

SOCIOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN THE STUDY OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN ILLINOIS

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The problems and areas of research discussed in this paper are the result of my own experience and reflection in the past three years, during which time I have been a sociologist on the staff of the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations at the University of Illinois. The research carried on there has involved the collaboration of economists, political scientists, psychologists, and sociologists. The problems which I discuss are influenced by these related social sciences and may appear at first glance to be rather foreign to sociology as it is commonly understood.

Careful studies in the sociology of industry are a new development which has come about since 1940. There is still a great deal to be settled about the relationship of this new area to the older branches of sociological theory. It is not my intention at this time to go into this somewhat academic matter, but rather to point out a few of the substantive areas of investigation which seem to present promising lines for empirical research.

In speaking of industrial sociology in Illinois, I am referring specifically to the down-state or non-Chicago region. I do this for two reasons: first, Chicago is relatively better known through earlier research and is currently being studied by Northwestern University and the University of Chicago while the Uni-

versity of Illinois is the only institution (that I know of) which is studying the smaller cities and the rural areas; second, the Chicago area is so different in size, in population characteristics, and in the development of industrial relations that it is best treated as a separate category. What I have to say, therefore, is intended as a guide to those persons who may be interested in the sociological aspects of business and industrial relations in the down-state region.

Before one can assess the importance and magnitude of these problems, it must be understood that the entire character of the down-state region has been rapidly changing in the past three or four decades. Many people still think of the Chicago—down-state distinction as primarily a difference between a large city and a rural district; but this is no longer true, since a majority of the down-state population are town dwellers. This majority is increased if we add to it the large number of persons who live in the country but make more than half their living in some nearby town, and are therefore economically dependent upon manufacturing or commerce more than upon agriculture. The growth of cities like Decatur, Peoria, and Rock Island has produced the same kind of political and social division between city and the local country dwellers which is found on a larger

scale in the great metropolitan centers. The expansion of industry in down-state communities has resulted in the development of attitudes toward political and economic issues which are more nearly similar to those in Chicago or other big cities than they are to the attitudes in the surrounding rural areas. This has broken up the old unity of opinion which was based upon common regional interests.

While the growing similarity of all cities is of significance, there are at the same time important differences between down-state communities and Chicago which must be recognized. The relative newness of industry in the smaller cities has emphasized the difficulty of making over a town to an industrial base from the older trading center and "county seat" type of life. The rapid growth of trade unionism has similarly forced a rapid change in business practices and in community organization. This process of urbanization is still progressing rapidly and is the source of many of the so-called social problems which are currently faced by our towns and cities.

One of the topics which invites study is the organization and administration of small-scale businesses and small manufacturing establishments. We know a great deal about the ways in which large corporations conduct their operations; we know a lot about the problems of administration and supervision in mass-production factories; and we know a good deal about labor-management relations in big companies. This is in part because large enterprises naturally attract attention, and also because the large companies have recognized the need for studying their human relations problems.

However, we have practically nothing concerning the hundreds of small and medium-sized companies which face comparable difficulties.

The research in this field which is now being carried on at the University of Illinois by the Institute and the College of Commerce is in a sense pioneer work; it must go much farther and must be supplemented by the efforts of other schools before we shall have an adequate understanding of the problems and practices of the small business man.

It is commonly said that one of the reasons for bad employer-employee relations is the large size of many companies. If this is true, then relations in small companies ought to be good. To date, however, we do not know if this idea is valid, and we shall not know until we have studies of many small companies. There is another reason for examining closely the sociology of the small business concern. This kind of business is probably the most seriously affected by depressions and labor turnover. Anything which will contribute to stabilizing these companies will, in turn, help to stabilize employment in general and community well-being. The sociologist can make a contribution by finding means to improve personnel practices and employee relations generally.

A closely related field of study is the nature of collective bargaining in the smaller company. Here again, we know very little. We suspect that the process of reaching agreement between union and management in a situation where owners and management are present, and consist only of one or a few persons, is quite different from the situation in a large company where the owners are absent and management is a

very large and complicated group of persons. A further complication lies in the fact that most small companies and union locals follow patterns set by the larger industries and in a sense, therefore, do not develop original or local patterns. Absentee control is important in both management and union for it reduces the independence of local representatives on both sides. In certain industries, absentee control has been carried to the point where labor contracts are made in the larger cities, and neither local employer-managers nor workers have much to say about the terms under which they operate.

Another large and important field of study is the structure and operation of trade unions in the smaller community. Organized labor has expanded greatly even in small towns in the last decade. The magnitude of this development can be seen when we consider that in many industrial towns at least half the total population are either union members or belong to the families of union members. In coal mining communities, especially, union affiliation may go as high as 90 percent of the population.

Three subdivisions can be stated within this general area of study. One is the changing attitudes in the working population, which have underlain this rapid acceptance of the union movement. This is especially important in the down-state area, which not so long ago was thought of as a non-union conservative region in which most workers reflected a rural or small-town orientation toward economic matters. The shift toward unionism is an expression of the growing urbanization of down-state people, including many of the rural dwellers.

A second approach to the study of

unionism is the examination of the internal organization of unions at the local level. We know even less about the operating practices and problems of unions than we know about small business. Since the two are closely related, we cannot adequately understand one without considering the other.

A third aspect of unionism is its impact upon the social structure of the smaller community. Because of the newness of unions in most of the down-state areas the impact of their large scale organization upon the community at large has not been felt to the same extent as in larger centers where the unions are better established and more mature. However, the beginnings of union interests in community affairs can be seen in their concern with schools, local taxation, and the community chest. This interest will almost certainly expand, and the unions will very likely occupy a key position in such matters, since they are the only organizations which represent large numbers of workers, and can mobilize mass support for efforts in the civic field.

A more general problem is that of the population change brought about by the establishment of new industries and the decline of older ones. This is well illustrated by the current efforts to secure new and diversified industries in southern Illinois to replace the declining coal mining industry. In this region the only alternative to new types of employment is wholesale migration to expanding communities where there are opportunities for employment. This same problem can be found in less exaggerated circumstances throughout Illinois. It is a problem which has attracted serious attention on the part of those concerned

with the declining importance of the small trading center. There is today practically no part of the state which is not dominated commercially by a larger city. The result of this has been that many smaller towns which were based upon trade with the surrounding countryside have lost their economic base and must either decline in size and become ghost towns or find some new means for supporting their population.

The background characteristics of the down-state population are being steadily influenced by our industrialization. The area as a whole has never received large numbers of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe as has been the case with all of the cities in the East and metropolitan areas such as Chicago. There are a few special instances in which "foreign" groups have entered down-state Illinois. One of these ethnic elements is found in the Polish foundry workers who are present in almost every community where such employment is available. A second example are the Polish and Silesian coal miners who have come with the Scotch-Irish, English, and Welsh miners. Except for these specialized groups, the down-state population is a rather homogeneous combination of Anglo-Saxon and German, with a considerable Scandinavian group in the northern part of the state.

This population is being steadily augmented by migration into the area from the border states and from the deep South, of both white and Negro. The increase in the Negro population of many cities causes racial tensions and legislative efforts to stabilize the situation. Negro workers are entering industrial communities in response to the occupational opportunities presented to

them. In general, they fill those jobs which are considered too low in pay or too undesirable to attract native white workers. In this sense, they are filling the position in Illinois industry which was filled by the eastern Europeans in the industries on the Atlantic seaboard.

The white migration is numerically much more important than the Negro. The wave of settlement from the border states, in particular, has now been noticeable even in the northern cities of Illinois, although it is greater in the southern part of the state. The Southern whites, like the Negroes, enter our industrial system in the lower occupations, but unlike the Negroes, the Southern whites have relatively little difficulty in moving upward into better jobs. The general acceptability of the white immigrants is highest in the southern half of the state, where the cultural differences between immigrant and native are so slight as to be of no real importance. The magnitude and continuity of the white immigration is such that if continued it will result in a new and even greater homogeneity of background of the native white population of all down-state Illinois and will quite possibly bring about a shift in the general culture toward that which now exists in the border states to the south.

The topics I have mentioned range from very specific matters of industrial relations in the small company, up to very general considerations of population changes in the state. I have brought them together in this paper because in my opinion they all represent social phenomena related to industry which can be profitably studied by the methods and concepts of sociology. In my opinion, all

these problems can be analyzed within the existing theoretical framework which sociology has established, since they all involve the common substance of human life, namely the organization of social structures, the functions of leadership and administration within these organizations, and the cultural values which people hold. A beginning has been made in the examination of each of the topics which I have mentioned, but it is

only a beginning. The major part of the study lies ahead.

Every trained person, regardless of where he may be in the state, can make a contribution to one or more of the lines of the proposed research. We can accomplish an understanding of these matters only through the collaboration of many persons in many institutions throughout the state, all focusing their attention upon the common set of problems.