



# Empowerment and Innovation

Managers, Principles and  
Reflective Practice

Martin Beirne

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## Foreword

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This book aims to engage the interest of two constituencies. In career terms, the first operates at the sharp end of management and organisation, in the practical world of affairs. This is an audience of prospective and practising managers, or, more specifically, people within this category who are favourably disposed towards employee empowerment, who articulate at least some commitment to the value of grassroots decision-taking, and who would do something positive to enact direct participation within their own situations. Although they represent the traditional target market for consultants and suppliers of prescriptive advice, these tend to be people who, through experience or involvement in management education, remain uneasy about the quality of the material that speaks directly to their concerns. Many of the readers in this category will, I'm sure, have encountered trite and unhelpful pronouncements and opportunistic interventions that draw a veil over the problems and issues that affect their practice. Some will have been disappointed or frustrated by 'how to do it' techniques that are poorly grounded in the realities and dilemmas of organisational life. Collectively, this population is looking for more telling and potent management knowledge that can help them to make a difference in their working lives.

The people in our second constituency, namely critical social scientists and management commentators, provide the intellectual weight to support these everyday concerns, reinforcing the sense of inadequacy with prescriptive accounts of empowerment and participation. One of the most encouraging features of the past decade or so has been the dramatic expansion of work within the critical tradition of management studies that challenges the simplistic images and ideas traded in this area. As we shall see, social researchers are highly critical of a whole range of supposedly empowering initiatives, highlighting a contrast between rhetoric and substance, presenting rich empirical studies and offering a detailed analysis of contextualising influences and constraints. The net result is a much stronger research base from which to explore the practical possibilities for empowerment. Yet this material is rarely absorbed into practitioner debates or followed through to agenda discussions that might assist front-line enthusiasts. Indeed, the findings of critical research regularly miss a practitioner audience, a situation that is largely attributable to the propensity of the research community to remain aloof.

Too many critical commentators unfortunately adopt an abstentionist position on practice, cutting their analyses short, stopping with the empirical results of their investigations, or demolishing guru prescriptions without considering the practical, organisational implications of their conclusions. Their work is loaded towards the early stages of what might usefully be called the full cycle of research. The major preoccupations, and indeed achievements, have been analytical and empirical, advancing our conceptual understanding of empowerment. Yet the momentum tends to stop at this point. The focus is almost exclusively on analysis and explanation, at the expense of following through to an explicit logic of practice. This dimension is conceded, by default, to consultants and prescriptive commentators who seem more interested or adept at engaging with practitioners, despite the negative reactions they often elicit. Even when attention is given to negative or unpalatable aspects of empowerment, the concern that critical writers demonstrate for staff on the receiving end is rarely matched by applied knowledge that can speak to those in the position, or with the inclination, to do something about it, to those who would become activists for change.

Some social scientists compound the access difficulty for managers by adopting a purist stance in their work, limiting their role to exploring ideals and articulating their sense of what ought to be in an ideal world, rather than addressing thorny issues of development. This is an understandable, if disappointing, position when so many research studies legitimately give rise to considerable pessimism about the obstacles to progress. For others, however, the flight from practical thinking is defensive and career-minded, rather than utopian.

Following the full research cycle from theoretical and investigative work to a consistent logic of practice is certainly fraught with difficulties. Generations of social scientists have issued warnings about the dangers of dual role compromises and the perils of dealing with practitioners. Eldridge (1980) provides a notable example with the call for researchers who would be relevant to beware. The gist of his argument is, quite rightly, that the challenge of being relevant often has strings attached. Recipients usually expect relevant research to be congenial rather than critical, useful on their own terms, otherwise it becomes unacceptable or threatening. This raises the spectre of conservatism that has long haunted the human relations tradition of management research, and which critical writers are determined to avoid. Hence, there are justifiable worries about 'managerialising the debate' (Thompson, 1986), or somehow encouraging the misappropriation of critical knowledge by enthusiasts for authoritarianism and tight labour control (Nord and Jermier, 1992).

Of course, the dangers of slippage from, or misappropriation of, progressive ideas are very real. However, it seems that there is also a thin line between

caution and negativity. It can be easier and safer for critical commentators to rail against the prescriptive pronouncement of gurus and consultants, and to underscore the limited or tentative results of empowerment schemes, than extend their work to the challenge of managing and realising change. Unhappily, social scientists can risk their research credentials in the realm of practice and open themselves to the charge of becoming ideologically unsound, possibilities that offer a powerful disincentive to applied work.

This is where we find the less excusable and debilitating side of critical management studies. Some contributions seem to equate the critical approach with an anti-management position, or are least their style can generate that perception among management readers. A deeply ingrained sense of 'them and us' feeds an oppositional stance in at least part of the critical literature, which aligns itself unambiguously with employee interests while presenting managers as the unquestioning and unitary agents of workplace misery. Mandel (1973) provides an obvious example, rejecting any link between contemporary management and progressive practice. His is not an abstentionist but a rejectionist position, saddling managers with an essential interest in labour control and dismissing empowerment as a means of concealing potential disagreements with staff.

Others produce negative assessments without such a rigidly servile image of managers. Hales (2000) provides a recent example, giving the impression, intentional or otherwise, that particular categories of middle and junior managers are against empowerment, or play calculating games with it to defend their own status and personal interests. This is theoretically positive insofar as it acknowledges the scope for managerial agency and choice, yet by reducing this to career politics and financial interests it reinforces the narrow, calculating and unhelpful image of management that survives within critical social research.

We are now at a point in history when people from a wide range of backgrounds, and with all sorts of personal values and beliefs, are employed under one management label or another. Some will have good reason to be worried about their jobs and to think defensively about their reactions to empowerment, especially where employers connect it with de-layering and downsizing policies. Yet management behaviour is not reducible to self-interest alone. For this category of humanity, as for any other, thoughts about personal advantage or disadvantage are cross-cut by ethical considerations and various social values.

Contrary to the sentiments expressed by some critical writers, there are practising and aspiring managers who baulk at the traditions of tight labour control within modern organisations. There are managers who identify with critical writings and articulate a genuine concern for principles of fairness,

justice and direct participation. Certainly, there are students in management education that would benefit from research that can lead to firmer views about how they can 'make a difference', how they can enact serious concerns and remain faithful to expressed values as they seek a living in management positions. More experienced hands can also be expected to benefit, empirical research indicating that personal concepts of self, integrity and morality continue to burn in managers throughout their careers, often adding a sense of struggle and dissatisfaction as they deal with everyday pressures and heartfelt contradictions (Watson, 1994).

Even if the suspicion remains that empowerment is somehow compromised or loaded towards employer interests, critical commentators could be more sensitive to the predicament of front-line managers who share a positive outlook. There could be more of an effort to acknowledge variability in the underlying values that move practitioners, and to relate this to a sense of management activism that might sustain progressive inclinations. This would enable the research community to reach beyond traditional debates and client groups, giving researchers the opportunity to apply their knowledge of organisational dilemmas and constraints, and to anticipate alternative possibilities, rather than occasionally wringing their hands about problems and poor experiences.

Initial pointers towards an applied research agenda have already been provided, albeit rather tentatively, by critical researchers who have taken employment in business school environments, and find that the issue has been forced for them as teachers of managers, especially on MBA and related programmes. Collins (2000) and Goulding and Currie (2000) provide examples of work that aims to package critical thinking and empirical research for a wider audience in management education, and to cultivate a more analytical and reflective practice. Using the phraseology adopted by Collins, this is 'critical-practical' in the sense of engaging with actors who may be committed to empowerment (Collins, 2000, p. 247) yet susceptible to technician thinking and the ill-conceived prescriptions of gurus and consultants.

As part of a broader attempt to inculcate the habits of critical scrutiny and promote active reflection, this line of development can be extremely useful, encouraging managers to 'stand back' from everyday pressures and question their attitudes, resources, activities and associations. However, it amounts to a partial and underdeveloped tendency, falling short of the effort needed to complete the full cycle of research.

In fact, some of the critical material that has emerged on reflective practice is disappointing, failing to match expressed aims with substantive content, and offering little more than a new spin on the old argument that 'there is nothing

so practical as a good theory'. This is surely an accurate dictum when theoretical knowledge prompts an informed understanding of issues and an ability to interpret the problematics of empowerment, rendering practitioners less vulnerable to the toolkit views of consultants and the packaged accompaniments to passive management education. Yet the emphasis is still on a prior stage to action. What the researchers are aiming to provide is a sensitising experience, equipping people with a greater ability to think and to play their own part in organisations as their awareness of conditions and constraints develops. The participants are then left to their own devices, to make their own sense of critical research and, more importantly, to find their own way of translating critical capabilities into a consistent practice. This is a truncated form of critical management studies.

Encouraging managers to reflect upon the principles and implications of their engagement with employees is only part of what is involved in pursuing the full cycle of critical research. Anticipating new possibilities and enlarging the collective stock of knowledge about alternative options is a neglected part of the agenda. Some of the most influential social scientists of the past half-century, including Tom Burns (1967), C. Wright Mills (1973) and Richard Brown (1984), have argued along similar lines that questioning, theorising and reflecting should be positively linked to the search for better ways of organising and managing:

Thus it seems to me that an essential part of our task is to question and to investigate alternatives – activities which may often be combined...few, if any, of us who try to find out and understand what work is like in our society will feel that there is no room for improvement; and exploring the conditions which make possible situations as they are is also, at least implicitly, to begin to establish how they might be different (Brown, 1984, p. 317).

The purpose of sociology is to achieve an understanding of social behaviour and social institutions which is different from that current among the people through whose conduct institutions exist, an understanding which is not merely different but new and better. The practice of sociology is criticism...It is the business of sociologists to conduct a critical debate with the public about its equipment of social institutions (Burns, 1967, pp. 366-7).

For these figures, it is a matter of professional responsibility that critical commentators enact the full research cycle and 'follow through' on the practicalities of progressive management. This means ranging beyond theoretical conventions, the rules of evidence and sensitive reflection, in this case relating critical reviews of empowerment to envisaging and programme building activities that have practical merit.

This book makes a deliberate attempt to apply critical research to the problematic of enacting and sustaining direct participation, and to the challenge of addressing managers who would give practical meaning to the

concept of employee empowerment. It is written polemically, as well as academically, to stimulate creative thinking about the everyday meaning of principled and reflective management, and the prospects for channelling research on the 'working out' of participation schemes into applied knowledge that can inform a progressive practice in the 'here and now'. This is an attempt to frame possibilities for innovative management without slipping to unrealistic or utopian assumptions.

There is a significant degree of correspondence between this approach and transformative projects in engineering and computing innovation, where critiques of orthodox prescriptions and standard ways of organising and managing development work have paved the way to innovative possibilities and very practical alternatives. Theorist practitioners such as Cooley (1980) and Rosenbrock (1990), and computing scientists in the participatory design community (Greenbaum and Kyng, 1991), have made a point of 'getting their hands dirty', of contemplating, devising, enacting, testing and evaluating new possibilities. Echoing the sentiments of Burns and Brown, they conceive their role as not merely adding to the stock of available knowledge, but as challenging conventional ideas and finding ways to increase the congruence between empowering values and everyday job performance.

Drawing inspiration from this material, as well as telling episodes from empowerment initiatives in other contexts, critical research will be connected to three levels of practical engagement. The first concentrates on the linkage to scrutinising, thinking and reflecting, building upon the emerging tendency to cultivate analytical and interpretive capabilities through critical management studies. However, it will add focus and specificity to established images of "critical-practical" knowledge (Collins, 2000) by mapping essential characteristics and qualities that can enhance reflective thinking about empowerment. These will be summarised in the penultimate chapter, although from the earliest stages empirical research will be harnessed to flag some of the issues, difficulties and dilemmas bearing upon practical initiatives, so that enthusiasts are better equipped to apply judgemental and interpretive abilities in favour of empowerment in their own settings.

Shifting the emphasis from thinking to doing, the second level of practice considers engaging and enacting activities, recalling Pateman's (1970) attention to participatory competence and the learned capacity to overcome obstacles and inhibitions. Recognising the managerial challenge of aligning principles and ambitions with situated learning and sustainable collaboration, down-to-earth guidance about what helps and hinders will be drawn from the case material assembled through the early chapters, and by introducing insights from research on community theatre. The latter is instructive because community theatre practitioners are also *de facto* managers. Their

role is to help members of the public to engage in the creative process of producing involving drama or delivering theatre that connects with local issues and speaks to local concerns. This means co-ordinating and enabling participants from a wide range of situations and predicaments (including young offenders, retired people, disabled and handicapped groups and residents of housing estates, among many others) to reach their full potential and express their views in a telling and effective manner. The precariousness of empowerment can be very obvious in this context, hence practitioners tend to have a heightened sense of the intimacy between sensitive reflection and management activism. Their experience in moving between these dimensions, together with their accumulated knowledge of creative possibilities for engagement, have much wider applicability, bringing options for negotiating progress and sustaining empowerment more sharply into focus.

Finally, attention turns to public policy and questions about the regulatory framework within which voluntary commitments to empowerment are articulated. State and supra state initiatives will be evaluated in terms of their enabling or constraining effects on local attempts to enact empowerment. The effectiveness of the relevant social provisions of the European Union will be a prominent consideration, though in pursuing the full cycle of research the analysis will extend into the developmental aspects of building and refining framework initiatives that are conducive to progressive management at the grassroots.

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My sense of the possibilities for an empowering management practice has been greatly enhanced by the experience of conducting collaborative research with Stephanie Knight. Her creative energy, boundless enthusiasm and fearless sincerity have had a major impact on my outlook and direction.

My interest in practice, and conviction that critical research should have something valuable to say to practitioners, to people outside of academia, is largely due to the influence of my local community and close circle of friends. The relevance of research for front-line people in the Clyde shipyards, in silicon valley electronics plants, the civil engineering industry and local authorities has been a consistent talking point for a large number of years. I've heard plenty of disparaging comments, most of them humorous yet some of them telling as these managers and workers bear little resemblance to the images of themselves that often appear in the literature.

This book is dedicated jointly to my children, Sean and Leigh, and to the memory of Harvie Ramsay. Harvie's impact on my life, as tutor, colleague and collaborator, has been profound. I'm not at all sure if he would approve of the more optimistic images of practice that appear in this book. However, his influence continues to burn as I struggle to pursue the standards of clarity and analytical rigour that he represented.

Finally, thanks are due to Kirsteen Wilson for her technical wizardry in formatting this book, and for skilfully defending space and time for my writing.

Martin Beirne  
May 2005

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# 1. Anticipating a new era of consensus management?

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This is a book about one of the most celebrated and controversial business subjects of recent years: employee empowerment and direct participation in the governance and management of modern organisations. Widely touted as key organising principles for private companies, the public sector and even not-for-profit organisations, the twin themes of empowerment and participation have been deployed both as worthy innovations in their own right and as indispensable features of broader movements and tendencies, including total quality management (Robson, 1988; Dean and Evans, 1994) and business process re-engineering (Hammer and Champy, 1993). To believe some of the populist and promotional material now available, empowerment is a new management philosophy, the central concept in progressive thinking about business and management, and something that credible executives must be seen to endorse on a regular basis (see Hales, 2000; Collins 2000). However, when stripped of the spin and the public relations hoopla that now surrounds the topic, empowerment is essentially about collective influence and the sharing of knowledge, insight and experience to improve organisational performance.

Much of the interest in empowerment is pragmatic, related not to managerial consumerism or fashionable ideology but to its market potential. Since the 1980s, influential management writers have supported empowerment as a practical matter of good business. Prominent Americans such as Tom Peters (1987) and Rosabeth Kanter (1984) prepared the ground for a large number of contemporary commentators who take a hard line against hierarchical approaches to controlling employees and limiting their discretion, arguing that these are anachronistic in a fast-moving and complex competitive environment (Foy, 1994; Caudron, 1995; Khan, 1997; Roth, 1997; Ward, 1996). The competitive challenges of thriving in global markets and harnessing rapidly changing technologies put a premium on responsiveness, flexibility and imagination throughout organisations, qualities that are stifled rather than cultivated by rigid job structures and the strict demarcation of tasks and responsibilities. From here, empowerment is a matter of straightforward economics, of acknowledging the potential value in untapped human resources and the folly of restricting access to these by following outmoded practices in a changing world.

This economic rationale can also be heard in public policy debates, where empowerment is now cast within a wider modernising agenda to boost employment and promote economic regeneration. However, in this realm it becomes entangled with other labels, such as partnership, social inclusion and lifelong learning. Although used frequently and together, these terms are not synonymous, and offer an initial indication of the elastic phraseology and contrasting meanings that are attached to this subject.

For the member states of the European Union, and for the British government, the economic aspects of empowerment are interrelated with principles of fairness and consensus (Commission of the European Union, 1998; Department of Trade and Industry, 1999). Crucial attention is given to developing the citizen and the community as well as the economy. This looks beyond the employability and adaptability of individuals to various concerns about their quality of working life. A humanist dimension is added, extending the reach of empowerment and recalling the earliest references to the term, as a way of helping handicapped and disabled people to assert themselves and exert an independent influence on their situations (Heller, 1999). Employers are encouraged to provide arrangements that nurture autonomy and personal growth, increasing the scope for self-determination at the workplace and reducing the formal dependence on managerial directives. The other partners in the employment relationship, the employees and their representatives in trade unions and other associations, are persuaded of the merits of consensual labour relations and of maintaining collaborative ties for mutual advantage.

Extending this concern for the career situation of employees and their wider role as citizens, some accounts cast the net even further, presenting empowerment as a democratising process that can counteract feelings of political marginalisation (notably Bachrach and Botwinick, 1992). Recalling British debates on industrial democracy from the 1970s (Burns and Doyle, 1981; Brannen et al., 1976; Poole, 1986), much of the interest here is on enfranchising workers into forms of organisational citizenship that permit collective decision-making about policy and strategy as well as operational matters. However, in contemporary accounts, the connection between local and national levels of political participation is attracting greater attention, prompted by very basic worries about the decline and decay of democratic institutions.

The linkage between workplace and polity that informs this broader vision of empowerment has itself been investigated by a long tradition of social scientists, variously emphasising the benefits of grassroots industrial decision-making for social learning, collective awareness and even public spiritedness (Pateman, 1970). Blumberg (1968, p. 109) captures the essence of this with a line that has been regularly cited through the last three decades:

'The organisation that permits participation ultimately produces individuals who are responsible to participate.' Active industrial citizenship ostensibly carries broader advantages, promoting a greater sense of social responsibility, democratic competence and a willingness to participate in the democratic institutions of civil society. Against a background of rising public cynicism and political apathy in Britain, the United States and elsewhere, this political vision of employee empowerment is gaining fresh impetus.

The symptoms of faltering democracy have been well documented, with a persistent decline in voting populations and hostile reactions to political spin and scandal. In Britain, despite the historic significance of devolution and the creation of a Scottish Parliament, large numbers of people are opting out of the democratic process (Wood, 1999). In Scotland, as in other countries, the turnout for voting at local and national elections has fallen to around 50 per cent, a figure that has also been applied to participation rates in the rest of Britain and in the United States (by Bachrach and Botwinick, 1992, among others). For all the hope of an enlivened democratic impulse via devolved government, almost half of the population is not moved to participate.

With this backdrop to the expanding discussion of empowerment at the workplace, it is hardly surprising that social scientists should revisit earlier debates and consider empowerment as a political phenomenon. For political theorists such as Bachrach and Botwinick (1992), empowerment commands attention for its democratic possibilities, as a means of reinvigorating citizens in their employment and, by extension, revitalising national institutions. Empowerment becomes an enabling mechanism, not just for economic or commercial advantage but for political development, as a means of boosting transferable skills and inclinations that can be carried over to the civic domain.

Of course, this takes empowerment on a conceptual journey that ranges well beyond the initial preoccupations of management writers, opening controversial issues, notably the defence of managerial prerogatives and the legitimacy of collective decision-making on key areas of business activity. Historically, references to democracy have sparked a variety of conflicting impulses and emotions, negative and indifferent as well as positive, from people who feel threatened more than liberated, and from some who detect little more than spin in the latest round of fashionable phraseology. Despite its current approval rating, the essence of what is considered to be empowerment varies significantly in terms of the aims and ambitions that are attached to the topic and the conceptual underpinnings that produce contrasting evaluations of progress and practice. It is vital to acknowledge this level of complexity, not only to understand the reactions and tensions that can be generated by different pronouncements, but also to pursue a

sensitive and consistent view of programmes and initiatives that claim to offer improvements of one sort or another.

Despite the thrust of a large business-focused literature, employee empowerment is not conceptually confined to the local and proximal level of the workplace or to matters of internal functioning. It is not reducible to the effectiveness of work technology or the influence that employees exert over their immediate task environment. Nor is it restricted to the economics of employment and global competitiveness. Empowerment is imbued with democratic credentials and concerns for social justice. It is politically correct in a number of different ways, as symbolic language for progressive management, as a way of encouraging personal growth and autonomy, as socially responsible corporate behaviour, and as a route to political maturity.

## PRESCRIPTIVE IMAGES AND PRONOUNCEMENTS

The various meanings and ambitions that are attached to empowerment command attention, and often approval, because they seem to be at odds with the predominant principles of twentieth-century management and industrial organisation. Enthusiasts share a basic distaste for management orthodoxy and for traditional organisational structures that ostensibly weigh heavily on people, stifling their energy and enthusiasm and retarding human development, economically, socially or politically. This debilitating legacy is commonly associated with the ideology and apparatus of scientific management and the influence of Fordism in setting the terms on which jobs are usually designed and employee relations typically conducted.

The tendency over the past century has been for managers to take their cues from authoritarian ideas about good practice, operating with the assumption that workers are basically unreliable, troublesome or recalcitrant, requiring close supervision and disciplinary control to ensure any sort of consistent performance. These ideas were legitimised by Frederick Taylor with his pronouncements on scientific management (Taylor, 1911), and subsequently by Henry Ford who gave focus and force to their application with assembly line production methods (Ford and Crowther, 1926). Though originally developed at a time of expanding markets during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the reorganisation of work on the shop-floor was considered to be a priority, the key to expanding output and satisfying demand, Taylorism and Fordism became pillars of orthodoxy, setting parameters for job design and for the conduct of labour relations through subsequent competitive conditions.

For Taylor and Ford, the fundamentals of management and organisation turned on the core problem of labour control. This was taken to be the most

pressing business challenge of the epoch, and Taylor offered a view that appealed to many of his contemporaries. Workers were deliberately pursuing their own sectional interests, exploiting their crucial knowledge of production processes and engaging in 'systematic soldiering' to inflate wages by restricting output, thereby damaging profitability, especially under conditions of buoyant demand. His solution was to wrest control from the shop floor, to capture essential knowledge from communities of workers and systematically disempower them by separating conception from execution, disconnecting the thinking and 'doing' aspects of work. Management specialists would take over the conceptual dimension, planning and organising very detailed, non-discretionary and narrowly defined tasks that were to be the sole province of workers, with supervisors and overseers monitoring adherence and enforcing higher rates of productivity.

While Taylor applied his ideas to institutionalise control through tighter job structures in the American steel industry, it was Ford's mechanised regimentation and pacing of task performance that established hierarchical management and anti-employee involvement as mainstream features of organisational life. The assembly line became the engine of mass production as Ford's ideas about the simplification of car-making and the replacement of craft workers with cheaper sources of labour were taken up to service mass markets in other areas (Littler, 1985; Noon and Blyton, 1997). Consequently, the distinction between 'them and us', the 'two sides of industry', sharpened as the twentieth century progressed. Empowerment was conceptually reserved for management grades, at the expense of discretionary working on the shop floor and with knowledge that was previously concentrated in the minds of employees.

Despite the dramatic increases in output and productivity under Taylorist and Fordist regimes, and the corresponding distribution of goods and services to a wider population of consumers, there has always been an undercurrent of concern about the dehumanising impact on staff. The pressures of machine pacing and the difficulties of coping with narrow, tedious and repetitive jobs have taken a serious toll on the health and well-being of generations of workers, as numerous reports and humanistic critiques have demonstrated over the years (Sward, 1948; Beynon, 1973; Littler, 1985; Ciulla, 2000). They have also prompted responses and reactions that have been played out against a shifting backdrop of economic conditions, often demonstrating the limitations of tight control systems and adversarial labour relations.

Ford himself discovered that elaborate authoritarian structures can be counterproductive when buoyant labour markets enable people to 'vote with their feet', to find alternative employment and an escape from what they regard as unsatisfactory jobs. From the earliest stages of mass production, Ford and his followers in the car industry and beyond experienced recurring