it is free from the reductions and impoverishments
of economism, and its forms of consciousness, which dominate the
institutional extensions of working class interests. The complement
of this quality of wholeness is, however, the profoundly parochial
quality of the shop floor, and its extreme limit of range. Though
full of political significance, and the only base for a working class
politics, this culture is deeply unpolitical. Its rivetting concern
the workplace - and specific work places at that - prevents the
connecting up of work experiences, issues and social structure; it
prevents a true political practise. The inherent and deeply charged
contradiction of a culturally threadbare working class politics

having such a richly blueaded, but essentially unpolitical base, is
right at the heart of the problems facing strategists of class
liberation. It is also right at the heart of the ambiguous and
troubled relations of Trade Unions to grass roots shop floor culture.

The Trade Union is the institutional extension of the culture of
the work place, the form in which the culture and its meanings might
have become more visible and the vehicle through which really concrete
attempts have been made to transform symbolic in to real control.

By far the most important working class institution, British
Trade Unionism was born through the struggles, over a hundred years,
of the world's first industrial proletariat. It was based on, and
drew all its meaning strength and loyalty from, the dense culture of
the work place. The achievements of the trade union movement are many.
They have protected work people in all sorts of ways, and have
helped to prevent the relative decline of living standards amongst
the working class.

As the main extension of the working class culture and social
organization of the work place, however, trade unionism has many
failings. By being, in its own right, a formal structure with narrowly
defined ends, it has excluded, to an ever greater degree, the actual
informal structure and culture of the work place from which it grew.
In becoming a responsible agency on agreed terms set mostly by
management - essentially that the bargain is mainly   over wages,
not over control, and that each party to the bargain must be able
to deliver what he promises - the Union has become another authority
structure over the worker. It often acts to cut out time wasting
practices - the very ground of the informal culture - and can even put
over the management case to the workers in order to carry an agreement
it has already made. Here is a lad, again from my current research,
talking about the union in his furniture working shop:

> I think our union at work, I think they shouldn't stand for as
> much as they do off the management, I mean the management do
> seem to overrule everything although, it's the union what says
> when to go on strike. /..../ The management sort of you know
> say to the Union, 'Oh, it's a good idea', and they agree with
> it /..../ You see they put to us what the management want,
> and you know the union want it, but the men don't.

Essentially the Trade Unions can be seen as a mediation between
shop floor culture and the dominant managerial culture. It negotiates
the space between them, and in this negotiation, gives up much that
is really central to the shop floor for what is often a mere accomodation

in managerial interests. The nature of Unionism and its organization
is not, however, evenly textured. Whilst the Union bosses adapt a
form of managerial culture and join the main industrial establishment (9),
the shop stewards and local organisers are still very much of the
local culture. Whilst trying to achieve union and organizational
aims, they use specifically shop cultural forms of communication -
spectacle, bluffs, drama, jokes, sabotage - to mobilize the man (10).
The Union structure, then, is a complex and varied institution striking
different degrees of negotiation, appeasement and settlement at its
various levels. The power of shop floor culture determines at least
the forms and methods of union activity at the plant level, but the
higher administrative level has completely lost that detailed binding in
with the lived culture of the work place, which was the original guarantee of
true representativeness. To put it another way, the Unions have lost
touch with, even betrayed, the real roots of working class radicalism
- the culture of the shop floor.

The lack within the culture of any overall political account -
in the sense of connecting up the 'separate' elements of a social structure
- aids and is perpetuated by, the operation of sophisticated control
mechanisms which act decisively to diminsh the influence of the culture.

Most insidious of these is the practise of management science and
human relations. Under the banner of a humanization of the work
process, it has actually been one of the most formidable weapons ever,
given to the dominant class by 'neutral' academics for use against the
working class. Essentially, this whole branch of knowledge and
technique rests on a simple and obvious discovery: informal groups
exist . Human groups are not fully accounted for in the two dimensional
structure of their public face; people exist as well in a private
hinterland where they develop relations and language quite unspecified
in any formal description of their situation. This is precisely,
of course, the area covered by the culture of the shop floor. Hard on
the discovery of this territory, came   techniques for
colonizing it, and, as in all colonizations, for destroying the culture
that was already there. It is techniques of 'employee centred
supervision', 'participation', 'job enrichment', 'socio-technical-
system analysis', which are penetrating right to the heart of shop
floor culture, unhinging its logic of symbolic opposition, unbending
its springs of action, flattening it out in the name of ratio-technical
advance. The sense of control given to the workers by these techniques

is illusory, the basic structures of power remain exactly the same
as before, and yet the located, rich, potentially dominating culture of
resistance is being destroyed.

The institution, neutralization or non-availability of this
informal culture can leave workers in a strange two dimensional world,
a world in which they seem to be under-utilized as people, a world in
which parts of themselves seem not to work in the full social sense.
Leisure may then be the field to which the individual turns to
revitalize himself - often with disappointing results. Restrictions
of personality, social depth and ability, during the main part of the
working life cannot be overcome magically during the for-long-awaited
and desperate, hours of the evening and weekend. A lad, again from
my current research. gives a stark account of the unexpected continuity
of cultural deficit between work and leisure arising from a dissatisfaction
with repititive mass production mark unmitigated by the humanisation
and diversion of a cultural involvement.

> You know, you, you at work, say stapling sort of thing. You
> come, 'cor blimey', 'what am I doing here?', sort of thing you
> know. I just, just, imagine me in say ten years time, I'll
> still be doing the same thing I expect, and I just don't, you
> know... . It 'ud send me mad I think, just keep doing it, a
> lifetime, I want someting better out of life /..../ The nice
> part of the week is Friday dinner time when I get me wages ...,
> they bring it on a tray, the wages. It's funny though, all
> week I'm thinking roll on Friday, and we can go down town
> Saturday, and you look forward to it. When you get to town
> Saturday, you think, 'What was I looking forward to? But I
> still look forward to it every week, just the same.

One can speculate that it is this sense of personal waste which is
exploited by the new commercial entrepreneurs of the leisure industry.
The elusive promise of packaged consumer leisure is always that of
human intimacy on tap - precisely an informal culture that is bought,
not won. Those leisure activities amongst the young, increasingly
branded as deviant, in which there is an attempt, sometimes violently
against the flow of passive consumerism, to create real informal
relations can perhaps be understood as displaced work concerns. They
may consist of oppositions, attitudes and feelings playing themselves
out at night because suppressed at day.

Another set of 'invisible' central mechanisms centre on the forms
in which a picture of the worker, and his culture of the work place,
is reflected back to working class people - the mass media and their
images. Firstly, an obvious point, the media are controlled and run
by members of the middle class. Perhaps less obviously, the media

'professionals' - because of their distance from the reality - rely
on stereotypical assumptions about class whenever presenting images
of anyone but themselves. Real cultural meanings are taken by the
media, transformed and caricatured, and returned to the working
class - the mass audience - in unrecognizable forms. Indeed, the
misrecognition is so great, and the habituation to media materials
so great, that working people themselves, accept these images as
legitimate and fair to, at least, how other people live - often in
the teeth of what they know their own reality to be. Think, for a
moment, of the stereotypical bigotry of Alf Garner, the pudding like
doziness of his wife, think of the lazy 'posturing' slob in 'Love
thy Neighbour', think of strikers consistently presented as stupid
and obstinate. Think for a moment of just how unusual it is to have
normal working people represented at all. The whole ethos and frame
of the media is middle class, its values are taken as the unquestioned
datum from which to view other cultures: anything that deviates from
this is presented in stereotypical terms or as the bizarre, or as
the meaningless. One of the greatest casualties of this monopoly
on communication is the meaning of shop floor culture to itself. With-
out an adequate public reflection of itself, its powers of self
knowledge and self development are severely hampered. It cannot
challenge the public and dominant images of itself, never mind
challenge the global definitions through which the dominant culture
presents itself.

Given the hostile conditions in which this culture has grown,
given the forces seeking to steal its soul, given the half betrayal of
its own strong right arm, it still shows an astonishing vigour.
Though in saying this, we are recognizing a creative achievement only
within severe and finally neutralizing conditions. Its potential is
held as part of the complex balance of forces and tendencies within
our modern liberal democratic state; a balance which holds, mediates,
and makes possible the apparently free management of our society by
concensus. That the work place culture retains, for some its
strength for others its virulence, in the face of domination and its
own part submission, indicates its fundamental power, and future
potential, as the culture arising from the elemental processes of
production - the deep source of cultural values amongst the working

class, as it is the source of the material conditions of life for us all.

We must not be confused either by a fundamental contradiction lying at the heart of this culture. A result of its success - limited as it is - has clearly been to perpetuate the status quo, and its own oppression, by accommodating to, rather than reacting against, its conditions. Though this is evident and though we should not be fooled by this apparent sanction of the status quo, we should not miss the dialectical balance of this contradiction. Though presently distorted and recessive, certain fundamental qualities of shop floor culture must surely be essential to any major political and social development of the working class. Profane testing of the formal, the socialness of relations adapted to production, irreverent humour, a sharp and differentiated consciousness able to judge humanness apart from traditional status or current job title, individuation within a collective solidarity - these cultural qualities arise deep within the materialism of production, and must be both elements of, and internal checks on, the future hegemonic drive of working class culture.

At the moment, however, we should not romanticize what exists, or be blind. The prospect for most, still, in our society is this: that the products of their hands, the living culture developed with other, the art of their daily lives, is stifled, broken and scattered; its remnants returned in unrecognizable dead forms. That this culture ever daily reproduces itself to be daily broken, is only the minimum condition of survival, and not a cause for celebration.

NOTES

1. Ed. R. Fraser, Work, Penguin 1969, p/63.

2. From a recent survey of conditions at work for the working class see F. Field, Unequal Britain, Arrow 74, pp 33-43.

3. G.C. Matthew, in Special Education, Vol. 58, No. 4, Dec 1969.

4. 'The Transition from School to Work as a Meaningful Passage', supported by the S.S.R.C., April 73 to July 75*

5. Ed. R. Fraser, Work2 Penguin 1969, pp 56-7.

6. Ibid, pp 22-3.

7. See for Instance, B. Bernstein, Class, Codes and Control, Paladin 74

8. The final report on the S.S.R.C. project will greatly expand on the framework of 'a culture of the workplace' presented here.

9. See T. Lowe, The Union Makes Us Strong, Arrow 74.

10. See H Benyon,, Working for Ford , Penguin 1974.

The following code is used in these Transcriptions.

    ———— = name ommitted
    . . . = time passing
    /...7 = phrase missed out
    /..../ = sentence missed out