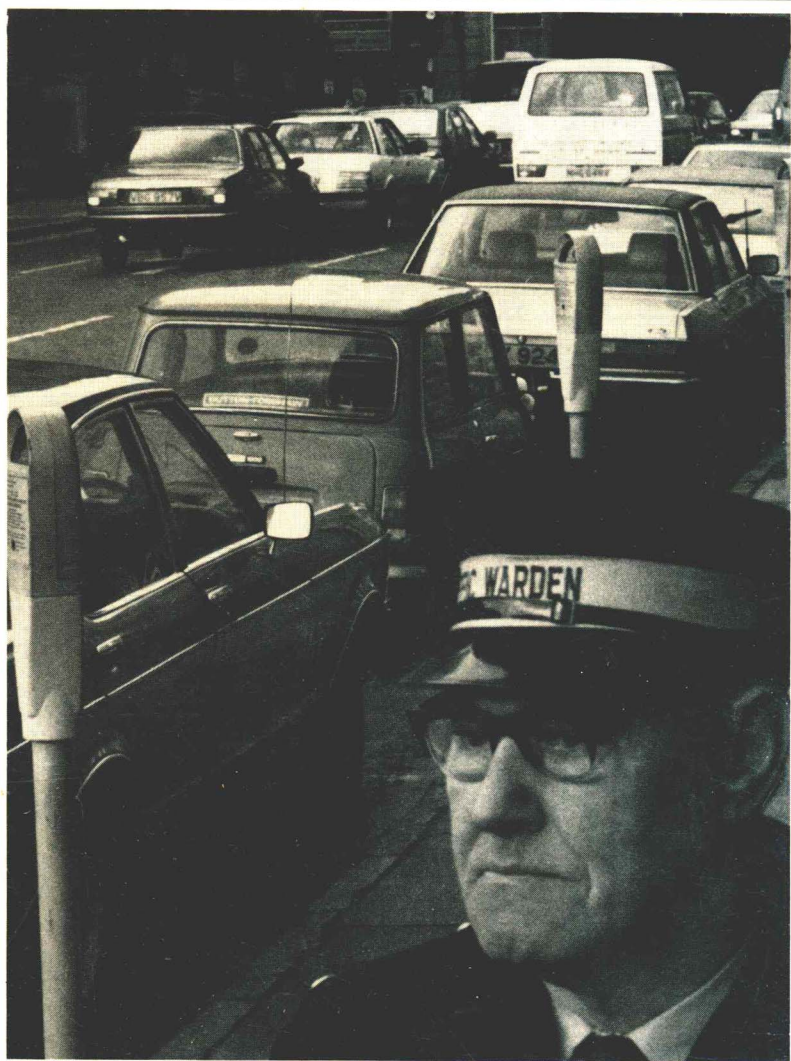


TRAFFIC WARDENS

An ethnography of street administration



Joel Richman

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*An ethnography of
street administration*



MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published by
Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL
and
51 Washington Street, Dover,
New Hampshire 03820, U.S.A.

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Richman, Joel

Traffic wardens: an ethnography of street
administration.

1. Streets – Great Britain 2. Traffic police
– Great Britain 3. Great Britain – Social
conditions

I. Title

388.4'11'0941 HE363.G75

ISBN 0-7190-0898-0

Library of Congress cataloging in publication data
applied for

Library of Congress catalog card number
82-62253

Photoset in Times
by Northern Phototypesetting Company, Bolton
Printed in Great Britain by
Butler & Tanner Ltd,
Frome and London

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to those who contributed so much towards the completed work.

Thank you, Lynne Brennan, Mavis Grindrod, Dr Jim Lord, Dr David Morgan, Professor Valdo Pons and Sheila Watt.

The Manchester Polytechnic library staff provided their customary efficiency and were most helpful in tracking down my sources.

My debt to all the traffic wardens and the staff of the Central Ticket Office goes without saying. Through their eyes I saw the street anew.

My last debt of appreciation is reserved for the late Philip Machent, senior. He taught me an immense amount about police work, as well as making this study possible. It is my sincere hope that he would have considered the study a fair presentation of our mutual trust. Regretfully he died before its completion.

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INTRODUCTION

The study is concerned with the comparatively new occupation of traffic wardens and their work site, the street. They were first in operation as meter attendants in the late 1950s, when they commenced their duties in the London area, but owed their legitimation to the later Road Traffic Act, 1960 (Section 85). Since that time the scope of their street activities has been enlarged; partly as a result of the provisions of subsequent Acts of Parliament and partly in relation to the initiatives of the employing authorities and, not least, through their own activities, since they have had to devise strategies and improvise in order to cope with the impossible demands of their street mandate. For most of the entrants street work was a new experience and they had to learn its ways, in all their manifestations: experiencing the discomforts of the inclement weather, detecting the hidden dimensions of territorial rights which street users had carved out for themselves and, equally central, knowing how to ride out the hostility, sometimes violence, of motorists. These are but a few of the features associated with their street work. Many did not stay long enough to face the challenge. How traffic wardens come to know about and use the street is a recurrent theme of the study. (It would be more accurate to refer to it as a relearning process. One of the costs of growing up is the loss of ability to relate to the street in multi-purpose ways; for children it is often a natural domain for many of their activities.) Contrary to popular belief, the issuing of 'parking tickets' is a very minor part of their activities. One aspect of the traffic wardens' world therefore necessitates the development of strategies for passing time on the street.

Another distinguishing characteristic of their short history has been the inadequacy of the legal framework underpinning their directives.

The Road Traffic and Improvement Act, 1962, authorised local authorities to employ persons (it did not specify any entrance qualifications) to undertake some traffic duties formerly done by the police; these persons were to be called traffic wardens, a very unfortunate and misleading name. But they were not empowered, for example, to penalise cars for causing an obstruction (that is still the position in 1982), no matter how bad the disruption of traffic. Their activities were restricted to well defined parking zones and they could only issue excess and fixed-penalty tickets (fpts) in accordance with the street regulations obtaining there and the additional discretionary times contained in their official instructions. Again, the Functions of the Traffic Warden Order, 1965, enabled them to control moving traffic – an initiative most welcome to the police forces, permitting them to deploy traffic wardens on point and crossing duty and release their own overstretched manpower for other purposes. But should a motorist disregard a warden's hand signals he could not be charged with that offence, as would be the case with a policeman. Only at designated places do they have the necessary authority for traffic direction.

When traffic wardens were created, no serious consideration was given either to their organisational base or to the possible implications of their task. Their work was originally conceived as trivial and predictable: merely monitoring and supervising the advertised regulations of parking zones which, intended to be self-regulatory, were in fact being disregarded. Few complications or disputes were envisaged. The public signs were clear for all to see; the meters sold fixed quantities of time. Infractions of the rules entailed a fixed penalty. According to Brandreth (1977), the motorist's fixed-penalty to avoid prosecution was a legal compromise based on the nineteenth-century precedent of dealing with smugglers. Motorists had previously complained of the courts erratic treatment of the 'same' offence. Now nothing could be simpler for all concerned, was the conventional wisdom of the planners. But in practice the traffic wardens' mandate was highly ambiguous: to punish errant motorists and yet simultaneously to serve as an urban aid to those in need. They had to keep the traffic flowing smoothly, but many meters were badly sited and the stationary cars there no less a hindrance. To complicate matters, the intentions behind the traffic warden scheme were misread by many urban interests. Even the police, who were glad to shed some of their 'menial' work, suspected that they might be a ploy to reduce overtime earnings. Others talked of the introduction by stealth of a second-class

police force. The logistics of the time dictated that the police should withdraw into cars for patrolling the city, which resulted in traffic wardens becoming the only *visible* representatives of law enforcement in many town centres, where they had to face challenges from articulate, middle-class motorists who alleged that their activities, especially commerce, were being unjustifiably restrained. The origins of the traffic warden force and the organisational dilemmas encapsulating their work are the subject of chapter two, where the public's powerful myths about them are also examined. Some considered them pariahs and unworthy, authoritarian people who enjoyed the exercise of an excess of power. The truth was the reverse: with an inadequate mandate for the task at hand, they became a scapegoat for the urban ills brought about by inadequate town planning, which for so long had permitted the car a long leash.

It must be emphasised that the study is anchored in time to a given period and place. There is little point in inventing a fictitious name to disguise the fact that the analysis relates to traffic wardens in the then Manchester and Salford police authority. Pseudonyms like 'Ashton' or 'Northtown' only serve to create an unnecessary aura of mystique around the research. No sophisticated detective work is needed to pop the bubble and discover the real identity. While the research was in progress a number of articles were published which allowed the traffic wardens to read my version of them. This practice may appear unconventional, or a travesty, to those who subscribe to a version of research which implies that all possible measures should be taken not to ruffle subjects and their 'naturalistic' settings. The assumption here being that naturalistic settings are in some way delicate orchids whose existence is sustained by a precise balance of life support factors. The traffic wardens were undergoing, however, a series of rapid changes stemming from the reorganisation of their parent body, the police, the expansion of parking zones as a matter of council policy, and from the succession of their newly appointed officer in charge, a former high-ranking police officer, who brought his considerable administrative experience into play.

A sociologist is summed up and researched also by those who are the focus of his attention. Tramping the streets in the company of a traffic warden stimulates the reciprocal research endeavour. Traffic wardens are used to reading about themselves in the press, which has done much to promote their unfavourable stereotypes. Some were disappointed with my efforts, expecting a 'crusading' narrative on their behalf.

Others, grasping the conceptual basis of the account, would willingly supply me with the 'deadly' counter-example, or would elaborate, for example, with additional insight, the 'ritual sequence of good clientship', which I had postulated as being one of the possible social forms of a traffic warden/motorist encounter. The term 'client', incidentally, was not in common use among traffic wardens until I raised the notion publicly. They used the term 'case' in an undifferentiated way to include that relationship and others.

The field work in the street was primarily from August 1969 to the end of 1970: where the analysis deviates from this period, it is made clear in the text. My formal involvement was not terminated until 1972; it is impossible to give a precise date. I just faded from the scene. There were no last farewells signalling the finality of the assignment, as others have recounted. There was nothing to resemble the mourning rites performed by tribes when they lose their anthropologist, as happened to Turner when he departed from the Ndembu, or the beer party as the occasion when Whyte, for example, left Doc and the gang (after singing 'God Bless America'). My research was different in that it was not 'continuous participation'. It was part-time research fitted in when other commitments allowed. The latter part of it was spent mainly in examining the administrative decisions involved in processing motorists' letters, which offered justifications and excuses in mitigation of their fpts.

The study shunts to the fore the street and its place within the development of social thought (chapter one), a broader horizon than the sociological one. I consider this exercise an essential prerequisite: the street is the traffic warden's work site. It is also intimately related to the process of societal change and its institutional forms. One year prior to the research, 1968, witnessed dramatic street outbursts – there was the alternative Democratic Party Convention in the streets and parks of Chicago, which rang to the mass cries of 'The streets belong to the people'; Paris streets heaved with the temporary student–worker alliance. We had the Grosvenor Square spectacular, a sequence in the international street protestations against the continuation of the Vietnam War. It was not until the completion of a number of working days with traffic wardens that I appreciated that the streets were a phenomenon worthy of study in their own right. They are a public repository of the cultural heritage, their names commemorating past relationships, events and significant people. Bombay Street, Brazil Street and China Lane did not appear by accident. The town is spatially

and symbolically orientated via the patterning of its streets. Traffic wardens accumulate much knowledge relevant for their own work about streets and their adjoining frontages; the best vantage points to gain the fullest view of a row of meters and so conserve energy by not making unnecessary visits; mentally recording which friendly doorways give protection against the elements when using their notebooks. They also possess up-to-date information on the changes resulting from redevelopment and can very often play the role of town guide. A monitoring programme by the Metropolitan Police indicated that traffic wardens in the area of Kensington High Street during the afternoon could actually be spending thirty per cent of their time helping the public with enquiries. This invisible part of the job is rarely acknowledged by outsiders.

During the 1970s the street has been accorded increasing significance, not only by motoring interests. The mass picket is considered by some as an integral component of institutional management – union negotiations and rule-making; the urban guerilla, the enemy within, is a reality, and in manuals of counter-insurgency street tactics figure prominently in the curriculum of the defence forces. The return of Khomeini is a vivid reminder of how the power from the streets can topple a regime. Streets, and other public spaces, are the only locales available for the populace to commune with the collective conscience, as shown by the Jubilee celebrations. At the micro-cultural level, sections of a street can be impregnated with new sentiments. The National Front have monopolised part of Brick Lane as their own 'sacred' territory, while the 'immigrant' groups have likewise staked out a similar claim. The number of policemen used in major demonstrations in London increased nearly sixfold from 19,000 in 1972 to 108,000 in 1979. Toxteth, Brixton and Moss Side are now critical benchmarks in the history of street confrontation.

The point is stressed that sociologists have invested little systematic effort in producing a sociology of the street. Part of the blame can be 'attributed' to the founding fathers, whose bequest placed no direct emphasis on the possibility of the street being a prominent social domain within the new industrial order. Street activities were considered part of the old order, soon to disappear when new patterns of relationships emerged based on, and *within*, institutions. Even urban sociology, whose reliance on the explanatory value of spatial dimensions has always been noteworthy, has been equally guilty of this omission. The immense labours of Mayhew among the London street

folk in the mid-nineteenth century did not produce a sociological lineage. It is only in the last decade that his contribution has been more fully recognised.

A few have, of course, advocated the revitalisation of the city streets. Adams wrote (1909, p. 19): 'It is as if our cities have not yet developed a sense of responsibility to the life of the streets, and continuously forget that recreation is stronger than vice.' She was concerned that the morals of youth, as she understood the situation, were being corrupted by the *indoor* entertainments of the saloon and dance hall. The street can weave a 'spell'. Some are conducive to contemplation, when freed from the cult of work. I found it impossible to record these sensations, or recall all the range and depth of conversation it produced with traffic wardens. I came to experience the sensations and images generated by being on the street and which Hecht (1927, pp. 52-4) could be stirred to express so fluently and poetically, as exemplified in these snippets on Michigan Avenue.

But here – the sun bursts a shower of little golden balloons from the high windows. The green of a park makes a cool salaam to the beetle-topped traffic automobiles. Rubber tires roll down the wide avenue and make a sound like the drawn-out striking of a match. Marble columns, fountains, incompleated architectural elegancies, two sculptured lions and the baffling effulgence of a cinder-veiled museum offer themselves like pensively anonymous guests. And we walk like Pierrots and Pierrettes, like John Drews and Jack Barrymores and Leo Ditrichsteins, like Nazimovas, Patricia Collinges and Messalinas on parole.'

This street, I begin to understand, is consecrated to the unrealities so precious to us. We come here and for a little while allow our dreams to peer timorously at life. In the streets west of here we are what we are – browbeaten, weary-eyed, terribly optimistic units of the boobilariat. Our secret characterizations we hide desperately from the frowns of windows and the squeal of 'L' trains.

Traffic wardens are fitted into the street scene by being another agent of the forces seeking to regulate and routinise it. The social activities contained within streets had to be subordinated to the essential purpose of transit between institutions. The car, formerly considered an instrument of that mobility, had become transformed into an impediment to the ease of passage. In chapter three I attempt to convey the different 'flavours' of the street and the dilemmas emanating from it, when interpreted in the thoughts and by the actions of a number of traffic wardens. Although the opinion may prevail at large that the

giving of fpts is a random or vindictive act, the rationale and moral judgements preceding the event are explored. A car is not just a metal object on the road. It is located within official categorisations – whether the engine is cold, or the rear wheels are up against the kerb, or, most crucial of all, whether the position of the tyre valves has been recorded (the primary evidence of whether it has left and come back to the same spot). Secondly, a car is indivisible from its social setting. Traffic wardens soon learn whether it ‘belongs’ in a particular street; the way it is parked indicates whether it is going to stay, or have a temporary sojourn, and so on. Cars can be part of the web of social relationships and have a favourable or unfavourable history derived from past encounters with traffic wardens. According to the mode of streetcraft adopted, fpts are fitted into the work programme with different purposes. Some are issued to all errant motorists, as a matter of routine, others are issued for specific purposes – whether it be for failure to keep an ‘agreement’ in the past and leave when promised, or because a particular meter in excess is vulnerable to inspection by a senior warden.

The social interior of the traffic wardens’ occupation contrasts sharply with the image perceived by outsiders. They consider themselves street specialists. Their work has far wider implications than the mere planting of a ticket on a car. As they traverse the town they are able to perform duties of civic responsibility. If it were not for them, they argue, the motorists would be at each others’ throats ‘like starving animals fighting for scraps’. They bring justice to the urban frontier. The street is latticed with many timetables, not just the explicit ones of the parking zones; many are privatised, constituting a part of the constellation of urban interests. Many cannot be accommodated within the specifications of the official parking allocation. Traffic wardens, not all, actively engage in temporal brokerage and thereby make adjustments to the official timetable. Under certain conditions motorists are permitted to enter into client relationships with them, but only after their credibility has been scrutinised by verbal techniques. How they come to develop the organisational intelligence for practising ‘effectively’ is discussed in chapter four, where the pervasive theme of ‘time’, which shapes much of the study, is more emphatically highlighted. Traffic wardens are usually solo practitioners, therefore it is pertinent to focus on the problem of ‘coming to know’.

Another interest automatically attracting attention was the need to explain the extreme hostility traffic wardens aroused. The explanations

offered by the wardens themselves are elaborated, in conjunction with their counterparts from the sociological lexicon. Attempts are made to pin down, dissect and 'test' the defence-of-territory aggression thesis, whose variants are still in vogue today – for example, in supplying a basis for understanding football violence. There was an initial seductiveness in conceptualising the car as an expression of personal territory and the traffic warden as the unwelcome violator. In chapter five attempts are also made to cast the traffic warden in the different moulds of the marginality/stranger thesis, the latter having a long history in sociological thought. Not only do traffic wardens straddle the police organisation, doing some of its job, without the prestige or the authority of the parent body, but they were also newcomers to the urban scene. The initial lack of standardised appearance contributed to the uncertainty generated about their purpose.

The urban frontier of parking regulations is a fragile one. About one-third of all fpts are not paid. Many pressures are exerted by sectional interests, each seeking to extract temporal dispensations for themselves on the grounds of the special importance of their tasks. Some groups have had their claims acknowledged, on a permanent or temporary basis. The certified disabled are allowed to park free at a meter for an unlimited period. Meters are bagged and reserved for essential deliveries, as when Securicor calls at banks. The association representing commercial travellers was one of a number which waged an unsuccessful campaign to gain additional time allowances. Chapter six discusses how both the general claims and individual pleas are processed. This leads into the area of the application of 'discretion' within the police administrative processes. By this route another dimension is added to the social significance of street activities and the urban process. Discretion is also a subject which has aroused considerable legal controversy. As Wilcox (1972, p. 112) has summed up: 'One school of thought holds that discretion must be exercised in accordance with strict rules. In *Sharpe v. Wakefield*, (1891) A.C. 173, Lord Halsbury declared: 'Discretion means, when it is said that something must be done within the discretion of the authorities, that something is to be done within the rules of reason and justice, and not according to private opinion; according to law and not humour. It is not to be arbitrary, vague and fanciful, but legal and regular.' However, my purpose is 'wider' than that set out in the legal debates; for example, it necessitates examining the impact of motorist pleas on the working of the police organisation. But nevertheless there remains the joint purpose

of explicating what Halsbury called the 'rules of reason'.

A preliminary comment on how the research was done is more than appropriate at this stage. The process of manufacture of sociological findings is critical. This is a self-evident truism with which no one would disagree. Data are not provided to the researcher as if they were heavenly manna. They have to be earned. All research is subjected to different cost-benefit equations. The approach adopted here is that of ethnography. Ethnography is not a unified or precise activity, but a convenient brand name covering a range of sociological productions. Although many criticisms, some of them calumnies, have been heaped upon its head, it cannot be said that it either took people out of or brought them back into sociology. Real people, with names, have always existed in their own right within ethnography, doing and reasoning in very much the same ways as anyone else in society.

The criticisms of ethnography are commonplace, but it is not the purpose to offer an apologia here. Ethnography is regarded as old-fashioned sociology, experiencing geriatric decay; it is the sick man of sociology. During the long history of its travail, there has rarely been a close season of respite from its detractors. Despite the numerous blood-lettings, ethnographic life still persists. To enable others to judge the extent to which this study perpetuates the ethnographic failings, here are a few of its alleged faults. It has been argued that it displays an exceptional degree of eclecticism, causing it to exhibit theoretical naivety; that it seeks out for display the social exotica and weaker sections of society; and authorities have argued, as Stouffer did in the 1930s, that ethnography is an unnecessary and time-consuming assemblage, for the same results could be achieved with the appropriate scientifically constructed questionnaire. So the argument runs. When its counterpart, anthropology, is included, the list lengthens. All the sins of colonialism are added to the ethnographic pyre. These 'errors' could be challenged, of course, on the grounds that methodological 'purity' does not exist in sociology (or in any other subject). We all ultimately 'muddle through'; but to sustain the impression of 'objectivity' we might reference our activities as improvisations. Some research forms more than others are explicit about this, as ethnography tends to be, making itself open to 'external' scrutiny because the feelings and moves of the researcher, like those of his subjects, constantly protrude from the text. When ethnography concentrates on the doings of a handful of people the tendency is heightened.

Although ethnography has been repeatedly humbled by its more

'exact' sociological affines, a paradox emerges. Ethnography is called into service, in different ways, to bolster their analyses. Let me cite two obvious examples. First, studies geared to surveys are prone to create a 'mutant' ethnography from the attitudinal ratings, even though the researchers are not likely to have seen their respondents in action. Attitudes *qua* attitudes cannot exist, they must be re-attached to some version of performance, is the logic. Secondly, there is the incorporation of the ethnographic extraction into a different style of analysis to lend support to the line of argument adopted there. At random, Sacks, elaborating in a lecture (*Everyone has to Lie*, p. 34) the diagnostic procedures and obligations on second speakers in responding to the greeting 'How are you?', embroiders his formulation of rules in use with ethnographically derived examples:

Let me here note that having the burden of enforcing some regulation on second-speakers or second-actors is not unique to the 'How are you?' situation. Campbell, in his study of a Greek mountain village, reported in his book *Honor, Family and Patronage* that there are rules providing that 'un-married', opposite sex persons should not converse. He notes further that 'when an un-married male encounters an un-married female he may offer a greeting. It's the business of the female to not offer one back.'

In the classic ethnography *Deep South* by Davis, Gardner and Gardner the rules against infidelity of a married person with another is discussed, and it is reported that 'a male may make advances of another man's wife, it's her business to keep him off'.

Ethnographers are aware of their subject's limitations and frequent self-medication is prescribed. Sturtevant (1964, p. 102) has written: 'It has long been evident that a major weakness in anthropology is the underdeveloped condition of ethnographic method. Typologies and generalizations abound, but their descriptive foundations are insecure.' He went on to suggest that ethnosience could become the 'new ethnography' and point the way forward. Psathas (1968, p. 504) disagreed:

Despite the fact that ethnosience has been called the New Ethnography, there is much in it that is old. Malinowski, some years ago, stated that the aim of the ethnographer is 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of the world'. Anthropologists would agree that this has been a central task of anthropology. Ethnosience may simply be providing a more recent statement of that aim within a framework of new methodology and research techniques.

The ethnographic debate goes on. Both linguistics and ethnomethodology are courting the subject. Also, Scholte (1971) has

been prominent in advocating that anthropology/ethnography should be both reflexive and critical. His approach is really a plea for a greater political awareness to be shown by ethnographers. It is a re-emphasising of the established fact that intellectual paradigms and the anthropological tradition are 'contextually situated and relative'. Scholte (1971, p. 437) goes on to say that 'Such anthropological studies should be radically contextual, immanently dialectual, genuinely comparative, and emphatically motivated (reflexive anthropology).' For Scholte, ethnography must be part hermeneutics.

I have only obliquely entered the ethnographic debate (the above is but a sketchy version of it) by cross-referencing my research dilemmas with those of others and by trying to clarify what was in the head of the ethnographer. There is no special section entitled 'methodology' (sometimes found in an appendix or long footnote), revealing the secrets of the hidden garden. The cauldron bubbles continuously. This does not mean I have used ethnography solely as a means of navigating both the raised and submerged shorelines of my own thought: that was only part of the exercise. The study is more than a research biography, even though my activities are open and given weight with those of others. There is no pretence that the researcher was the 'invisible man' flitting in and out of settings at will, eavesdropping undisturbed and making perfect recordings of what happened. There is no pretence, either, that I was considered the 'father confessor' (another mythical research pose) to whom all came to reveal their dark secrets. To the fore is the patronage I enjoyed from the officer in charge, Philip Machent, and our exchanges were many. Those therefore seeking to cry 'bias', or claim the subservience of the research for administrative purposes, need look no further than our relationship. The study has pauses for short sociological soliloquies on the immediate interest at hand. These are not offered as legitimations, or proof, of the approach subsequently adopted. In some ways it is 'whistling in the dark', or thinking aloud. The 'visible' plotting of the research moves does, however, enable others to peer over one's shoulder. What is very often used as constituting proof in a sociological enterprise is a sense of aesthetic appreciation that things could have worked out the way they have been described.

All sociologists have problems with what to do with all the data collected. Data do not order data. The past debates of sociologists, however, can still sharpen the present. For example, after handling the mammoth correspondence from motorists (chapter six) it was still exciting to follow the Blumer debate with Thomas and Znaniecki (and

others) on the possible interpretations of the letters between Polish peasants. The issues raised then are still with us. Where does the researcher's understanding of the contents of the letters come from? Has a preconceived theoretical apparatus coerced meaning from the letters? Could this be avoided? And so on. The ideas of many have jostled the imagination while doing and writing up the ethnography. Mention must be made of E. C. Hughes, whose deceptively simple wisdom still offers us much on occupations. He is no straw man. When reading him many years ago I first learned of Weber's now more widely known paper on 'restriction of output' – the *Psycho Physics of Industrial Labour*.

A few concluding comments. The ethnography is neither intended to be complete nor exhaustive; it is doubtful if such an utopian enterprise were possible, despite some of the exaggerated claims made on behalf of ethnoscience, which has concentrated on the more easily circumscribed aspects of 'cognitive structure' to produce classifications. However, there are some obvious omissions. There is no detailed discussion of the legal performance of traffic wardens in court when confronting motorists there. Nor were traffic wardens followed home, and little is offered on their activities outside work. The iron maiden of publishing costs has squeezed out the crop of supporting footnotes and abbreviated some debates, especially chapter one.

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