# Research for whom? Labour sociology between observation, co-management and social critique*

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What is the relationship between labour sociologists and the workers they examine, and what function do researchers acquire within the complex field of force that is the workplace? These questions are addressed, mainly drawing upon the author's personal research experiences as a labour sociologist at one of the leading German institutes of labour research (SOFI, at University of Göttingen). After discussing in how far the social divide between researchers and their objects of research impede or rather support a thorough analysis of work organisation, and how labour sociologists can resist the tendency to be turned into (cheap) corporate consultants, the question will be tackled whether labour sociology can still claim political relevance today. The article ends with some reflections on how new strategies of research could possibly pave the way for politics of emancipation, on the shop-floor and beyond.

**Key words:** labour sociology, sociological case study, IT-work, work organisation, tripartist labour regulation

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What is the relationship between labour sociologists and the workers they examine, and what function do researchers acquire within the complex field of force that is the workplace? Are sociologists supposed to merely observe the world of work, to reform it, or to question its basic principles? In marked contrast to anthropological research, for instance, deliberations of this sort seldom play a central role in labour sociologists' day-to-day activities. The very fact that their research may well exert a direct influence on the workplace constellations under review, however, renders at least some kind of self-reflection advisable.

This article is supposed to be a first step in that direction. It is, however, and this is worth emphasising at the outset, primarily a report on the author's personal research experiences. Moreover, it draws upon impressions of those research traditions within industrial and labour sociology which focus on intensive case studies of specific workplaces, with a special focus on the Sociological Research Institute (SOFI), University of Göttingen, as one of its institutional strongholds (cf. Wittemann, Kuhlmann, & Schumann, 2010).

## 1. Professional distance? The social divide between researchers and their objects of research as cognitive obstacle and opportunity

In the good old days, when the focus of labour sociology was still mainly directed towards men in large industrial firms, the front lines were comparatively clear. On the one hand, researchers and their objects of research had much in common: aside from their interest in a more humane organisation of work, they also shared the same (male) gender. This may explain why some questions (such as those concerning the interrelations between the organisation of gainful employment and the organisation of reproductive work) remained largely unaddressed for a long time.

On the other hand, there was and continues to be a clear dividing line, with regard to the socio-economic background of both groups. Most labour sociologists originate from academic families: a pattern, which was even more pronounced before the educational expansion of the 1960s and 1970s took place in Germany. From their perspective, workers were not necessarily perceived as equals, but could well be conceptualised as the proverbial

"noble savages". As such, they could be turned into an object of wishful thinking (e.g. when it came to matters of political awareness and radicality), and it was difficult to forgive them when they failed to live up to such expectations. In many ways, this kind of social divide results in a cognitive obstacle that is not easily overcome. If researchers and their objects of research do not speak the same language, labour sociologists might fail to grasp the full meaning of what is said at the workplace and thus misinterpret critical aspects of work constellations. This is suggested, inter alia, by the fact that despite all discussions about tendencies of alienation or (on the contrary) about the meaning of professional pride among industrial workers, it is still argued that identification with one's task or the desire to work independently and creatively are either very young phenomena or an exclusive feature of high-skill "knowledge work." Other labour sociologists, instead, tend to interpret every incident of individual stubbornness displayed by workers, and every effort undertaken by them to make the work process smoother, as acts of resistance in the framework of (unconscious) struggles for autonomy. In both cases, we do not listen attentively enough: and thus systematically under- or overestimate the explosive potential inherent in concrete work constellations. However, such misunderstandings are fatal for labour sociology, at least if it aspires to prepare the ground for politics of emancipation, both at the workplace and beyond.

It is quite obvious, then, that the social divide between researchers and their objects of research may constitute a cognitive obstacle. At the same time, however, the very same social divide may also support deeper insights, since excessive social proximity may just as well diminish one's awareness of the realities of work. For example, maintaining "professional distance" proved to be a special challenge in a research project on Internet and multimedia providers the author was involved in (on the findings, see Mayer-Ahuja &Wolf, 2005). Since she had completed her own studies in 1998, at the cusp of the dot-com boom, a considerable number of those graduating in the same year had found work precisely within the newly emerging sector of Internet companies. As a result, the author and the overwhelming majority of those interviewed for the project shared not just their academic qualification, but also their age: during some interviews, considerable self-discipline was

needed to avoid switching from German's formal "*Sie*" to the informal "*Du*." This sort of constellation makes research enjoyable, but it also creates tremendous methodological problems. If research is directed, as it were, at one's own peer group, it is almost inevitable to feel that one is actually acquainted with the work constellation or the working attitudes of interviewees before even talking to them, since they are (rightly or wrongly) perceived as mirroring the researcher's own situation. It is thus not to be ruled out that the widespread overestimation of the novelty of high-skill service work, which is often argued to contain chances and risks hitherto unknown, may at least in part result from the fatal social proximity between academics, as researchers and as the objects of research. Whatever the case may be, it is certainly problematic to expect that any researcher will be able to analyse his or her own work situation with professional distance. After all, it is quite likely that we will project onto our objects of research the self-delusions by which we manage to survive our own working life relatively unscathed. Is a demanding and satisfying job not really more important than a permanent contract, and yet are we not always going out of our way to secure for ourselves the next follow-up job? The tendencies toward self-exploitation, including self-control and self-economisation, that arise from such considerations (as well as from the structural constraints of the academic labour market) are painfully familiar to (virtually) everyone with a mid-level university position. It might thus not be too surprising that the type of employee that Voß and Pongratz (1998) have entitled "labour-power entrepreneur" (Arbeitskraftunternehmer) appears just as familiar and seems to lurk behind every corner in the companies under review.

How can this situation be negotiated? The only feasible option seems to be a continuous attempt to reflect the degree of social distance or proximity that characterises the relationship between researcher and interviewee, in each particular constellation, in order to turn a potential cognitive obstacle into a source of deeper insight. After all, both variants can, in principle, be rendered productive. On the one hand, social distance may well produce an alienating effect of the sort described by Bert Brecht. During the author's research on Indo-German project work, for instance, analysing the utilisation of labour-power in the Indian IT sector has not just made the Indian "case"

appear more familiar; at the same time, the German "case" has appeared more and more unfamiliar, since apparent truisms were left behind and new questions provoked (cf. Mayer-Ahuja, 2014). On the other hand, social proximity can also open up new lines of inquiry: this may apply, for instance, if a critical scrutiny of high-skill white-collar work renders the power relations in the researcher's own surroundings more visible.

## 2. Consultants on the cheap? Positioning labour research within the field of force that is the workplace

When historians read source material, their interpretation does not lead to an *ex post* transformation of the past. When labour sociologists conduct case studies of certain workplaces, however, they interfere with this specific workplace's field of force, and are quite likely to influence it directly by means of their research. While this problem is not new, it has become more acute during the last years in two respects. On the one hand, labour sociologists' grasp on workplace constellations is becoming more selective; on the other hand, they acquire a different function within the company's field of force than they used to.

As far as the scope of research on specific workplace constellations is concerned, one can distinguish broadly between three scenarios. The first scenario has hardly changed: it remains relatively easy to study large industrial firms with stable workforces and well-established mechanisms of co-determination. In these firms, managers and/or works council members have in some cases been cooperating with labour sociologists for decades, on the basis of some common interest in similar questions. Even here, power relations seem to change, however. Since financial departments have gained power vis-à-vis human resource departments during the last years, as argued in studies on the workplace consequences of "financialisation" (Kädtler, 2006, 2010), researchers will henceforth find fewer and fewer managers with an interest in issues relevant to labour sociology. The second scenario can be encountered in large companies operating in so-called "new" sectors (such as the IT sector). In these companies, works councils are rare, trade unions are in an unfavourable position and employers tend to have little or no experi-

ence as far as co-operation with researchers from the field of labour sociology is concerned. Under these conditions, access to the workplace can be obtained only by catering to *management* interests. In the case of the above-mentioned project on Indo-German software development, for example, the German sample company granted access to our research team in order to find out why there were so many conflicts within transnational project teams and why the labour turnover rate in India was so high that employees seldom remained with the firm for a full cycle of software development. As for the Indian sample company, the management sought some advice on the question of why the German market is so difficult to access for Indian service firms. Finally, a third scenario emerges in the case of companies that have remained entirely inaccessible to classic labour sociology: given their particularly problematic working conditions, the near absence of strong works councils, and a strongly fluctuating workforce, many of these companies are not interested in the disclosure of their (sometimes semi-legal) practices of utilising labour power. When analysing work in a sector such as the cleaning industry, for instance, one cannot rely solely on company case studies for this reason. Instead, researchers need to draw upon other written sources (e.g. by evaluating the journals of trade unions or employers' associations; Mayer-Ahuja, 2003), to engage in participatory observation “undercover” (Gather, Gerhard, Schroth, & Schürmann, 2005) or to approach employees outside the workplace. This challenges the classic company case study, and it provokes the question of whether the company is necessarily the most important analytic unit.

Moreover, if labour sociologists obtain access to a company, they tend to acquire a different function within that company's field of force today than they used to do in the past. Of course, the research of labour sociologists (insofar as it presupposes company case studies) has always been possible only if it corresponded at least in part to the interests of the management. In many cases, labour sociologists thus tended to offer managers advice from an external perspective, for instance, on how to implement tariff agreements more “smoothly,” or on how to increase productivity. From this perspective, it has been and continues to be a prerequisite of research that the questions of labour sociologists are formulated in such a way that company representa-

tives can relate to them: sometimes, even the questions themselves may have to be adapted to corporate interests. What is new, however, is the increasing polarisation that shapes the field of force in many companies, rendering it more obvious than in the past that there is no 'quasi-natural' community of interests between employees and employers. At the same time, however, labour sociologists continue to depend on the management's permission for their research. In order to avoid management objections, then, measures of adaptation may not be confined to the reformulation of research questions: instead, under conditions of heightened workplace polarisation, labour sociologists are often forced, in effect, to side with the management. This is not lost on employees: for example, some of the Indian programmers interviewed for the above-mentioned project on Indo-German IT work asked the research team to inform their superiors of, say, their preference for another task. Thus, in spite of all assurances of anonymity, the interviewees apparently had little confidence that the researchers would not pass confidential information on directly. For labour sociologists, this would obviously be unthinkable, but it is not impossible to understand how such suspicions can arise. After all, the management had invited the sociologists into the high-security complex that software firms usually appear as in India; the direct superior had selected the interviewees for the talks, and the interviews were conducted in glass rooms on large open-plan office floors, which is to say under the eyes of managers, who could observe the conversation by gazing over the partitions of the programmers' cubicles. Under these circumstances, those speaking to the research team were carrying out management instructions: consequently, the researchers were perceived as (particularly cost-effective) consultants in the service of the firm. It is evidently painful to evoke this kind of impression, but there is a grain of truth to it. In fact, labour sociologists, just like corporate consultants, need to engage in careful observation, in order to be able to analyse work and social relations within the firm adequately. Under present conditions, this may well be problematic, however. On the one hand, it is often first and foremost the company management that one provides with information and arguments: On the other hand, a field of force is characterised by the fact that a vector (such as an input from the side of a labour sociologist) will never have exactly the effect intended by its sender, but

rather alters its intensity and direction in interaction with other influences (cf. Pries, 2005). For this reason, researchers ultimately have no full control over the effects of their observations and recommendations. This is disconcerting, especially since it is even more obvious today then it used to be in the 1960s or 1970s that co-management cannot be equated easily with politics of emancipation.

## 3. In the name of efficiency and/or emancipation? Labour sociology's claim to political relevance

Labour sociology exerts an active influence on how work is organised: this was a truism among earlier generations of researchers. In fact, their claim to political relevance usually implied some devotion to a pragmatic re-engineering of social relations on the shop-floor, based on a close co-operation between management, works council and scholars, who joined forces in order to render the world of work more humane. In any case, during the economically prosperous post-war decades, it was generally assumed that one was dealing with a win-win situation. The goal of increasing productivity called for overcoming certain forms of work organisation, especially alienated Taylorist work at the assembly lines of large corporations functioning according to Fordist principles. Thus experimenting with, for example, new forms of team work, seemed to be in the common interest of employers and employees. In many ways, the "humanisation of work" was an integral component of what contemporary historians such as Raphael and Döring-Manteuffel (2008) refer to as the "liberal consensus of the postwar period", between state, capital, and labour. Thus those who championed the humanisation of work did not need to make a political statement: they found natural allies in government ministries, in trade unions and works councils, as well as among employers and managers. Even though workers tended to remain the object, rather than the subject of such reforms, it seemed obvious for many labour sociologists that they were acting in their best interest as well.

Echoes of these earlier coalitions in the sphere of the politics of production can be encountered to the present day (e.g. in a campaign of the German metal workers' union, which demands "better, not cheaper" work; cf. Hai-

peter, Brettschneider, Bromberg, & Lehndorff, 2011). In general, however, considerable disillusionment has taken hold, since corporate efforts to enhance productivity increasingly tend to clash with the interests of employees. Moreover, rising unemployment, the replacement of so-called "standard employment relationships" by fixed-term contracts, agency work, single self-employment or mini-jobs, the emergence of working hours that are either far too long or far too short, and rising competition between jobholders and jobseekers increasingly render the workplace a field of force rife with conflict. Companies thus turn into a social space in which not only the interests of capital and labour clash, but also the interests of old vs. young workers, core vs. temporary employees, men vs. women, parents vs. childless colleagues, skilled vs. unskilled staff, Germans vs. non-Germans etc. This has grave consequences for labour sociologists who can no longer perceive themselves as honest brokers in search of "good work" which would lie in the common and objective interest of all.

## 4. Labour sociology and the politics of emancipation

These circumstances lend new urgency to the question of whether labour sociology can still prepare the ground for politics of emancipation today. Four points merit particular attention.

*Should labour sociologists position themselves politically?* Given the polarisation of the field of force in many companies, this question has long been answered. If scholars do not consciously decide to conduct their research in the interest of employees, they also adopt a political position: they allow themselves to be turned into corporate consultants.

*Research on employees – or with them?* As argued above, workers appear as objects rather than as subjects of scholarly discussion in many studies. Despite all discussions about how research can trigger processes of self-reflection and self-communication among interviewees, in practice, this is achieved only very rarely. In the case of the author's projects, for instance, even attempts to discuss just the findings of a specific company case study with the workforce, or at least with the direct participants, often failed due to a lack of interest among management and interviewees. In the small internet

companies of our sample, for instance, this was due mainly to the unwillingness to waste time and money in a critical economic situation. In the large software companies mentioned above, instead, the short duration of projects and impending deadlines are likely to have had a similar effect. Despite all differences in their actual workplace constellations, then, the objects of our research had little time to spend on (or were not particularly interested in) reflecting the empirical findings of a sociological case study, not even with the perspective to develop strategies for the implementation of "good work." In all likeliness, this problem will even gain importance, to the extent that the confidence of employees in their own ability to assert their interests dwindles. Only those who believe themselves capable of bringing about change for the better will struggle for a deeper understanding of their situation, and will strive at developing alternatives.

*Labour sociology beyond the company case study?* Two reasons in particular make it seem advisable to broaden the range of methodological instruments available to labour sociology. First, it is precisely the most tension-riddled (and the most exciting) workplace constellations that cannot be accessed by means of company case studies. Second, the shop-floor is increasingly failing to function as a stable microcosm, given that many employment relationships are becoming more short-term. At the same time, external influences gain importance, including management's orientation to "shareholder value", (sometimes transnational) corporate policies, particular customer demands or reproductive requirements whose increasing importance for work organisation on the shop-floor is not only due to the growing number of working mothers. Labour sociology will not be able to fully relinquish its focus on the company, but there is much to suggest that it should start from the employees even more consequently than it has hitherto done. One way of doing this might involve contacting workers outside the workplace and using their social networks as a starting point from which to obtain insight into workplace constellations. In the case of the above-mentioned project on Indo-German IT work, for example, the first experiences yielded by such an approach were consistently positive. Thus, in India, where the IT sector is much more concentrated in geographical terms than in Germany, the research team lived for several months in the IT metropolis of

Bangalore, within a neighbourhood inhabited by large numbers of IT specialists. Like them, we found ourselves stuck in the notorious traffic jams between these residential areas and IT business parks twice a day. It was only against the background of this experience, for instance, that we were able to understand why the scope of work intensification depends significantly on the physical structure of social space, and hence on infrastructure policies. Employees who have spent two hours of the morning in the heat and among exhaust fumes on heavily congested streets in order to travel just a few kilometres within Bangalore will be tired and worn out on arrival at the office. They will not be able to work as intensively as their German colleagues whose residential areas are in some cases further away from the office in absolute terms, but much faster to reach, given German conditions of time-space compression (Harvey, 1990). Only after watching thousands of employees leaving the office buildings in Bangalore at a fixed time every evening and getting on the company buses that take them back to their residential areas, it became intelligible for us in how far these rigid bus schedules preclude Indian employees from staying in office just a few minutes longer, on short notice: an attitude, which the German members of transnational project teams tend to interpret as a lack of commitment. The author's colleague even stayed in a dormitory on the company premises, intended for employees temporarily posted to Bangalore from other company locations, for some time. He observed the networking activities on the company "campus," where sports and dining facilities are crowded every evening with young people who do not wish to return to their austere "paying guest" accommodation or to their flats, which they typically share with other IT-workers, who also tend to stay late in office. Under these conditions it is difficult for managers in charge of assigning highly complex work packages to impose a clearly delimited workday on young, unmarried employees in their twenties, who live a largely isolated life far from their families. At the same time, we realised, vice versa, that the standards we envisaged in Germany, of highly concentrated and largely undistracted work during the core working hours, are actually depending on several preconditions which neither our German interviewees nor we ourselves, were aware of. Moreover, central standards governing the division of labour along the axis of gender in Ger-

many and India respectively became immediately apparent when the author dropped off her own child at an expensive private kindergarten and talked to the numerous German mothers who had accompanied their husbands to Bangalore for the latter's expatriate stay at some IT company. It is needless to say that these arrangements did typically not involve any gainful employment on the part of these women. At the same time, there were hardly any Indian women to be encountered at this kindergarten. Alerted by this experience, we asked our female interviewees in India (all of whom work full-time, with or without children) about the childcare arrangements of working mothers, and learned that the children of couples who are both employed in full-time IT jobs are typically looked after either by their grandparents or by (inexpensive, live-in) nannies. Our interest in the question of why Indian software firms seem to be so much more successful than German firms in binding female labour-power was thus initiated, to a significant degree, in the playing area of an Indian kindergarten. Consequently, our attention was directed not only at differences between the standards of social inequality, but also between the social security systems in Germany and India respectively. After all, one reason why the "extended family" is experiencing a revival within the Indian IT community, of all social groups, is that the parents of IT workers are often not entitled to sufficient pension payments. In brief: observing employees at the margins of the workplace and beyond may shed light on numerous external factors which influence the organisation of work on the shop-floor, and which 'classic' company case studies fail to take into account. Finally, innovative perspectives (for instance on IT work, as our field of research) may result from the evaluation of new types of source material, like IT discussion forums on the Web or self-produced videos in which IT workers share reflections on their work situation with their peers. Obviously, such sources cannot replace the classic company case study, and they raise new methodological issues; at the same time, however, they provide a more direct access to employees, thereby reducing the risk that research questions are increasingly dictated by the management.

*New pathways for labour sociology?* In many respects, even research that is explicitly conducted with the goal to support the interests of employees, will still imply the usual set of tasks. Labour sociologists must engage in

careful observation, because a precise analysis of the situation on the shop-floor (and beyond) is required in order to be able to move beyond the diagnosis of a "new complexity", after several decades of analytical self-restraint, and to trace new contours of the world of work (Mayer-Ahuja, 2011). Moreover, labour sociologists need to continue making practical suggestions on how work should be re-organised, even if their implementation, and long-term consequences lie beyond their control. Most importantly, however, the focus of research should be directed towards those incidents of rupture that might serve as a starting point for self-communication and organisation. The current status quo is hard to bear for many employees: under these circumstances, in order to promote politics of emancipation, labour sociology must, even in its bread-and-butter-research, consistently strive to pave the way into a different world of work.

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