

Brave New Workplace—Cooperation, Control, and the New Industrial Relations

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And that...that is the secret of happiness and virtue—liking what you've got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their inescapable social destiny.

—Aldous Huxley (1932)

In the last twenty years, changes in many United States manufacturing plants have prompted some observers to herald the arrival of a second industrial revolution. A cluster of new techniques—including “job rotation,” “learning by doing,” “flexible production,” and “just-in-time delivery” of component parts—was first adopted in Japan and is now, according to the conventional wisdom, indispensable for competing in the so-called global marketplace. Among the most significant shifts is the “social organization of production,” where work teams and “quality circles” have become the building blocks of tomorrow’s work force (Kenney and Florida 1988).¹ The quality circle, a committee made up of ten to fifteen workers, analyzes and solves quality control problems and points of contention by using a method of “communal problem-solving.” This “soft” approach to management—in which workers are said to manage themselves—received much attention following a lengthy 1981 cover story in *Business Week* entitled “The New Industrial Relations.” From assembly plants, the techniques diffused outward to many American bureaucracies and businesses, including supermarkets, schools, banks, and government offices—including the Pentagon (Schmitt 1994)—to name but a few. The goal was to end the adversarial relationship between management and labor through “self-managed” work teams, and in so doing improve the efficiency and psychological “health” of those involved.

This paper is a critical analysis of work teams and quality circles. The research was inspired by nine months of work in 1989 and 1990 as a student engineer in a General Motors automobile assembly plant where I observed firsthand the implementation of the “team approach.”² It was intriguing to walk around on the shop floor and listen to opposing views of the new industrial relations. Supervisors, engineers, and “team leaders” excitedly talked about how the plant would soon be building “world-class” products. A few long-time line workers, on the other hand, described the programs as a waste of time, or worse yet, as manipulation. They resented the imposition of the team approach, and resisted it whenever possible. At the time, I did not understand why so many workers would be in opposition to the program. Years later, as I became familiar with the literature, I began thinking about the possibility that the “new industrial relations” might operate coercively, and not democratically as was so often claimed. These, then, became the research questions: Are quality circles coercive, and if so, how—that is, through what mechanisms are workers coerced? And secondly: Why did the new industrial relations spread so quickly across the United States when they did?

Though others have commented on the tendency for quality circles to take on a coercive form (see for example Parker 1985, Wells 1987, Parker and Slaughter 1988, Grenier 1988, Fantasia, Clawson, and Graham 1988, Grenier and Hogler 1991, Hobson 1992, Barker 1993, Garrahan and Stewart 1993), an anthropological analysis is lacking. Such an approach could shed light on quality circles, which make use of constructed “symbol-systems” (Geertz 1973)—including language, rituals, and prestige rankings—to replace old ideas about work with newly imposed ones of workplace cooperation and harmony. In many cases, psychological techniques are used to dislodge a worker’s previously held beliefs about his or her job; some of these techniques resemble those used in classic “thought reform” (“brainwashing”) programs (Lifton 1961). Small work teams are sometimes used to manipulate individual workers, and may become mechanisms through which ideologies of compliance are transmitted and by which control over workers is maintained. In extreme cases, the well-being of the individual worker may be sacrificed for the sake of the team. What we find in many instances is a case of social *and* cultural control (Nader 1994), where the organization of labor is altered at the same time that radically different idea-systems are promoted.³

These issues are addressed in the following sections, which (1) briefly review the history of industrial relations programs; (2) focus on the construction of culture patterns which are characteristic of quality circles; and then (3) compare the techniques of the new industrial relations to those of thought reform programs. The next section concerns (4) the legal status of quality circles with respect to federal labor laws. The conclusion locates the new industrial relations within broad contemporary ideological currents in the US.

A Brief History of Industrial Relations

What is new about the new industrial relations? As early as the 1920s, some managers were calling for “the molding of a united work force...of developing teamwork within the organization. Every worker must be shown how to make his efforts fit into and support the work. . .of the whole organization” (in Noble 1977:304). A review of the history of industrial relations can illuminate the differences between these early calls for reform and recent workplace reform programs. The historical roots of the new industrial relations can be separated into four schools of thought: (1) the scientific management movement; (2) the industrial relations movement; (3) the so-called “Toyota Method of Production”; and (4) American industrial psychology.

Scientific management had its beginnings about one hundred years ago, when Frederick Taylor, a mechanical engineer, devised the first “scientific” principles of management. Taylorism was a method in which information was gathered about individual shop floor jobs, and then used to reorganize work tasks more efficiently (Noble 1977:268-269). Taylor “streamlined” assembly plants by conducting time-motion studies of each worker, breaking down each movement into a number of discrete steps, and then reorganizing them in a more efficient sequence by eliminating all unnecessary movements. Of course, the efficiency gained through Taylor’s method would result in the need for fewer workers; the extras would subsequently be fired. Scientific management relied on strict adherence to the prescribed organization of work, and used wage incentives to make it more palatable to workers (Noble 1977:266-269). In spite of the harsh results of implementing scientific

management, Taylor believed that his methods “constituted the basis for a true ‘harmony of interest’ between the warring classes of capital and labor: the scientific means toward greater production and thus, both higher wages and higher profits” (in Noble 1977:269). Taylor’s principles still form the backbone of much of the work done by industrial engineers today.

The industrial relations movement was the outgrowth of a “revisionist movement” among a number of Taylor’s disciples. These men and women, who were mostly engineers, combined forces with “corporate liberal management” reformers, which included “business leaders, bankers, politicians, trade-union leaders, and academic social-scientists...try[ing] to forge a viable corporate order” in the 1920s (Noble 1977:274-278). While the former group tended to focus on increasing efficiency and productivity, the most liberal of the latter group strove “to ‘uplift’ them [the workers], through educational, cultural, medical, and recreational services within the plant” (Noble 1977:287). What both groups shared in common was first, the realization that “better living and working conditions would render him [the worker] more cooperative, loyal, and content, and, thus, more efficient and ‘level-headed’”; and second, that social and behavioral scientists could be useful in achieving these goals (Noble 1977:290). Some industrial relations programs included:

recognition of organized labor and collective bargaining, profit-sharing, company magazines, insurance programs, pension plans, safety reform, workmen’s compensation, “shop committees” for “joint control,” and, especially after the war, restricted work hours and the “living wage.” It also carried over such aspects of the industrial-betterment movement as gardens, restaurants, clubs, recreational facilities, bands, and medical departments. (Noble 1977:289)

Like the proponents of scientific management, those who supported industrial relations believed that it worked towards a “harmony of interest” in which both management and labor would benefit from cooperation.

Both scientific management and industrial relations were important features of industrial life in early twentieth-century America; however, a third approach to industrial reform began overseas, in post-World War II Japan. A number of Japanese companies, under the guidance of American business consultants like W. Edwards Deming, began instituting a series of unconventional manufacturing techniques, which sought to improve “quality” as much as efficiency. Meanwhile, the Toyota Motor Company, under the direction of Eiji Toyoda and Taiichi Ohno, began formulating the “Toyota Method of Production” along similar principles (Womack, Jones, and Roos 1990:277). The first step in the Toyota process was to create small groups of workers with a designated leader, and to eliminate the position of the foreman. The groups were then given a set of assembly steps, their piece of the line, and told to work together on how best to perform the necessary operations. The team leader would do assembly tasks as well as coordinate the team. . . he set time aside periodically for the team to suggest ways collectively to improve the process. (Womack et al. 1990:56)

Recently, three researchers for MIT’s International Motor Vehicle Program noted that the “know-how and commitment” of workers—and their willingness to provide them—are “the main advantage” of the Toyota Method (Womack et al. 1990:14). Participation in work

groups, they argue, provides “tension and a continuing challenge” to workers, and ultimately, “job enrichment” (Womack et al. 1990:101-102).

The widespread success (from a managerial standpoint) of employee participation schemes in Japan was no surprise to American industrial psychologists, who had long been singing the praises of a team-oriented work force (Noble 1977:303-304). In the US, they had been met with skepticism by most managers, who did not see a need to press ahead with such reforms. However, the perceived threat of the Japanese led to renewed calls on the part of American behavioral scientists to adopt these techniques in the US. A new generation of industrial psychologists and sociologists became the spokesmen for the new industrial relations, which, in a manner reminiscent of the first decades of this century, emphasized management-labor cooperation, work teams, and the abolition of adversarial practices in the workplace.

The most important of these researchers included Elton Mayo, Douglas McGregor, and William Ouchi. Mayo’s research, conducted in the 1930s, indicates that factory workers tend to band themselves into groups, whose performance improves when given attention by management. McGregor, writing in the 1960s, postulates that managers in the US come in two varieties: “Theory X” managers, who believe that workers inherently dislike work, and “Theory Y” managers, who believe that workers basically like work and simply need to be encouraged and motivated. He advocates “sensitivity training and other methods of teaching managers interpersonal skills. . .[and] small working groups led by these psychologically trained managers” (“The New Industrial Relations” 1981:90). Ouchi is known for his idea of the “Theory Z” corporation, which employs the “Japanese-style” production methods described above. Theory Z corporations incorporate “slow evaluation and promotion, rotating managers to avoid extreme specialization, consensus decisions, and informal controls” (“The New Industrial Relations” 1981:90).

The history of industrial relations indicates that the ideas behind the new industrial relations are not new at all. Since at least a century ago, a number of engineers, businessmen, and scientists realized that *technology* was no longer the limiting factor of production; now, it was *man* that could be engineered, and made still more efficient, given the right kind of motivation (Noble 1977:259-260). However, there are two aspects of today’s industrial relations that are genuinely new: first, the specific psychological techniques used to motivate workers; and second, the increased number of companies willing to experiment with these techniques. We will return to these points shortly.

Manufacturing a World View

Much has been said by international business experts about whether a particular “culture” (usually, a homogenized national “culture”) will provide a fertile environment for quality circles to flourish. But little has been said about the quality circle as a culture in itself—albeit a deliberately constructed one. We should take a moment to briefly discuss concepts of culture which are useful for this analysis.

As Roger Keesing notes, anthropologists have worked for too long with the “coral reef” model of culture: culture as the “cumulated accretion of minute deposits” over many

centuries (1989:1), or the “cake of custom” as Bagehot called it in the nineteenth century. This view has, for the most part, gone unchallenged even as boundaries between societies have eroded and a centralized “cultural apparatus” has mass-produced standardized images, sounds, goods, and ideas for popular consumption (Keesing 1989; Mills 1959; Schiller 1989).

Still, there have been exceptions. One anthropologist who early recognized the difference between the coral reef model of culture and “canned culture” was Edward Sapir, a linguist who studied under Franz Boas. In “Culture, Genuine and Spurious” (1949[1924]), Sapir argues that a “genuine” culture is coherent and integrated, both at the group level and at the individual level. Individuals in a genuine culture are able to meet “immediate” needs as well as “spiritual” ones. Ironically, a society’s level of complexity (or “civilization”) often corresponds to an impoverished, commercialized, or “spurious” culture:

Here lies the grimmest joke of our present American civilization.... Part of the time we are dray horses; the rest of the time we are listless consumers of goods which have received no least impress of our personality. (1949[1924]:101)

Sapir’s reference to this spurious, commercialized, “canned culture” (1949[1924]:118) was ignored by Kroeber and Kluckhohn in their compilation of definitions of “culture” (1949). Perhaps they considered the notion of a spurious culture as unworthy of serious mention.

Much later, “Ideology as a Cultural System” (1973), Clifford Geertz took the notion of ideology—a set of ideas constructed with an instrumental purpose in mind—and elaborated on why it should be analyzed in cultural terms. He rejects the notion that ideology is muddled or nonobjective thought; instead, he argues that ideologies are cultural systems, a symbolic set of “programs”, “templates”, or “blueprints” for making sense of the world:

Culture patterns—religious, philosophical, aesthetic, scientific, ideological—are “programs”; they provide a template or blueprint for the organization of social and psychological processes, much as genetic systems provide such a template for the organization of organic processes. (Geertz 1973:216)

For Geertz, culture is not something that is simply carried down from generation to generation—it is constantly being transformed, and can even be created. Cultural patterns can be constructed, molded, or “reworked” into ideologies (Geertz 1973:224-225). More recently, Laura Nader (1994) has discussed how today, constructed idea-systems are introduced incrementally by the powerful for achieving instrumental aims: “[In] the United States, culture appears natural and inevitable, even when it is made to appear so by the manipulation of cultural images that often articulate what people should be, should think, should buy or buy into” (Nader 1994:3).

The new industrial relations emphasize an ideology—a cultural system painstakingly constructed by behavioral scientists and managerial consultants—that places workers and managers together in an in-group, against those in other companies and plants, who form an out-group (Parker 1985:15-18). This represents a change from previous workplace norms, which made sharp distinctions between labor and management, and emphasized solidarity among labor groups across different companies, industries, and even countries. In the words of

one consultant, one of the goals of quality circles is “reduction of the ‘we’ and ‘they’ mentality. . . Since everyone (labor and management) is encouraged to participate in problem solving, the feeling develops that the employees are all in it together” (in Parker 1985:17). The human resources director of a textile plant in Massachusetts describes it in similar terms: “There’s no longer management turf and worker turf. There’s just a sharing of the management of the business, and there’s such a thirst among the workers for this process, it’s amazing” (“The New Industrial Relations” 1981:86). In essence, what occurs is that the quality circle becomes a “middle group” between management and labor, blurring the boundaries between the two and creating the structural basis for a new reformed employee identity (Parker 1985:35). Or in other words, the new industrial relations provide the structures for a culture pattern, or program, or ideology on the shop floor—one which replaces distinctive concepts of “we” the workers versus “they” the managers with an all-encompassing “we” the company versus “they” the outsiders.

The evidence for this can be seen, for example, in charts at the Chevrolet Gear and Axle plant in Detroit, which list the sales figures of various American and Japanese cars. Next to these lists is a sign that reads, “You are entering the war zone. Quality and productivity are our weapons.” The soldiers, of course, are labor and management, who are “working together,” shoulder to shoulder, to stave off the “Japanese juggernaut” (Simmons and Mares 1982:49-51). Another illustration of this blurring of the labor-management distinction is found at the General Motors-Toyota NUMMI plant in Fremont, California:

Any status symbol that ferments class consciousness is removed from the workplace. There are no parking spaces or toilets reserved for executives. Managers and workers dine in the common cafeteria.... Production workers are called “associates” or “technicians” rather than “workers” or “employees.” (Ozaki 1991:169)

Yet another illustration of the egalitarian ideology is the General Motors on-line information system, which displays updated production figures and average “defects per car” for dozens of General Motors plants, within the US, Asia, and Mexico (Simmons and Mares 1982:49). The message is clear: that “we” (workers and management together) must rise above “they” the competition (those employees in other assembly plants) to remain in operation.

If this shift of perception corresponded to a change in the ownership of the company, it might be acceptable. In some cases, employee participation schemes are indeed accompanied by quite progressive employee stock ownership programs, which give workers a real stake in the profits. Unfortunately, these cases are rare. More often, quality circles and the new industrial relations are set up without any significant reorganization in the company’s ownership.

A wide range of observable symbols reinforce quality circle membership. According to one quality circle handbook:

The workers often want an identity for their own circle. This identity begins with naming the circle. Some examples of names are “Joe’s Trouble Shooters,” “Positive Approach,” “The Carson Raiders,” and “Loose Wires and Stripped Nuts.” Other examples of establishing identity include bulletin

boards for circle activities, tee-shirts, logos placed on hard hats, and emblems. (Gyrna 1981:53)

There are examples of distinctive plant symbols, as well. At General Motors' Hydra-matic transmission division, thousands of employees participated in a program aimed at "establishing a family atmosphere within the division...the props include[d] hats, jackets, stickers, notebooks, and diplomas with the large 'family' logo" (Parker 1989:19). In Shreveport, Louisiana, an automobile plant had its own cartoon mascot, the "Qualigator", which appeared on the back pockets of company-issued jeans (Parker and Slaughter 1988:128). In all cases, the desired effect is to bind together workers and managers, and to erase old notions of "we" and "they."

Quality circles may also have their own prestige systems, based on a set of values differing from previous adversarial models. Satoshi Kamata, who worked in a Toyota assembly plant in the early 1970s, describes how his cap reflects a ranking system based on productivity and cooperation:

[My] two green stripes stand for Seasonal Worker; one green stripe, Probationer; one white stripe, Trainee; one red stripe, Minor; a cap without any stripe, Regular Worker; two yellow stripes, Team Chief; a thick yellow stripe, Foreman; a black stripe on a white cap, General Foreman; a green cap, workers from subcontractors. (Kamata 1982:11)

At the same assembly plant, "good idea suggestions" were elicited from workers, and the number submitted by each worker was posted in the locker-room (Kamata 1982:71). Similarly, one of Kamata's closest friends boasted about the number of pieces he could produce in a work day; this became another source of prestige (Kamata 1982:24,30). On the other hand, when a worker in Kamata's quality circle was injured on the job, all members wore a "Safety First arm band" which was stigmatized by others in the plant (Kamata 1982:109-110). Because low prestige was attached to the arm band, and all team members had to wear it, peer pressure—from a worker's own team—became a strong disincentive for anyone to report a job-related injury.

By now, it is clear that the culture patterns which guide the members of many quality circles coincide with the wishes of management. Mike Parker, perhaps the most outspoken critic of QWL (quality-of-work-life programs), describes the process as "learning to think the company way" (Parker 1985:15). He notes that "QWL training is designed to get people to act on the idea that 'we and management are all in the same boat'" (Parker 1985:15-16). But how is this done? What mechanisms trigger this shift in conceptions of "we" and "they"? Parker offers a suggestion as he takes his critique one step further:

Like the cults of the 1960s and 1970s, which also talked about creating "new families," QWL training uses powerful psychological techniques to bring about major attitude changes in a short time. The training takes people out of their normal environment. In the context of a very comfortable, controlled situation, feelings of insecurity and needs for belonging and intimacy are manipulated in an attempt to redefine workers' identity. (Parker 1985:21)

The next section of this paper takes a closer look at Parker's assertion that the new industrial relations are a form of "brainwashing" (Parker 1985:21) by examining the techniques of thought reform, coercive persuasion, and attitude change with respect to quality circles.

Changing Minds in the Workplace—Quality Circles as Mechanisms of Thought Reform

How, in the context of the new industrial relations, are workers' and managers' attitudes about work relations changed from an adversarial one to a cooperative one? A body of literature dealing with thought reform, coercive persuasion, and attitude change lists several specific psychological mechanisms used by organizations seeking to influence the behavior of members (Lifton 1961; Schein 1961; Ofshe and Singer 1986; Ofshe 1992). In his definition of coercive persuasion, sociologist Richard Ofshe states that its distinguishing characteristics are:

- (1) the reliance on intense interpersonal and psychological attacks to destabilize an individual's sense of self to promote compliance, (2) the use of an organized peer group, (3) applying interpersonal pressure to promote conformity, and (4) the manipulation of the totality of the person's social environment to stabilize behavior once modified (citation omitted). This section reviews each of these characteristics and compares them to the techniques used by companies practicing the new industrial relations.

The first characteristic of thought reform programs is the use of interpersonal and psychological shocks. These may include "emotional flooding techniques" in which role-playing or hypnosis may be used for the "stripping away of psychological defenses"; and the inducement of fatigue, disorientation, and confusion, which may increase the effects of emotional arousal (Ofshe and Singer 1986:15-17).

Intense emotions may be aroused through training or awareness retreats, which often take place at isolated resort centers. For example, in the 1980s, many of the 22,000 people employed by General Motors' Hydra-matic transmission division spent week-long sessions in "family awareness training...[aimed at] establishing a family atmosphere within the division" (Parker 1985:19). A series of interpersonal exercises including managers and workers (with no distinction made between the two) were featured. One of the exercises worked at developing trust: employees were paired up and then one of them was blindfolded and guided by the other. In another exercise, "Johari Window," the object was to reveal as much about one's "joys, fears, and needs" as possible—and in so doing, open the "window." Another exercise, "Hot Seat," took place on the last day of the training session:

One by one each person sits on the "hot seat" and listens to group members say positive things about him or her. It is hard to say which is the more moving experience—sitting in the "hot seat" or seeing those in the seat moved to tears. (Parker 1985:20)

The participants were deliberately drawn from the same departments, to maintain the bonds forged during the moving experience of the retreat (Parker 1985:19).

Apart from emotional flooding, a more obvious sensory flooding—from stimuli inside the plant itself—may leave new workers psychologically vulnerable. The experience of being in an assembly plant, initially, at least, can be like stepping into another world. A barrage of sounds, sights, and smells assault the senses: the constant hiss of compressed air; cascades of sparks from welding guns shooting across the aisles; the clanging sound of sheet metal being pounded into place; the electrical buzzing and popping of arc welders; the sharp odors of paint, primer, and hot solder; and huge robot arms pivoting menacingly about in the dim light of the shop floor. To a new worker in this environment, a supportive “family” of co-workers—the work team—is often quite welcome.

In a Toyota assembly plant in Japan, workers were also made vulnerable to manipulation and emotional stress through sheer fatigue. Kamata’s personal account of Toyota City in the early 1970s, is clearly that of an exhausted worker: “When I come back from work, I do nothing but sleep. I try not to think about the job; even the thought of it is enough to make me feel sick. Mostly, I feel too tired to think about anything” (Kamata 1982:42). Several weeks later, Kamata slips into trance-like states: “[On the assembly line,] sometimes I think of something totally illogical: landscapes with towns I once visited suddenly appear one by one. . . It’s impossible to concentrate on any one scene” (Kamata 1982:53-54). And again:

I’m not myself while I’m on the line.... It often surprises me to look up and suddenly find some strange scene in front of my eyes. In that split second I always wonder where I am. Merely seeing the light come in through a door on the opposite side of the building can bowl me over.... Again, for a few seconds, I’m totally disoriented. (Kamata 1982:75).

These episodes of confusion and despair are not unlike those experienced by ex-cult members (Singer 1979:76).

Another characteristic of coercive persuasion involves the use of organized peer groups to promote conformity. According to Ofshe and Singer, the “first generation” of coercive influence and control programs dealt primarily with prisoners in the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea. In these programs, the “target” of the program was controlled through interaction with a group of peers, who were typically “ideologically advanced but organization status equals” (Ofshe and Singer 1986:6). The subject would become emotionally attached to the peer group members, who “came to know the target’s personality and history exceedingly well” (Ofshe and Singer 1986:6). So, for example, a prisoner in Communist China would develop a circle of friends among his jailers, who could reward or sanction him according to whether or not his behavior fit their standards. Eventually, his behavior could be conditioned through peer pressure.

Do quality circles constitute coercive peer groups? In the Toyota plant, experienced circle members went out of their way to help new recruits adjust to the ever-quickening pace of production (Kamata 1982:35). Soon, however, the group expected new members to come up to speed, and exerted pressure on them to meet production goals. Kamata explains how quality circles can create a prisoner’s dilemma:

If Fukuyama, the worker on my right, falls behind, he’ll pull me behind, since I barely keep up with the work myself. Even if Fukuyama finishes his

job in time, should I take longer on my job, than the next worker, Takeda, will be pulled out of his position. It takes enormous energy to catch up with the line, and if things go wrong, the line stops. (Kamata 1982:48)

When the line stops, the quality circle is held collectively responsible, and peer pressure becomes a powerful incentive to work faster. Anthropologist Alejandro Lugo, who worked at a *maquiladora* plant in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, describes a similar experience. He dropped behind many times in his first few days of work, and writes that “the pressure would be almost unbearable” as members of his work group would shout at him for not keeping up (Lugo 1990:178-180).

In another instance from Toyota City, a temporary worker was forced to quit after an injury. He tells Kamata, “I’d have quit a long time ago. But I came here with Miura, so I can’t let him down” (Kamata 1982:156-157). This is not the first time Kamata has heard of such a case, and in his account he notes that “work here is so difficult that people try to support and encourage one another, especially the ones who come here together. We feel it’s not fair to drop out and go home alone” (Kamata 1982:157).

Circle leaders often learn a great deal about team members’ personalities and histories, sometimes for purposes of manipulation. For example, at an assembly plant jointly owned by General Motors and Toyota in Fremont, California, a management handout, entitled “Facts a Group Leader Must Know,” implored team leaders to learn the birthday, marital status, anniversary, number of children, and hobbies of each circle member. Furthermore, “team members are encouraged to help each other deal with personal problems” (Parker and Slaughter 1988:103-104; Gyra 1981:84-85). At a Toyota plant in Japan, team chiefs even used team members’ birthdays to calculate biorhythm charts, so that an individual’s “bad days” could be anticipated by the quality circle (Kamata 1982:124).

Finally, total control over the social environment has been described as an important component of thought reform programs. At Toyota City, literally thousands of young men were housed in huge military-style dormitories, surrounded by a fence and a guardhouse (Kamata 1982:7). During the time Kamata wrote his account, visitors—including family members—were not allowed to enter the dorms freely to visit temporary workers (Kamata 1982:19). Roommate assignments often grouped men from the same town together; according to Kamata, “it helps them adjust to the new environment and stay put during the employment period” (Kamata 1982:13).

Of course, Toyota City is perhaps at most extreme end of the spectrum. Most automotive plants in the US do not approach this kind of milieu control. Still, the control exercised by Toyota over its workers’ environment should be kept in mind, especially in light of comments like those made by the vice president of the General Motors-Toyota NUMMI plant in Fremont, California: “We will not waver from the Toyota production concept. It’s what will make us successful” (in Parker and Slaughter 1988:120).

“Success” is ultimately gauged in terms of plant performance, not in terms of the individual worker’s well-being. From the perspective of the individual worker, success may exact a painful price. Janice Klein, in an article entitled, “The Human Costs of Manufacturing Reform,” describes how the Toyota Method, according to some line operators, led to “more

accidents. . .and an unusually high number of suicides among the blue-collar work force” (Klein 1989:64). Kamata’s account of six months at Toyota City, a harrowing recollection of fatigue, depression, and isolation, underlines the danger of intensifying the work pace in the name of success.

One final comment should be made about the techniques of control characteristic of the new industrial relations. The big auto makers—Japanese and American alike—have in recent years pursued the so-called “Southern strategy” of locating new assembly plants in the deep South and the Midwest. Since the late 1970s, two state-of-the-art automotive assembly plants have opened in Tennessee, two in rural Ohio, one in Kentucky, and one in Indiana (Womack *et al* 1990:200-203; Kinney and Florida 1988). The strategy appears to be an emulation of the Toyota City experiment, which was located “in insular Nagoya rather than cosmopolitan Tokyo. For many years its work force was composed largely of former agricultural workers” (Womack *et al* 1990:49). The conventional wisdom attributes the Southern strategy to the relative dearth of unions in these (mostly) right-to-work states. A non-union environment would ostensibly have less of a “we-they” mentality, and this would facilitate the imposition of cooperative ideologies common to the new industrial relations. In the new rural factories, managers are saved the step of obliterating the old adversarial ideology before implanting a new one of cooperation and teamwork.

In summary, when an individual is subjected to processes of “Coercive Persuasion and Attitude Change”, his beliefs progress through the sequential phases of *unfreezing*, *change*, and *refreezing* (Ofshe 1992:215). The *unfreezing* phase attempts to “undercut a person’s psychological basis for resisting demands for behavioral compliance” to a reform program (Ofshe 1992:215). In workplace reform programs, this may be accomplished through emotional flooding at retreats or training sessions, through the sensory shocks induced by the assembly plant itself, or through fatigue and stress caused by assembly speed-ups. These techniques may dislodge—or unfreeze—old conceptions of workplace relations. The *change* phase relies on a group of peers who reward or punish the “target” for adherence to the reform program and ideology (Ofshe 1992:216). If we look at the new industrial relations, the quality circle might be seen as a coercive group of peers, which rewards new members with friendship in a stressful work setting, while simultaneously exerting pressure to keep them from falling behind or deviating from strict work routines. Finally, the *refreezing* phase attempts to “promote and reinforce behavior [with] social approval, status gains, and small privileges” (Ofshe 1992:216). When viewed through this framework, a number of elements of the new industrial relations bear a remarkable resemblance to classic programs of thought reform and coercive persuasion.

Quality Circles and the National Labor Relations Act

The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) was passed in 1935 to protect workers’ rights, including the right to organize unions. Quality circles stand in questionable legal terrain, particularly regarding Section 8 (a)(2) of the NLRA, which prohibits employers from dominating or interfering with employee organizations such as unions. In 1992, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) invoked this provision when a high-tech Silicon Valley firm, Electromation Incorporated, set up worker-management teams. The NLRB ruled that these teams effectively discouraged workers from organizing a union. Needless to say, industry

executives have told a presidential Commission on the Future of Labor Management Relations that they would like to see Section 8 (a)(2) eliminated entirely from the NLRA (Bacon 1994:4). The Commission, organized by Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown and Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, was to draft recommendations for modifying the NLRA by May 1994 but the report—obviously a political hot potato—has been delayed indefinitely.

Conclusion

Today, a number of observers have noted that a new ideology has blanketed the United States. Harvard business professor, George Lodge, calls it “Communitarianism,” and sets it in relief to the Lockean ideology of “Individualism” previously prevalent in America (Lodge 1976; Roberts *et al* 1979). In a 1979 book on employee participation, Lodge and two co-authors describe how Individualism “has been eroded” in the US and is being replaced by the Communitarian ideology, in which:

consensus is more important than contract in governing human relationships...property rights are less important than the rights which derive from membership in a community or group...[and] reality can only be perceived through an understanding of wholes and systems of wholes. (Roberts et al. 1979:65-66)

Ezra Vogel, one of Professor Lodge’s Harvard colleagues, took this message to heart, and in a book that began the “learn from Japan” movement, declared:

Americans would do well to follow the Japanese model and rely on moral suasion, on creating a consensus of concerned people who can exert their positive influence...At all levels [of American society], from the individual to the highest government offices, we must restrain the use of adversary relations if we are to avoid the divisiveness that makes cooperation for mutual benefit untenable. (Vogel 1979:236)

Curiously, Vogel, like Lodge, attributes Japan’s rapid economic growth almost exclusively to the rather opaque and mysterious ideology of Communitarianism, without first regarding more immediate economic factors, such as highly protective trade policies and a progressive post-War development strategy that emphasized wealth redistribution before growth.

Both men abandon any pretense of detachment, and bind themselves to this new ideology of community, embracing it wholeheartedly and recognizing that “there can be no going back” (Lodge 1976:21). They contend that America needs Communitarianism because it will “serve the interests of the group or society at large” (Vogel 1979:234-237). Too often, they believe, America has been slowed down by “persistent demands for equality”; and “we [Americans] have often been more concerned with the rights of the deviant than the rights of the responsible citizen” (Roberts et al. 1979:65; Vogel 1979:235). In a Communitarian society, pragmatic efficiency is a higher priority than individual equality or participatory democracy.

Anthropologist Laura Nader also recognized an ideological shift in the US in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a shift she refers to as “harmony ideology,” characterized by:

an emphasis on conciliation, recognition that resolution of conflict is inherently good and that its reverse—continued conflict or controversy—is bad or dysfunctional, a view of harmonious behavior as more civilized than disputing behavior, the belief that consensus is of greater survival value than controversy. (Nader 1990:2)

Although Nader's harmony ideology describes the same phenomenon as Lodge and Vogel's Communitarianism, her work is different in two very important respects. First, she chooses as her research site the legal system in the US, while Lodge and Vogel focus on business and politics. In US law, an "explosion" of non-adversarial alternative dispute resolution (ADR) forums emerged in the latter half of the 1970s—at the same time that Communitarianism was making deep inroads into the world of business and industry via employee participation schemes. So, at the same time that the new industrial relations boomed in response to popular perceptions that the American work force suffered from "malaise" and "non-competitiveness," the ADR movement spread in response to popular perceptions that the American populace was too litigious (Lodge 1976:3; Nader 1988).

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Nader's formulation of harmony ideology is set in a broad historical and geographical framework, which allows her to locate it within various institutions over many centuries. Much of her study is devoted to tracing the development of harmony ideology in southern Mexico, where it was introduced as a pacification scheme by Spanish missionaries in the sixteenth century. Similarly, the ADR movement was established as a way of pacifying those who emerged with a stronger voice from the 1960s—women, minority groups, consumers, and environmentalists (Nader 1988). Nader's view of harmony ideology is sharply critical, in stark contrast to Lodge's and Vogel's endorsement of Communitarianism.

These differences illuminate the complexity of the new industrial relations, and the different ways the programs may be interpreted. Some, like Lodge and Vogel, are essentially instrumentalists who see efficiency—not participatory democracy—as the most important consideration in today's world. Communitarianism is simply the ideological vehicle for getting there. Others embrace the new industrial relations for humanitarian reasons; these are, to use Eric Hoffer's phrase (1951), "the true believers." For example, when the chairman of one company was asked why he implemented the changes, he answered, "You do it because it's right" ("The New Industrial Relations" 1981:90). The true believers argue that these programs are progressive because they are more humane and less confrontational. Finally, there are the critics, particularly the many employees I met at General Motors who resented the imposition of these new arrangements and saw them as little more than psychological manipulation and a poorly-disguised effort to weaken the local union.

Which view is closest to the mark? It is difficult for one trained in the social sciences to take Lodge and Vogel—the instrumentalists—seriously, for they do not contextualize the Communitarian ideology, nor do they tell us what we might lose in the process of adopting this "Japanese" model—democracy, constitutional rights, established labor law, a 200-year tradition of participatory government. To the true believers, one must ask: is it truly a humane exercise to try imposing thought patterns on workers, even if it is allegedly for their psychological benefit? The critical view is a more plausible interpretation because it describes

the functions of harmony over time and in various settings. The critics sound a clear and convincing note: beware of coercive harmony.

A recent scandal in the federal government illustrates the dangers posed by coercion masked as harmony. In March 1995, a Congressional subcommittee was stunned by the bizarre testimony of many witnesses who told of being “psychologically abused” and subjected to sessions resembling “cult programming” during management and diversity training sessions sponsored by the Federal Aviation Administration. According to witnesses, men were fondled by women, blacks and whites were urged to exchange epithets, and coworkers were tied together or disrobed for hours at a time during the week-long training courses, which the FAA subcontracted to various management consultants. One consultant, Gregory May, received \$1.67 million in government contracts. According to some witnesses, May is influenced by a west coast “guru” who occasionally contacts a 35,000 year-old spirit named Ramtha (“US Offered Unusual Class on ‘Diversity’” 1995).⁴

In the past, careful research conducted by generations of behavioral scientists and engineers was used to construct workplace reform programs for the purpose of increasing company profits. Today, Communitarianism and other such ideologies espousing cooperation and consensus at any price are being packaged and sold by some managerial consultants and business school academics not only to increase profits, but also to tighten control over employees, hampering their right to unionize and discouraging them from seeking other rights such as civil rights (Edelman, Erlanger, and Lande 1993). Given the fact that these ideologies are all too often associated with pacification, perhaps it should be of no surprise that the new industrial relations seem to have so much in common with programs of coercive persuasion and thought reform. Proven techniques of control, especially the use of small work teams to manipulate individual workers, may become mechanisms for transmitting ideologies of compliance and for conditioning efficient employee behavior.

Ultimately, the goal of most employee participation programs is to increase quality, efficiency, and ultimately, corporate profits—even if that requires surrendering individual autonomy and well-being. Egalitarian-sounding phrases such as “industrial democracy” and “quality-of-work-life,” put in the context of the new industrial relations, often ring quite hollow indeed.

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Notes

- 1 These workplace reform programs have gone by several names, including “the team approach” (Gyma 1981), “employee participation” (Herrick 1990), “workplace democracy” (Bernstein 1976), “human capitalism” (Ozaki 1991), and “quality of work life” programs.

- 2 Some might claim that this study does not adequately take into account the resistance of workers. Although I briefly alluded to the resistance I observed at General Motors in the opening paragraphs, it is control—and not resistance—that is the central concern of the essay. Ethnographies of resistance have enjoyed a certain popularity in recent years, and a number have been set in industrial plants (Ong 1987, Willis 1977; see also Scott 1985). Critics have charged that some ethnographies of resistance tend to romanticize it (Abu-Lughod 1990).
- 3 Like much of the anthropological research centered in the contemporary US, my approach is methodologically eclectic. Because I did not keep field notes while I was at General Motors, most of the data for this essay was collected from secondary sources across a range of industries and countries. Even so, the project is ethnographic to the extent that it centers around two “communities”—one of assembly workers involved in quality circles and the other of managers and consultants who formulate and organize them. This approach corresponds roughly to Robert Wiebe’s observation that the contemporary US is a “segmented society” (1975) whose members are compartmentalized, above all, by the work that they do.
- 4 The connections between some management consultants and the New Age movement have been described by others, as well. Karen Cook (1988), a New York business writer, wrote an interesting piece several years ago entitled, “Scenario for a New Age.”

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