

THE WRITTEN AND THE REPRESSED IN GOULDNER'S INDUSTRIAL SOCIOLOGY

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In many ways Alvin Gouldner's industrial sociology prefigures his later work. His studies of the General Gypsum Company combine what later become two separate branches of his discourses on social theory: the exploration of the liberative potential of structural functionalism and the appropriation of the critical moments of Marxism. In *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*, he explores Merton's ideas of functional equivalence, to suggest alternative forms of factory administration, and of latent function, to unveil the domination behind bureaucratic rules. In *Wildcat Strike*, he turns Parsons's conditions of stable interaction into their opposite: the conditions for disequilibrium. In both books he draws on Marxian ideas of systemic contradiction and struggle as the motor of change, to explain the emergence of new patterns of industrial bureaucracy and to illuminate purposeful collective action. His subsequent books — *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* and *For Sociology*, on one hand, and *The Dialectic of Technology and Ideology* and *The Two Marxisms*, on the other — can be viewed as reflections on what was tacit and repressed in his analysis of the General Gypsum Company. Even *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* has roots in Gouldner's construction of the ideal type "representative bureaucracy" based on expertise and in his treatment of bureaucratic succession in terms of the ideologies of locals and cosmopolitans.

Nor is this continuity between his early industrial studies and his later critiques of Academic Sociology and Marxism surprising. For Gouldner was not interested in locating the General Gypsum Company historically, or as a specific part of a specific totality. To the contrary, like other major organization theorists of the period (e.g., Lipset, Selznick, and Blau), he was more concerned with stripping away the particular to reveal the general. General Gypsum Company was a laboratory for testing and developing *general* theories applicable to diverse contexts, rather than a *specific* sociology of industry. And yet Gouldner's analysis remains particularly relevant to recent Marxist studies of the labor process. His critique of the "metaphysical pathos" behind

Weberian notions of bureaucracy as an iron cage prefigures the many criticisms of Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*.¹ Just as Gouldner questioned the inevitability and inexorability of bureaucratic domination by underlining resistance and alternatives, so critics of Braverman have counterposed class struggle in the pursuit or defense of workers' control to the logic of capitalist domination.² Although they share the metaphysics of resistance, voluntarism, and optimism, Gouldner's and Braverman's critics operate from within different theoretical frameworks. Gouldner's arguments with organization theory are couched in terms of the imperatives of industrialization and size, whereas the second debate revolves around the logic and potentialities of capitalism. Where Gouldner counters the "iron law of oligarchy" with the equally general "iron law of functional autonomy," domination with resistance, consensus with conflict, Marxists have insisted on opposing specific forms of class struggle to equally specific theories of capitalist domination, linked to the pursuit of profit.

In this article I assess Gouldner's analysis from the standpoint of these contemporary analyses of factory life — acknowledging, of course, that Marxism was much less developed at the time Gouldner was writing. I will also highlight Gouldner's originality in relation to the organization theory dominant in the 1950s. Thus, I will underline his search for alternative adaptations to the exigencies of industrialization, but go beyond him in posing questions about the conditions for the realization of those alternatives. Similarly, I point to his emphasis on resistance, but suggest that he could have gone further in examining its limits. Where Gouldner moves from alternatives and resistance to general theories of bureaucracy and group tensions, I suggest another route from the General Gypsum Company, situating it within the development of United States capitalism and thereby focusing on the limits of the possible and how those limits themselves may change. Finally, I consider ways of transcending the subject—object dualism — between voluntarism and determinism, domination and resistance — by pointing to an alternative notion of agency.

In Pursuit of the Possible

If the sociologist may not expatiate upon what "ought to be," he is still privileged to deal with another realm, "the realm of what can be." It sometimes seems that students of bureaucracy are all too ready to agree with Franz Kafka's judgment: "Such freedom as is possible today is but a wretched business." Underlying their pessimism is a limited conception of the choices presently available; a choice is seen only between a utopian and hence unattainable vision of democracy, on the one hand, and an attainable but bureaucratically undermined, hence imperfect, democracy, on the other hand. But the options thus stated have been amputated, for there is no real choice between the possible and the impossible. . . . The assumption here has been

that examination of concrete situations will detect alternative arrangements, and a variety, not a singularity, of solutions. These by their very existence demonstrate that they “can be,” and thus empirically enrich the available policy alternatives. . . . The study which follows, then, is shaped by the conviction that if the world of theory is grey and foredoomed, the world of everyday life is green with possibilities which need to be cultivated.³

Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy, Gouldner’s celebrated PhD dissertation, is an intensive study of the Oscar Center plant of the General Gypsum Company. During the period of the study, from 1948 to 1951, a number of changes took place in the plant’s administration. Initially, relations between management and workers were governed through “the indulgency pattern,” in which cooperation and loyalty were elicited through a regime of leniency and paternalism. In 1948 the plant manager, Old Doug, died. He was replaced by Peel, who set about dismantling the indulgency pattern by introducing new rules, formalizing disciplinary measures, eliminating government jobs, introducing closer supervision, restricting job shifting, and withdrawing the sample room as a place where injured workers could recuperate. The earlier “mock bureaucracy,” with its few and rarely enforced rules, was replaced by the “punishment-centered bureaucracy,” with its proliferation of rules enforced through disciplinary sanctions and grievance machinery. Gouldner also constructs a third pattern of bureaucracy, the “representative bureaucracy,” in which rules emerge through common agreement. This is bureaucracy based on expertise and enforced through education. In exposing different types of bureaucratic rules and elaborating them into different patterns, Gouldner mounts his attack on the view of bureaucracy as a juggernaut of history, relentlessly eating away at the few remaining freedoms. Bureaucracy, argues Gouldner, is not of a piece; it is not all bad. The root of evil, of “red tape,” of regulation for domination, is one particular type of bureaucracy – the punishment-centered bureaucracy. By deploying Merton’s notion of “functional alternatives” in a radical manner, Gouldner claims that industry can be administered in different ways, some more oppressive than others. But are these patterns of industrial bureaucracy really functional alternatives? Do we really have a choice between “representative” and punishment-centered bureaucracy? And if so, what does that choice mean?

The ideal type *patterns* of bureaucracy are constructed from the existence of *specific* rules. Thus, the “no-smoking rule,” recognized only when the safety inspector pays his visits to the plant, exemplifies the mock bureaucracy. The safety rules, reached through common agreement between management and workers, exemplify the representative bureaucracy, while the no-absenteeism rule typifies the punishment-centered bureaucracy. In this way Gouldner build his ideal types, resting the case for their realization on the existence of

isolated rules. Generalizing from the safety rules, a representative bureaucracy in which management and workers jointly participate in the development and enforcement of commonly agreed on rules presumes a certain harmony of interests. How extensive can this be in the industrial setting of capitalism? How meaningful can such joint participation be when enterprises are subject to market competition?

Gouldner's own analysis suggests that the adoption of a representative pattern would imply a much greater harmony of interests than actually exists. Thus, when examining the functions of rules in a punishment-centered bureaucracy, Gouldner argues that they may mitigate or contain the *effects* of tension without removing the underlying cause.⁴ But Gouldner stops there. He does not examine the nature of the underlying conflict that leads to the withdrawal of consent and little motivation to work, which in turn necessitate rules. In other words, he leaves unexamined the specificity of the organization he is studying: a capitalist organization, producing for profit on the basis of wage labor. It is one thing for workers and managers to agree on safety rules; it is quite another matter for management to give up the prerogative to dictate how work shall be organized, or for workers to accept management's definition of "a fair day's work." Focusing on the capitalist character of the factory would highlight both the conflicts that undermine tendencies toward representative bureaucracy and the external market forces that restrict the scope of any decision making at the level of the firm. Such an analysis would indicate what is actually possible within contemporary advanced capitalist societies — that is, the "policy alternatives" — while underlining the political and economic transformations necessary for the realization of a wider range of choices.

If the representative bureaucracy is not a feasible alternative to the punishment-centered bureaucracy, what about the mock bureaucracy? Regarding the indulgency pattern as a functional substitute requires an explanation of its demise as a consequence of human intentionality, rather than of changes in structural conditions such as technology or markets. Gouldner therefore explains the replacement of the mock bureaucracy by the punishment-centered bureaucracy as the result of changes in personnel. In *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* Gouldner focuses on the "close connection between succession and a surge of bureaucratic development, particularly in the direction of formal rules."⁵ Rules were the successor's defense of his status interests. They allowed Peel to be more independent of head offices; they provided a justification of his behavior, as well as a means of checking up on untrustworthy subordinates.⁶ But was it the succession itself that led to the dismantling of the indulgency pattern and the elaboration of bureaucratic rules, or was it the particular context in which it took place? Had Old Doug lived, might he

too have introduced a punishment-centered bureaucracy? Here Gouldner passes over a critical detail: in the last 24 years there had been six successions, but only the last one threatened the indulgency pattern.⁷ What, then, was peculiar to Peel's succession? Gouldner argues that Peel came to the plant "sensitized to the rational and impersonal yardsticks which his superiors would use to judge his performance."⁸ But any new plant manager would be sensitive to the efficiency criteria of head offices. Gouldner poses and answers the question of Peel's response most clearly in *Wildcat Strike*:

. . . management's selection of the various forms of rationalization, namely, technological innovations, succession, and strategic replacements, cannot be understood solely as a response to threatening market conditions. For an alternative defense, heightening the workers' morale and willingness to produce, was largely neglected. The defenses chosen were uniformly characterized by their accessibility to managerial control, while the defense rejected might have made management dependent upon a resource on which it could not rely. More concretely, management preferred to forego joint labor-management determination of machine speeds, as one way of enhancing workers' morale and motivation, since this infringed upon what management conceived of as its status rights.⁹

However, locating the dynamics of succession in the defense of "status interests" still does not explain why the punishment-centered bureaucracy should arise when it did. Gouldner is left with an explanation that revolves around the peculiarities of Peel's character. Drawing on *Wildcat Strike* and occasional hints in *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*, one can piece together two other explanations. The first involves the introduction of 1.5 million dollars' worth of new machinery, which began just before Old Doug died.¹⁰ Gouldner argues that this became an excuse to increase supervision and for Peel to make his strategic replacements. But the new machines had their own implications for industrial bureaucracy, expropriating control from the workers, intensifying and fragmenting work and thereby undermining the leniency pattern. In its stead stepped the imposition of stricter discipline through bureaucratic rules. The second explanation for the decline of the indulgency pattern revolves around the new economic context within which the General Gypsum Company operated: the increased competition of the postwar period and labor's weakened position, resulting from higher levels of unemployment. Succession becomes the vehicle for restructuring the administration of the factory in accordance with changes in market forces and technology. It is quite conceivable that the changes would have taken place without the succession. To put it another way, the mock bureaucracy and the punishment-centered bureaucracy are *not* functional equivalents, in that their conditions of existence reflect both a different balance of class forces and a different set of technological and efficiency imperatives.

By identifying “those social processes creating variations in the amount and types of bureaucracy,” Gouldner successfully “eschews the role of mortician, prematurely eager to bury men’s hopes,”¹¹ only to wrap himself in a blanket of voluntarism. In divorcing those “social processes” and bureaucratic types from their conditions of existence Gouldner, despite claims to the contrary, undermines his role as social clinician, “striving to further democratic potentialities without arbitrarily setting limits on these in advance.”¹² The refusal to set arbitrary limits turns out to be a suspicion of any limits, a refusal to take into account the character of the society in which we live and the possibilities on which it closes or opens the door. Gouldner the social clinician gives way to Gouldner the critical theorist, celebrating potentialities, the gap between what is and what could be. The world of theory becomes “green with possibilities,” while the world of everyday life remains “grey and foredoomed.”

The Iron Law of Democracy

Even as Michels himself saw, if oligarchical waves repeatedly wash away the bridges of democracy, this eternal recurrence can happen only because men doggedly rebuild them after each inundation. Michels chose to dwell on only one aspect of this process, neglecting to consider this other side. There cannot be an iron law of oligarchy, however, unless there is an iron law of democracy.¹³

Gouldner mounts a second assault on the metaphysical pathos behind bureaucratic theories. Bureaucratic domination is not the inevitable cost of increased efficiency and material abundance, but the product of struggles. Nor are bureaucratic patterns impelled by a superhuman force, an inherent telos of history: they are initiated by specific strata, within or even outside an organization, aiming to control other strata. Management is usually the source of rules, but Gouldner shows how subordinates, too, will try to protect and advance rules that regulate the activities of their supervisors, for example in connection with safety conditions.

Moreover, the attempt to impose rules is by no means always successful. Thus, the miners underground effectively resisted the no-absenteeism rule. Gouldner catalogues the sources of the miners’ strength: their belief system, the legitimacy of resistance given the hazardous nature of their work, and their informal solidarity. He then generalizes from these observations: the imposition of bureaucratic rules provokes a countermovement toward the exercise of functional autonomy. The iron law of oligarchy produces its opposite: the iron law of democracy. The one implies the other: bureaucratic rules are required *because* people resist being controlled. Yet again Gouldner provides an important corrective to deterministic theories of organizations, to the notion of bureaucracy as iron cage. But his critique opens a new set of ques-

tions: under what conditions are the forces of resistance greater than those of domination? Taking an historical perspective, are the forces of resistance becoming weaker as capitalism advances? How typical are the gypsum miners? To what extent was their successful resistance the result of (a) the nature of the labor process underground and (b) the balance of class forces at the plant and in the wider society? Gouldner seems to downplay the first:

Diffuse work obligations might be thought to derive from the physical and technical peculiarities of mining; that is, since the amount of gypsum rock available is beyond control, and not entirely predictable, this might be the basis of vague work responsibilities in the mine. Track layers, however, were much less frequently confronted with natural resources over which they had no control. Nevertheless, they adhered to a relatively unspecified work program.¹⁴

But both gypsum miners and track layers do face uncertain work tasks that require more flexible work organization. Another factor Gouldner ignores is the system of payment. From two short asides,¹⁵ it appears that miners were paid on a group piece-rate system, which is itself conducive to a particular organization of work. Instead of these more objective features, Gouldner stresses the mobilization of sentiments and the will to resist as part of “mine culture.” In explaining this, notwithstanding his earlier remarks, Gouldner underlines the hazards of mining as legitimating resistance to close supervision — yet other hazardous occupations, such as the soldier in combat, are subject to close supervision and elaborate rules. A series of studies of coal mining in England, conducted within the framework of “socio-technical systems,” stresses the importance of uncertainty (including danger) in the work environment as shaping the form of work organization. A productive organization that must rapidly adjust to change can rely either on the self-regulating, semi-autonomous work group *or* on an “impracticable and unacceptable” degree of coercion.¹⁶ Yet in other political contexts, such as South Africa, mining is organized on the basis of military discipline and brutal coercion, made possible by the limited rights of black workers both at the point of production and in the wider society. Even in such a favorable work context as mining, the miners’ capacity to resist is firmly contained by the broader balance of class forces. In short, the successful mobilization of subjective sentiments and the ability to resist bureaucratic domination cannot be understood outside an account of the technical requirements of the particular labor process, as well as wider political and economic structures. Gouldner approaches such a structural analysis in *Wildcat Strike*, only to veer off in the direction of general theory.

Toward General Theory

The final objective, however, is not simply the explanation of this one strike, but, instead, the development of hypotheses and conceptual tools which can illuminate other similar processes. In short, it is possible that the careful examination of this one case may provide occasions to test and develop instruments of more general application to industrial sociology and to a theory of group tensions.¹⁷

Two years after Gouldner entered the gypsum plant with his team of researchers, and after Peel was replaced by Landman, the workers went out on a wildcat strike. Gouldner identifies five zones of disturbance before the strike. First, the transfer of an urgent export order to Oscar Center made the workers there acutely aware of a strike at another plant of the General Gypsum Company. The export order brought to the surface a pre-existing "free-floating aggression." Second, the aggressive behavior of Spiedman, the company's travelling engineer, toward Tenzman, the chief steward, aroused powerful resentment, indicating that relations in the plant had already deteriorated. Third, the accumulation of grievances and broken promises, brought to a head with Landman's succession, had generated further distrust of management. Fourth, the new board machines created anxiety, particularly at the take-off position, where speed-up had to be achieved with the old machines. Finally, workers complained that foremen were working – a form of close supervision that provoked hostility.

Gouldner diagnosed the disease underlying these symptoms as follows: A push for rationalization from head offices led to the introduction of new machinery, the succession of a plant manager with a rationalizing mission, and strategic replacements in the managerial hierarchy, to counter resistance from the old lieutenants. In combination, these led to close supervision – that is, a shift from control through personal ties and trust to control through rules and punishment. The indulgency pattern was violated, and workers lost their motivation to obey. They withdrew from work and finally mobilized their aggression in the form of a strike. From this careful and novel analysis of the symptoms and their causes, Gouldner develops a general theory of group tensions. This particular wildcat strike becomes an illustration of conflict and disorganization in general.

Hopefully, the analysis of this strike sheds some light on the events that occurred in the Oscar Center plant, and contributes, generally, to an understanding of strikes and wildcat strikes. In this section, however, these events will be divorced from their unique industrial setting, as much as possible, and will be examined in the broadest context – that is, in the framework of a general theory of group tensions.¹⁸

So Gouldner leaps from his very specific and concrete study to the most universal conditions for the stability of relations between Parsons' two abstract actors: Ego and Alter. The analysis of group tensions proceeds by identifying a set of expectations (indicated by complaints) and a set of roles. Stable interaction requires that the role expectations of two actors be complementary, that the expectation of one is regarded by the other as an obligation; tension breaks out when either ego or alter violates the other's expectations. Gouldner then develops a series of propositions about the conditions likely to bring about unstable and conflictual interactions. Thus, all other things being equal, tension is likely to break out when expectations are vague, when they change, when they are inconsistent, when either ego or alter is unaware of them, when they are nonlegitimate or illegitimate, when they are perceived to be violated, when ego is not interested in the approval of alter, when expectations are transferred from one individual to another, when there is distrust, when there are power differentials, when there is an unequal capacity to defer gratification, or when there is a failure to satisfy expectations within a specific time. All his propositions are *illustrated* by reference to the relationship between management and workers before the strike. The specific underlying sources of tension are thus lost in a shopping list of general propositions. By showing the ubiquity of tension, its multiple sources, Gouldner provides a powerful antidote to the assumptions of harmony found in Parsons' *The Social System*. Conflict is as much a part of social interaction as is cooperation. Here Gouldner effectively repudiates Parsons' "inertia theorem," that a social system once established tends to persist,¹⁹ by insisting that there are always forces threatening the stability of a social system from within.

A general theory of group tensions must develop some conception of the "threats" which disrupt social systems. It would be unwise, though, to fall into the "bacteriological error," that is, to conceive of threats as if they were insular entities, as external to the social system as germs are to the biological organism. Instead, threats should be thought of as both within and without the system, as an interactive blend of elements in the system and in the environment. Perhaps, therefore, it would be best to speak of "disorganization patterns," rather than threats."²⁰

As Gouldner argues in his paper on "Organizational Analysis," ego's continued conformity to the role expectations of alter produces system *disequilibrium*, because the value of conformity diminishes as alter takes it for granted.²¹ Again we note the influence of a Marxian metatheory, the focus on internal contradictions as a source of change. But the costs of forcing Marxian ideas into the framework of a *general* theory of group tensions are high indeed: for what is lost, as before, is Marx's *specific* theory of capitalism. Just as Gouldner suppressed an analysis of the conditions under which resistance to bureaucratic rules might be successful, we are now left wondering when the forces

of equilibrium yield to those of disequilibrium — a problem that also besets Parsons's analysis of deviance.²² Gouldner offers only the *possibility* of disruption, with no assessment of its likelihood, or of the direction in which change might take place. This is the result of his search for a general theory. All we have is a *diachronics*: a social system is either in equilibrium or it is not, in which case it somehow moves to a new equilibrium. We have no *dynamics*, no theory of the changes a system may undergo, of the relationship between the old and new equilibria. The problem is clear in Gouldner's analysis of the changes that occurred at the gypsum plant between 1948 and 1951.

Episode 1 – Equilibrium: During and shortly after the war, labor–management relations were comparatively stable. . . . *Episode 2 – Disorganization and Defense*: Changes took place in the market; it became harder to sell goods, harder to find jobs; Old Doug died. . . . [succession of threats and defenses] *Episode 3 – Development of Organizational Character*: A compromise settlement was reached which, in effect, resolved the strike by increasing bureaucratic mechanisms. . . . The commitment to this organizational character did not, however, eliminate many of the tensions underlying the strike and, in fact, left open the possibility of their renewed expression.²³

What does this tell us? At stage one is a certain stability, which presumably would have been maintained were it not for an external source of disruption. So in his concrete analysis Gouldner actually does rely on an outside disturbance that reverberates through the system in a sequence of threats and defenses. The outcome is critically shaped by the beliefs and expectations of the parties to the internal conflict. The new equilibrium may or may not be stable. Do we now know anything we did not know before? Do we need an elaborate set of propositions to help us discover this? By insisting on the distinction between system and environment, Gouldner is able to close off the gypsum plant and bracket external constraints as given. He can then focus on internal relations, seeking out what they share with other social systems. But what is shared by all systems — e.g., the gypsum plant, the family, legal institutions, the Trobriand Islanders — must be so general as to be useless in explaining the specific dynamics of any one system. After such a double decontextualization, indeed anything may appear possible.

Prematurely launching from the specific to the general obliterates all that is distinctive to the gypsum plant, with the result that Gouldner reproduces in his critical sociology the same problems of the academic systems sociology he condemns. What one side claims as possible, the other side can with equal assurance claim to be impossible. Rather than abandon Oscar Center for the dizzy generalities of analytic sociology, Gouldner could have taken another road, concerning himself with a theory of *industrial* conflict in a *capitalist* society, a theory that would have located changes in the administration of

work within the context of a theory of the labor process on one side and of market forces on the other. This second road from the General Gypsum Company proceeds not from the specific to the general but from the micro to the macro, from the part to the totality, and examines the potentialities of the present through the analysis of history.

The Return of the Repressed

Every theoretical system has another system inside it struggling to get out. And every system has a nightmare: that the caged system will break out.²⁴

Gouldner's industrial sociology is a bold attempt to provide an antidote to the prevailing assumptions and sentiments behind the social theory of the 1950s. Human beings are not passive recipients of the social order, but active makers of history. Social structures emerge and collapse through reflective and purposive endeavors. Individuals are producers rather than effects, centers of consciousness rather than carriers of social relations that are "indispensable and independent of their will." In grasping one horn of the voluntarism-determinism dilemma, Gouldner suppresses the other. As we have seen, he constructs different types of industrial bureaucracy without examining the conditions of their realization, and postulates the universality of struggle without examining its consequences. In so doing, he suppresses the limits of the possible as shaped by external and internal "constraints." Indeed, the very concept of constraints comes under sustained attack throughout Gouldner's writings, first appearing in *Wildcat Strike*.

When a person says he is "unable" to do something, what he seems to be doing is to take certain of the circumstances in which he is involved and treat them as "givens" or unchangeable. At certain times, these circumstances may, indeed, be unchangeable; often as not, however, they are unchangeable only because the person has not thought of changing them or because he would not want to do so, even if he could. In short, commitments generate constraints.²⁵

With a more polemical flourish he later writes: "The faintheartedness of persons and the unyieldingness of structures are simply different sides of one coin."²⁶ He often appeals to W. I. Thomas's theorem, developed in Robert Merton's classic essay "The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy": "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Constraints are costs, which we may or may not be prepared to pay; they are not natural, ineluctable givens. The enterprise of social theory shifts dramatically from explaining why things are the way they are, and understanding the directions in which they may change, to a general theory, a metaphysical pathos that insists things do not have to be the way they are, that attributes the power of what exists to human frailty, and that summons us to resist, to a great refusal.

But there is another Gouldner, who does indeed try to work out the unintended consequences of resistance, who examines the functions of different patterns of behavior as a guide to their persistence. We find this Gouldner, in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* and *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (among other places), where social scientists become the unwitting victims of the political, cultural and economic climate in which they live. In his compelling critiques of both sociologists and Marxists, Gouldner highlights their self-*mis*understanding, their false consciousness of themselves as autonomous beings practicing an unlimited “value free” rationality, and links their theories to the conditions of their production. But even in his industrial studies we find traces of an analysis of social structure as constraint. Not surprisingly, Gouldner is forced beyond a eulogy of the will when underlying constraints reassert themselves all the more powerfully after their “natural” and “inevitable” appearance has been shattered by a strike.

In *Wildcat Strike* Gouldner makes much of the distinction between “grievances” and “complaints.” Grievances deal with violations of the contract and are therefore legitimate, whereas complaints refer to violations of the non-contractual elements of the contract, such as the indulgency pattern, and therefore, argues Gouldner, are not legitimate. Workers can legitimately defend the indulgency pattern through struggles only by transferring their aggression onto a contractual issue such as wages or resorting to such “informal” struggles as restriction of output or a wildcat strike. Gouldner then turns this specific feature of wage labor into a general formulation: all contracts have their noncontractual elements, and because of their unstated, implicit, and often vague character easily provoke tension. Almost as an aside Gouldner suggests there is something distinctive about the wage labor contract. Drawing on John Commons, he argues that a worker sells to an employer the *willingness* to use faculties for a particular purpose defined by the employer.²⁷ The labor contract, however, leaves unanswered many of the “tension provoking” issues centering on authority relations and work behavior. He then further illuminates the specificity of the wage labor relationship by referring to Marx’s distinction between labor and labor power. Workers sell their *ability* (not their *willingness*) to work — that is, their labor power; they do not sell a given amount of labor.

If the worker has sold only his ability to work, in exchange for his wages, how much of this ability shall he put into effect? How much shall the worker produce while under the employer’s direction; how hard shall he work? These questions cannot be answered by inspecting the contract, for typically, this binds the worker only to a diffuse promise of obedience. In short, *the legitimate expectations of the parties to the labor contract, concerning both work and obedience, are unclear and vague, thus failing to provide a necessary condition of stability to the worker-management relationship.*²⁸

Attributing conflict to “unclear and vague” expectations, however, suggests that stability would be assured through more effective communication. Gouldner hesitates to move behind those expectations to the *opposed interests* they express. One of the workers put it quite clearly before the installation of the new machinery:

The Company knows that if they started getting tough around here, they would have to pay higher wages. The men would resent it and start asking for higher pay. The pay is like a balance for the working conditions.²⁹

In other words, workers have an interest in maintaining or increasing the reward for effort, while management has an interest in reducing it, by either cutting wages or intensifying labor. A struggle ensues over the terms of the “effort bargain,” and that is why expectations are “unclear and vague.” Thus, when new machines are introduced the struggle revolves around speed-up. But the struggle is not between equals. First, workers have to sell their labor power for a wage, to survive, and second, their wage depends on capital first realizing its own interest — that is, realizing a profit. Without profit there is no capitalist and therefore no job. In other words, domination is inscribed in the relationship between capital and labor. It is not a matter of a power situation being “tipped in favor of management by the deterioration of the job market.”³⁰ In leaving management’s “status rights” or “status interests” unexamined, Gouldner effectively obscures the structured inequality of power defining the wage labor relationship.

Management’s “status interests” are not the pursuit of efficiency in the abstract, but the pursuit of efficiency in the particular, under capitalism, where it is measured by the critical but silent concept in Gouldner’s analysis: profit. As Harry Braverman and others have insisted recently, the pursuit of profit is *inseparable* from the exercise of domination. The argument is simple: profit is secured through reducing wages on the one hand and intensifying labor on the other. Both goals are achieved through the transformation of the labor process: through the separation of *conception*, which becomes management’s prerogative or “status right,” from *execution*, which is parcelled out to the direct producers. This degradation of work has two consequences. First, deskilling makes workers replaceable, so they lose what little power they have to resist, either on the shop floor or in the labor market. Deskilling goes along with the lowering of wages on one side and the intensification of labor on the other. We see this in the installation of new machines, which led to speed-up and closer supervision.³¹ Second, the fragmentation of work is a *precondition* for the very control functions that Gouldner so brilliantly analyzes: the explication of tasks, the screening of power disparities, control through spot

checking, the legitimation of punishment, the leeway that rule enforcement gives to supervisors, and the preservation of apathy.³² The capacity of the miners to resist a detailed division of labor explains the absence of rules underground.

We have seen that Gouldner would have no truck with those theories that insisted bureaucracy was the inevitable cost of technological advance, or the consequence of increases in size and complexity. Recent research offers support for Gouldner's view. Although sadly ignorant of Gouldner's work, Dan Clawson has argued that large-scale systems of inside contracting and craft production were as efficient as production based on a managerial hierarchy, but that the former gave way to the latter because of struggles within the *capitalist* order — that is, an order in which the owners of the means of production seek profit through the exploitation of wage labor.³³ Richard Edwards presents a similar argument in his book *Contested Terrain*.³⁴ Again, the connection between the capitalist labor process and bureaucracy is not absolute but historically specific. Although he adds nothing to Gouldner's sociological insights into the functions of bureaucratic rules, Edwards does locate the punishment-centered bureaucracy, or what he calls bureaucratic control, as one of three historic ways of regulating the labor process in the United States. The other two forms are simple and technical control. Simple control is first found in the small firm of the last century, where owners and workers are linked by personal ties. Increases in company size undermine those loyalties, which give way to hierarchical control and the dictatorship of the foreman. In its benign paternalistic incarnation, simple control can be likened to Gouldner's "mock bureaucracy."

Between 1890 and 1920, the intensification of class struggle combined with the concentration and centralization of capital to promote a crisis of simple control. Large corporations began experimenting with new forms of control, including scientific management and welfare capitalism. According to Edwards, the failure of these experiments instigated the development of technical control, epitomized by the assembly line, in which the organization of technology narrowly constrained productive activities and so facilitated the explication of tasks and the evaluation of performance. Here Edwards is confusing the labor process itself, which includes technology, with its administration. Be that as it may, this subordination to technology bound workers to one another and led to militant struggles against capital. The contradictions of technical control led to new forms of control, based on administration through rules. Bureaucratic control aims at routinizing all functions of management, all dimensions of control, subordinating all productive activities to rules. Although each period generates its own prototypical form of control in new industries,

once a form of control has been introduced it tends to persist into successive periods. Thus, in the competitive sector we still find variants of simple control or mock bureaucracy, whereas the large corporations of the monopoly sector may still use technical control. Whatever the theoretical and historical shortcomings of Edwards's analysis, it breaks new ground in its focus on the transformation of capitalism, in particular its market structure, as producing changes in factory administration. It is not that Gouldner ignored market forces. Far from it: they play a key role in his explanation of the strike.

What we have attempted to do, however, is to take these commonly recognized features of market institutions and to indicate their bearing on the internal relations of a small factory group, showing, in particular, their role in generating a complaint peculiar to wildcat strikes, the "run around."³⁵

Gouldner nonetheless takes market factors as an unexamined given, paradoxically very much at odds with his insistent critique of "constraint." He does not go behind the market to the forces generating, threatening, and reshaping its form. Where Gouldner suppresses capitalism and the pursuit of profit, Edwards highlights its problematic nature and its transformation through history. He emphasizes the variability of constraints rather than their immutability, and thus opens alternatives suppressed by a closed-system, ahistorical analysis. Because Gouldner fails to locate his patterns of industrial bureaucracy within two sets of changing conditions — the capitalist labor process and the market — his diagnosis of choice is mere puffing in the wind. Because they confine their analysis to the United States, Gouldner, Braverman, and Edwards all miss a further factor: the political context of the factory. Gouldner attributes the rise of the punishment-centered bureaucracy to the status interests of management and, to a lesser extent, to the invasion of the market principle, with its emphasis on explicitly formulated contractual agreements. Comparative analysis suggests this is wrong. In reality, the punishment-centered bureaucracy is a distinctive form of factory administration that arose in the 1930s, with the Wagner Act, to be consolidated during and just after World War II. Industrial unionism took root in the United States *after* mechanization had already spread to mass production and basic industries. The emergent industrial relations reflected the interests of capital and labor in a particular phase of capitalist development. Labor struggled for the application of seniority principles and institutionalized grievance machinery, as protection against the pre-existing despotic factory regimes and the economic hardships of the depression era. In conformity with the greater control it now exercised over product and supply markets, large-scale capital yielded to seniority rights, as in the bidding rules, to grievance machinery and to organized, binding collective bargaining, as a means of regularizing struggles and internalizing labor market uncertainties.

The characteristic pattern of industrial relations in the United States that emerged in the postwar period thus involved a rigid distinction between disputes over “interests” and those over “rights.” This distinction was institutionalized in the separation of collective bargaining, conducted at the plant level every two or three years, from the grievance and disciplinary machinery that protected the collective agreement. In countries without decentralized collective bargaining and exclusive union representation at the local level, the distinction between rights and interests is blurred. In Britain, for example, the collective agreement is neither permanent nor codified, but instead is the object of day-to-day struggle. There is no clear distinction between grievance machinery and collective bargaining. Instead of bureaucratic rules, we find an uncoded and fluid “custom and practice.” A further feature of the United States’ system of bureaucratic industrial relations is its confinement to the organized sectors of the economy. The same laws that give a certain protection to unionized labor facilitate despotic regimes of factory administration where labor is not unionized. In short, the pattern of industrial relations at General Gypsum Company cannot be seen as a product of internal forces alone. It is specific not only to the United States but also to certain sectors within that country. As before, Gouldner’s repudiation of “constraints” not only underestimates their strength but, by allowing them to reappear as fixed and immutable, ironically overestimates their power. Because Gouldner slights social structure, as a crutch of the frail or the rationalization of the privileged, it springs up when his back is turned to close off prematurely the very options he seeks. The dream becomes a nightmare.

We have now cleared the second road from Oscar Center. Whereas Gouldner generalizes from his observations of the gypsum plant about human propensities toward struggle and autonomy, the second road extends from the gypsum plant to examine the wider forces under which it operates. Whereas Gouldner moves toward a general theory of social systems that includes tensions, as well as consensual mechanisms, the second road moves toward a specific theory of capitalism that includes the dynamics of the labor process. Whereas Gouldner examines history for the alternatives it suggests, the second road examines history to highlight the forces that both limit and open possibilities. Whereas Gouldner brackets external “constraints” as given and therefore immutable, or sees them as commitments that dissolve under the spell of human resolution, the second road focuses on constraints as problematic and variable because historically produced. We turn next to see if these roads can be combined into a transcendent third road.

Beyond the Tragic and the Ideological

The tragic vision had said the imperfect was not worth striving for. The ideological vision accepts universal imperfection and settles for the better. The tragic view summoned men to transcend tragedy by the courageous endurance of the unchangeable. It thus saw such transcendence as an essentially individual heroism. The ideological vision, however, saw men facing circumstances that their courage might collectively surmount. . . . The tragic vision represses awareness of what is impossible.³⁶

Gouldner's "ideological" vision was shaped by his refusal to be implicated in the metaphysical pathos of theories of bureaucracy and technological determinism. His vision harbored potentialities, extolled resistance and repressed "scientific" ambitions to predetermine what has to be. The heavy weight of tradition and the constraints of social structure are not impervious to human striving. To the contrary, they are the product of human creativity. To stress what could be, based on what is and has been, is to stress the optimistic and voluntaristic moment of critique. In the other moment, potential remains implicit and voluntarism gives way to determinism, optimism to pessimism. Individuals are subordinated to objectified forces beyond their control, to social forces presented as natural powers. They are stripped of their subjectivity, reduced to cogs by the blind laws of capital accumulation operating behind their backs. They are manipulated by technology, mass media, and the state, all masquerading as freedom. This is Braverman's "tragic" vision, in which the universal market penetrates and commodifies all spheres of life, subordinating all to a homogenizing and atomizing logic. Resistance is absent, tamed, or incorporated. Braverman and Gouldner represent inverted forms of the same analytic: what one represses, the other articulates. Where Gouldner represses the determinism of social structure, the powers that thwart the great refusal, the forces that turn resistance into its opposite, Braverman represses the very subjectivity he summons to regain control of history. For Braverman, hopelessness is the inspiration to action; for Gouldner, the inspiration to action is ever-present, denying the hopelessness.

Can we transcend this dualism of subject and object, voluntarism and determinism? Can we conceive of individuals simultaneously producing and being produced? Can social structure be grasped as both constraining and enabling social action? This would involve a conception of human agency that makes of Braverman and Gouldner a duality, rather than a dualism.³⁷ It would go beyond individuals both as carriers of social relations, transmission belts of external, inexorable forces, and as centers of consciousness, violating or conforming to expectations, executors of norms that are somehow given. It would, above all, treat social structure as a complex of practices — a dimension too easily passed over by Gouldner and Braverman. We hear little of work as an

activity undertaken by competent, creative individuals, seeking to exercise control, albeit minimal, over their environment. Notwithstanding his intimate involvement with the plight of wage labor, Braverman stands as an observer, drawing on managerial programs to substantiate his indictment. Gouldner comes closer to the lived experience of workers, but remains at a distance, relying on interviews and sentiments more than activities and cognitive skills.

An alternative conception of human agency, more resonant with *participant* observation, a conception in which individuals and groups reflexively regulate their responses to constraints, is to be found more clearly in Gouldner's treatment of sociologists and intellectuals. Here he pushes toward a self-awareness that monitors and transforms the conditions of intellectual production, of theory work. This notion of *praxis* is not entirely absent in his industrial sociology. When Gouldner is not drawn onto the terrain of his adversaries, of theories of bureaucracy or the consensual bases of social systems, there emerges a vision of workers strategizing over rules, actively engaged in turning mechanisms of domination to their own advantage, and at the same time reproducing those mechanisms. On the one hand, Gouldner works with norms that are internalized role expectations, integrated and legitimated through common values. On the other hand, he talks of rules external to the individual, which may or may not be the object of consent.³⁸ The former is the dominant and elaborated theoretical perspective, while the latter is subordinate and undeveloped. In the second perspective, individuals are viewed as game players: the game is defined by its rules and strategies. Rules are therefore seen not merely as constraints but also as facilities that define parameters of strategies. Thus, the bidding rules may exist to constrain and channel the movement of workers among jobs, but they can also be manipulated by workers to their own advantage, as a sanction against aggressive supervisors. Rules in fact define an arena of maneuver for those they are supposed to control, an arena free of managerial intervention. In other words, rules represent opportunities, as well as constraints. The labor process, considered as a game, defines an arena free from but bounded by managerial coercion, in which outcomes secure or undermine the conditions of its reproduction: the production of profit on one side and wages on the other.

Gouldner tells us little about work itself and therefore of the games it generates. We hear more about the game of administering the labor process. But we can say, most generally, that consent to the conditions of work is generated through the possibility of realizing interests as defined by the game. One cannot play a game without consenting to its rules. As long as it is possible to achieve the interests defined by the game, within certain boundaries of certainty and uncertainty, participation in the game produces a commitment to

its rules, and therefore to the conditions necessary to the reproduction of the game, which are obscured by those rules. But why should workers partake in games in the first place? We can look on the game as an attempt to carve out of a world beyond our control a world partially within our control. The game seals off a stage dependent on external conditions, but constituted to permit a minimal realization of human creative potential. Thus, work games are a response to the inherent deprivation and coercion of industrial labor — an attempt to rescue a certain relative satisfaction by introducing a *limited* uncertainty into a labor process progressively stripped of uncertainty. Management, particularly on the shop floor, often encourages and facilitates such games as enhance production, foregoing its own “status interests,” the prerogative to direct the labor process, for the sake of eliciting cooperation. At the same time, the game has the advantage of dislocating degraded work from its source — the capitalist relations of wage labor — or presenting those relations as natural and inevitable.

But it should not be thought that the rules are somehow static, as in a game of chess. Rules change as a result of the game’s internal dynamics, and may be disrupted from outside by another game. Thus, capitalists play a game with one another, defined by the rules of the market place. Each capitalist seeks to gain an advantage in the pursuit of profit through some innovation or intensification of work, which other capitalists must then follow if they are to survive. As a result, however, they bring down the overall rate of profit and threaten the conditions for realizing profit by intensifying the oppression of the workers. In other words, we have a classic prisoners’ dilemma, in which individual rationality becomes collective irrationality. Only outside intervention — for example, by the state or through the consolidation of working class organization — or the self-organization of the capitalist class can counter the corrosive influence of market competition. We have also seen how this game among capitalists disrupted the game between management and workers at Oscar Center, transforming the mock bureaucracy into a punishment-centered bureaucracy. But the indulgency pattern has its own internal logic, which tends to sow the seeds of its own destruction. As the indulgency pattern develops under conditions of the separation of ownership and control, plant management becomes increasingly responsive to the interests of workers and correspondingly less responsive to top management. Plant management becomes concerned with ensuring cooperation and consent from workers rather than with the production of profit. Succession becomes one possible mechanism for undermining the indulgency game and reasserting profitability and control by central offices. The strike itself can be viewed as an episode condoned by management to engineer the transition from one game to another. Thus, the conjunction of the dynamics of the game among capitalists

and the opposed logic of the dynamics of the indulgency game led inexorably to conflict, which was resolved by the reconstruction of management–worker relations, the work game. We can therefore look at social structure in terms of a hierarchy of interlocking games, each with its own internal dynamics. Thus we see, first, that the conditions for playing one game lie in the playing of other games, and second, that playing a game may undermine the conditions of its existence.

Parallel to the voluntarism–determinism dualism we noted another dualism, the split between micro and macro analysis. Gouldner's voluntarism focused on the forces within a particular arena, the gypsum plant. The analysis bracketed the context, whereas Braverman's analysis dwelt on the macro forces shaping the transformation of the labor process, without an examination of the consent and resistance to those forces at the micro level. The game metaphor aims precisely at connecting these levels, at linking individual rationality to system rationality – that is, connecting indeterminacy at the micro level to a limited determinacy at the macro level. And it is precisely the thematization of the discrepancy between strategies and laws, intentions and outcomes, that provides the basis of critique: people make history, but not as they would wish. It reconstructs the question so central to Gouldner's concerns in his formulation of the “representative bureaucracy” and the community of intellectuals: To what extent is it possible collectively to create and change rules to contain unintended consequences?

NOTES

1. *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Monthly Review Press, 1974).
2. See Dan Clawson, *Bureaucracy and the Labor Process* (Monthly Review Press, 1980); David Stark, “Class Struggle and the Transformation of the Labor Process,” *Theory and Society*, 9/1 (January 1980), 89–130; Richard Edwards, “Social Relations of Production at the Point of Production,” *Insurgent Sociologist*, 8/2-3, 109–125; David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Andrew Friedman, *Industry and Labor* (Macmillan, 1977).
3. Gouldner, *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* (Free Press, 1954), 28–29.
4. *Ibid.*, 177–180. 5. *Ibid.*, 94. 6. *Ibid.*, 93.
7. *Ibid.*, 96, I must assume the mock bureaucracy was not itself preceded by a punishment-centered bureaucracy, although such cyclical change is by no means inconceivable.
8. *Ibid.*, 72.
9. *Wildcat Strike* (Antioch Press, 1954), 172–173.
10. *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*, 89.
11. *Ibid.*, 245. 12. *Ibid.*
13. Gouldner, “Metaphysical Pathos and the Theory of Bureaucracy,” *American Political Science Review* (June 1955), 506.
14. *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*, 111. 15. *Ibid.*, 142, 184.
16. E. L. Trist, G. W. Higgin, H. Murray, A. B. Pollock, *Organizational Choice* (Tavistock Publications, 1963), 67.
17. *Wildcat Strike*, 12. 18. *Ibid.*, 124.
19. Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (Free Press, 1951), 204.
20. *Wildcat Strike*, 151.
21. Gouldner, “Organizational Analysis,” in Robert Merton, Leonard Broom, and Leonard S. Cottrell, eds., *Sociology Today* (Basic Books, 1959), 423–26.

22. Parsons, chapter 7.
23. *Wildcat Strike*, 177–178.
24. Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms*, (Seabury Press, 1980), 380.
25. *Wildcat Strike*, 144. 26. *The Two Marxisms*, 97.
27. *Wildcat Strike*, 162.
28. *Ibid.*, 163; emphasis in the original. 29. *Ibid.*, 32. 30. *Ibid.*, 142.
31. *Ibid.*, 29, 50; *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*, 89.
32. *Ibid.*, chapter 9. 33. Clawson.
34. Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain* (Basic Books, 1979).
35. *Wildcat Strike*, 116.
36. Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology* (Seabury Press, 1976), 75–76.
37. While Edwards recognizes both “domination” and “struggle” rather than resolving the voluntarism-determinism dilemma, he arbitrarily shifts between the two poles, which coexist awkwardly in the same work. Anthony Giddens (in *New Rules of Sociological Method* (Hutchinson, 1976) and *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Macmillan, 1979)) focuses directly on the problem of combining action and structure within a single theoretical framework. Miklos Haraszti’s *Worker in a Worker’s State* (Penguin Books, 1977), Paul Willis’s *Learning to Labour* (Saxon House, 1977), Pierre Bourdieu’s “Marriage Strategies as Strategies of Social Reproduction” (in Robert Foster and Orest Ranum, eds., *Family and Society. Selections from the Annales: Economies, Societies, Civilizations* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 117–144); and Jon Elster’s “Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory,” *Theory and Society*, 11/4 (July 1982) all exemplify, in different ways, an alternative notion of agency.
38. Gouldner writes, in *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*, 223: “For Weber authority was given consent *because* it was legitimate rather than being legitimate *because* it evoked consent. For Weber, therefore, consent is always a datum to be taken for granted, rather than being a *problem* whose sources had to be traced. In consequence, he never systematically analyzed the actual social processes which either generated or thwarted the emergence of consent.”