

## Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Mike I. Reed, *The Sociology of Management*

Alexander J. Matejko

Volume 46, Number 1, 1991

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/050665ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/050665ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

### ISSN

0034-379X (print)

1703-8138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Matejko, A. J. (1991). Review of [Mike I. Reed, *The Sociology of Management*]. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 46(1), 245–247. <https://doi.org/10.7202/050665ar>

On aurait souhaité que l'éditeur mette autant de soins à la présentation visuelle de l'ouvrage qu'en a mis l'auteur à la rédaction et l'organisation pédagogique du texte. Une prochaine édition devrait permettre, si l'on veut assurer la pérennité d'un tel ouvrage, d'en améliorer le caractère typographique et l'illustration du texte. L'ajout d'index thématiques et des auteurs cités contribuerait à en faire un instrument utile et fonctionnel que l'on conserve et continue de consulter... même le cours terminé!

Alain LAROCQUE

Université Laval

**The Sociology of Management**, by Mike I. REED, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, p. X + 182, ISBN 0-7450-0570-5.

This is the attempt to cumulate the sociological knowledge of management as a social practice geared to the assembly and regulation of other social practices concerned with the transformation of the environmental conditions encompassing socio-economic life. Technological change leads to the automated administration; there is a progressing erosion of the privileged employment position of higher-level white-collar workers; the technologically induced deskilling and rationalisation weakens the bargaining position of lower and middle managers; pressures to achieve increased organizational flexibility make managers vulnerable; managers remain a highly differentiated group and they miss integration allowing to promote common interests; the process whereby individuals become credentialled for entry into higher-level positions is not consolidated; the dependence on employer remains high and actually grows with the progress of capital concentration; the existing knowledge and skill base is not strong enough to permit the achievement of social closure. There is a tendency to question the future of management as an autonomous profession. On the other hand, learning of it becomes more complex and fashionable and the management consulting business is growing all around the world.

The sociological perspectives on management summarized by the author present it either as a rationally designed tool for the realisation of instrumental objectives (the explanatory model of systems theory), or as the negotiated social process for the regulation of interest group conflict (the explanatory model of action theory), or as the control mechanism geared to the extraction of maximum surplus value (the explanatory model of marxist theory). The dilemmas of managerial practice are still not adequately acknowledged at the theoretical level. "None of the three analytical perspectives we have discussed exhibits a sufficient degree of theoretical and methodological sensitivity to the ambiguities of managerial practice" (p. 17). The author suggests the **practice perspective** in which "management is treated as a process or activity aimed at the continual recoupling or smoothing over of diverse and complex practices always prone to disengagement and fragmentation (...). Work organizations are seen as points of intersection for a wide range of social practices that are subjected to various strategies of institutional combination and recombination" (p. 21). From this perspective, management constitutes both a **mechanism** through which conflict over the possession and control of resources necessary for primary productive activity can be, at least temporarily, regulated, and the **process** which provides a medium for struggle over the institutional arrangements through which this regulation is achieved.

A conception of **managerial control** as a loosely coupled network of co-ordinating practices geared to the assembly of productive activity helps to integrate the variety of concerns: appreciation of specific parameters of the technical, economic and organizational nature,

recognition of diversified interests, implementation of power and authority relationships, acknowledgement of constraints, linking forms of managerial power to forms of participant involvement, reconciliation of various levels of control, mediating between the closed-system aspects of the technical core and the open-system logic of the institutional domain (balance the demands for operational stability and the pressures for environmental instability), dealing with hidden agenda and recognizing dominant coalitions, manipulating of dominant values and symbols, muddling through several barriers, handling the fundamental antagonism between labour and capital, striving to achieve the cooperation of workers as well as profits (these two concerns do not necessarily go well together), reconciling all three basic levels of control (corporate, organisational, and workplace) founded on corporate strategies, tactical considerations, and operational concerns.

Control at the shopfloor level is the matter of bargaining involving various constraints, expectations and degrees of a relative freedom. Quite often informal bargaining is the matter of fact and it is necessary to know very well the workplace reality in order to make any reliable judgments. "A mixture of pragmatism, opportunism and incrementalism is often the most sensible basis on which labour management control strategies should be designed and implemented" (p. 52).

The nature of managerial work differs depending on the level (higher, middle, lower) and the changing organizational environment. "The reality of management structure emerging from sociological research and analysis is one of a highly stratified social order permeated by relational networks that simultaneously sustain and undermine the viability of the former" (p. 92). The subculture of each managerial level is much influenced by the educational background of its occupants, their individual and collective ability to defend and promote vested interests, bargaining power, vulnerability to the external intrusion, and the chance the managerial reality to be substantially modified (informational technology, routinisation, mechanisation). "The formal structure may demand a rigid division and cultural separation between different levels of management, but the complexities of management practice require modes of social interaction that severely weaken these barriers. As a result, managerial work must accommodate the conflict between the imperatives of structural differentiation and the requirements of socio-political practice" (p. 92). There is a considerable amount of insecurity typical for each managerial level: at the top careers depend much on the performance of enterprises and changing allocations of power, at the middle level whole sectors of managerial work may disappear due to the restructalisation, at the bottom level the power of the foreman becomes restricted by union on one side, and on the functional expertise on the other.

There is a continuing process of negotiation between various levels of management, as well as between management on the whole and the labour force. Management "attempts to control work performance through the design and implementation of administrative mechanisms directed at securing required effort levels from employees. In turn, the forms of conflict regulation and control deployed by management are reciprocally linked to the modes of individual and collective action in which employees engage with the intention of avoiding, resisting and manipulating the effort levels managers are attempting to impose" (p. 102). It is up to management to apply mechanisms appropriate to various forms of worker recalcitrance, individual or collective resistance, diversification of interests and their possible clash.

Regulative responses to various forms of disfunction are the domain of management but in this respect several other agencies (trade unions, city councils, state, etc.) have their claims more or less recognized by the managers. There is a trade off between formalisation and informalisation. "The problem for management is to ensure that the balance between formal modes and informal practices is appropriate to the situation they face, given that the latter is always likely to change in a way that will disturb the former" (p. 113).

The institutionalisation of conflict resolution mechanisms is highly appropriate but it may lead to the unnecessary rigidity which itself would originate dissatisfaction. For example, wild strikes may occur when workers feel abandoned not only by management (their natural "enemy") but also by trade unions which are supposed to represent their interests. Quite often managers develop on their own informal bargaining with the subordinates that may be actually a convenient addition to the formal arrangements.

Formal order introduces rigidity that may be, substantially alienating and in this respect it defeats its original purpose. "Both the strategy of formalisation and the specific mechanisms chosen to achieve it are sucked into the struggle for control" (p. 114). There is always an open question to what extent, and under which circumstances, a given conflict may become solved by formalisation and institutionalisation. There are several cases in which it is actually impossible to unload the growing tension and to find reasonable solutions without changing the whole configuration of a given situation, for example by deposing a given manager.

Management people already now constitute a considerable social category even if they are much diversified and actually collective consciousness of them remains weak. It is quite difficult to find common interests between the bottom of the managerial hierarchy and the top as long as there is no any dramatic confrontation between management and labour that would integrate both sides. Definitely, the modern management has inherited much of the interests and outlooks of the traditional owners and controllers, but with the growing anonymity of capital (ownership of wealth without appreciable control, and control of wealth without appreciable ownership) managers gain a new identity founded on a considerable autonomy, privileges, service functions (service class), ability to defend themselves against any encroachments on their power and influence, as well as the specific professional formation (management schools, managerial consulting).

The organizational concentration reinforces the power of top management and this is not limited to the market economy. For example, in postcommunist Poland 100 largest enterprises control 38% of sales and 22% of employment (the same data for 500 largest enterprises are 66% and 49%). Under communist rule in Poland every second member of the ruling party was a manager, and the political appointees constituted over 90% of all managers. It is an open question how much managers are able to reinforce their relative position in society in the period of postauthoritarian democratization. In Poland they are liberated from the dictate of the communist party, which does not exist any more, but they have to deal with strong trade unions, as well as with the self-governmental bodies. In present day Eastern Europe new managerial posts are advertised and the candidates apply for them on the basis of competition.

Alexander J. MATEJKO

University of Alberta

**Dangerous Premises: An Insiders View of OSHA Enforcement**, by Don J. LOFGREN, Ithaca, N.Y., ILR Press, 1989, 244 p., ISBN 0-87546-150-6 (pbk.).

Lofgren's **Dangerous Premises** joins Berman's **Death on the Job**, Page and O'Brien's **Bitter Wages**, and Scott's **Muscle and Blood** as an expose of government inaction, foot dragging, and cover-up of health and safety threats in US workplaces. What distinguishes this effort is that it is the first book which presents a view of government regulation and enforcement of occupational health and safety from the perspective of an OSHA inspector. The body of the text is grounded in Lofgren's experiences as a California OSHA health inspector from the early to mid-1980's.