

## The Isolated Mass and Contemporary Social Theory: A Reply to Burrell

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It is a pleasure to comment on Gibson Burrell's (2017) essay, for two reasons. The first, like GB's, is autobiographical, though of a merely intellectual kind: my first substantial paper was published 40 years ago on the Kerr-Siegel Hypothesis, and I thus return to it (Edwards 1977). The second is that I offer some wider reflections on social theory; these are inspired by GB's essay, and I have little specific and even less critical to say about it.

### The Isolated Mass

The key question about the concept of the isolated mass is what it is intended to explain. For Kerr and Siegel, it addressed differences in strike rates across industries. But as commentators, such as Rimlinger in the piece cited by GB, soon established, strike rates in coal mining varied massively not only between countries but also within them. Shorter and Tilly (1974: 287-294) indeed report that strikes in France had the opposite pattern to that predicted. If the concept has value, it is to identify one among a number of features of industrial communities that may lead to class solidarity and then, if other factors are also present, to strikes. The most sustained assessment of the combination of factors is that of Church and colleagues (1991). They stress that, despite the many efforts at explanation from economics, sociology and history, miners' militancy has been extremely 'difficult to resolve'. Their preferred approach is an application of Hyman's (1972) three-level model. Firstly, there are structural factors such as the technical and economic structure of an industry and the social structure of mining communities. Secondly comes organization, in respect of how the work process is organized and the nature and strength of the organizations of employers and workers. Thirdly, we have consciousness in terms of leadership, action and subjective interpretations. Such a framework offers a great deal. To take just one example, some mining communities lacked the solidarity and militancy of 'Ashton' (in fact Featherstone) and Ashington. Thus Waller (1983) dissects the role of employer paternalism and religion in the development of a relatively quiescent, if still isolated, mining region in Nottinghamshire. As GB tersely remarks, 'no pit village is the same'.

The fact of being an isolated mass was, as GB demonstrates, one part of the structural conditions underpinning miners' solidarity. And local tradition remained influential. Beynon (1983) showed that the solidarity of another 'isolated mass', dockers in Liverpool, sustained local traditions that in turn underpinned the militancy of workers at the car plants introduced to the region. Specifically on Ashington, I studied the nearby Lynemouth aluminium smelter, and found that workers carried with them traditions from the mines (Wright and Edwards 1998). There are two important points about the traditions. Firstly, they did not entail simple 'resistance' to management. On the contrary, they gave workers a sense of confidence which

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allowed them to embrace new forms of work associated with team work. These forms indeed had a clear affinity with work group responsibility in the mines. This certainly did not mean acquiescence in managerial policies but rather a robust defence of autonomy and independence along with a willingness to accept some new ideas. Secondly, as with the mines, none of this did any good in the face of the restructuring of the aluminium industry. The smelter closed in 2012 with the loss of over 500 jobs directly, and perhaps up to 3500 in the supply chain.

## **Social Theory**

The theoretical conclusion is that being part of a mass can be one factor in sustaining a militant and solidaristic outlook. But that outlook is not necessarily defensive or inward looking. It also promotes a sense of discipline and a commitment to productive norms, as at Lynemouth. The wider conclusion which I reached in 1977 is that sociologists may like the Kerr-Siegel hypothesis because it offers a structural social fact which seems deeper than the kinds of factors stressed by economists or historians. In the intervening period, we have of course had the massive swing away from anything that smacks of determinism so that, if anyone now reads Kerr and Siegel it may be to dismiss them. But the structural fact remains important, and it is good to see GB, as one of the leaders of the turn to Foucault and all that, recognizing it.

I offer two further glosses on what GB says in the latter part of his essay. These turn on models of the contemporary world and emerging social theory.

In relation to the former, GB lays out several perspectives yet he does not seem convinced by any of them. He is right to be doubtful. One point I made in 1977 about Kerr and Siegel, which I had forgotten until re-checking the piece, was that concepts like an isolated mass may characterize, even if they do not explain, polar cases but are much less good at capturing what happens away from the extremes. Many commentators have tried to identify emergent forms of work organization through concepts such as post-Fordism, varieties of capitalism, precariousness or more recent phenomena such as the gig economy. But there is a tendency to write as though the ideal type captures the range of actual cases and as though one world, of the proletarian isolated mass, has been wholly supplanted by another. Models are useful, and indeed essential, for they help us to identify key underlying processes and ask which operate in a given setting. Some economists have usefully developed this idea, thus moving a long way from the market determinism of parts of that field (Rodrik 2015). But models are not a short cut to understanding the complexity of concrete work settings.

If we want to understand this complexity, we need to grasp the kind of factors that GB identifies in his discussion of Tianfu. In terms of the three levels identified by Church and colleagues, structural factors include the economic globalization of the industry and technological change, notably the use of opencast techniques which have allowed mechanization and a production process far removed from that of underground mines with teams of autonomous workers. Organizational factors include, as GB stresses, the use of migrant workers, who are likely to be far more individualized and dependent on managements than were members of the isolated mass. Finally, we have consciousness and action, on which GB says little. There is, however, a growing body of research in labour relations in China which points to elements of militancy and collective organization despite a challenging social and economic context. Workers' consent can never be taken for granted (e.g. 2015 *Human Relations* Special Issue, 68(2)). There is then considerable space for scholars to promote emerging, and possibly better, models of employment governance. The dangers of importing 'upper middle class values' and of anthropological condescension highlighted by GB in his conclusions are important, but they should not stand in the way of critical dialogue between social science and workers (Edwards 2015).

Finally, in terms of an underpinning methodology for the kind of analysis indicated above, I draw attention to the growing uses of realism in social science (Sayer 2000). Realism

says that we need to understand the world using a layered ontology that identifies the empirical (things that can be immediately sensed), the actual (things not directly sensed but of which people will be aware, such as hierarchy and authority), and the underlying level of the real (forces of which people may not be aware, such as the ways in which power can be constituted in hidden ways). The affinity with Hyman's model of strikes is evident. The causal powers of unobservable forces can in principle be identified by asking what the world must be like for us to observe what we observe. As the debate on the isolated mass demonstrated, powers may or may not operate in a given context, and they may be counteracted by other powers. In Rodrik's (2015: 143) example, if we want to explain something like growing inequality in countries like the USA, we might identify globalization and what economists call skill-based technological change as possible factors. But these operate in different ways in different conditions rather than having determinate effects. And there are other factors, such as those discussed by GB, that may be hard to include in economists' models. As O'Mahoney (2012) shows, realism enables us to identify some feature with causal powers without descending into either essentialism or determinism. The isolated mass was one such feature that can help to say something about some mining communities, and GB's re-interrogation of it in contemporary context is timely and apposite.

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