Tom Burns and the practice of sociology.

John Eldridge
Emeritus Professor of Sociology,
University of Glasgow.

‘The practice of sociology is criticism: to criticise or raise questions about claims and assumptions concerning the value or meaning of conduct and achievement. It is the business of sociologists to conduct a critical debate, in this sense, with the public about its equipment of social institutions’¹

‘Sociology, like all other disciplines, scientific and other, begins with description, is descriptive as well as explanatory, has its fact-finding as well as taxonomic aspects as well as being a theoretical and model-building endeavour. More than that, it is in their descriptive and taxonomic work that all specialist studies have their historical origin.’²

Introduction.

I have long admired the contribution which Tom Burns (1913-2001) made to sociology. He certainly broke new ground in his studies of work organisations and the conduct of individuals within them. There was clarity of expression in his writing and he was an indefatigable researcher. Moreover, although he wore his learning lightly, there is plenty of evidence of his own wide reading and erudition well beyond the boundaries of his discipline. My intention in this paper is to outline what I think is of value in his work and why we can still learn from it, not only in substantive terms but also more generally in matters of theory and methodology.

It would be wrong to proceed without first drawing attention to a valuable paper by his long time friend and colleague Gianfranco Poggi.³ There is also a thoughtful and affectionate obituary and appreciation by some of his

---

Edinburgh colleagues on the Tom Burns website.\textsuperscript{4} The details of his early life are sketchy but we learn from Poggi that he was born in London, part of a poor, large family of Irish origins. Despite any social disadvantages that may have entailed he went to Bristol University, where he graduated in 1933 in English. As a young person Burns formed a connection with the Society of Friends and a commitment to pacifism. Poggi comments: ‘His early familiarity with and sympathy for the Quaker tradition never ceased to inform his public concerns, and to inspire his rejection of violence as a means of policy. He occasionally described the days when the USA and the USSR seemed about to go to war over Cuba as the darkest in his memory.’\textsuperscript{5}

This value position led him to join the Friends Ambulance Unit at the beginning of the Second World War when he spent time in Finland, Norway, Egypt and Greece. In 1941 he was taken prisoner by the Germans in Crete and was repatriated in 1943 as part of an exchange of wounded soldiers. Poggi records that ‘for years he would remain unwilling to attend films that depicted, however inadequately, prisoner-of-war camps, for he found himself troubled by the memories they evoked.’\textsuperscript{6} On his return he served as Press and Information Officer at the Friends Ambulance Unit Headquarters in London. After the war he became Press and Information Officer for another Quaker inspired organisation, the Bournville Village Trust, doubling up as Research Assistant to the West Midland Group on Post-War Reconstruction and Planning, which had connections with the University of Birmingham. Burns himself describes this period as a form of apprenticeship for a social scientist. He was particularly responsible for a study of local government in the region, which involved interviewing officials and collecting statistical and other relevant data about the region.\textsuperscript{7} This indeed led to his first book for the West Midland group which explored the relations between local government and the constraints and controls exercised by central government.\textsuperscript{8} This represented his early professional engagements with organisations, which he was later to study in more detail in other contexts.

\textsuperscript{5} Op cit. p.47
\textsuperscript{6} Poggi ibid p.44
Only at the age of 36, in 1949, did Burns take up his first University academic appointment, when he became a Research Lecturer in Social Studies at the University of Edinburgh. The academic context there at that time was largely Social Anthropology, with its emphasis on ethnographic research and interests in community studies. There he remained, apart from visiting Fellowships elsewhere, eventually becoming Professor and Head of the newly formed Department of Sociology.

An initial foray.

The West Midland Group Study, *Local Government and Central Control*, does not have Burns’ name on the spine but it is made very clear in the Foreword that the main labour of preparation and writing was his. The terms of reference for the work were: ‘To investigate, by study of the conditions in the West Midland Region, the present situation of Local Government and particularly the influence of recent changes on its value and effectiveness as part of the English democratic system.’

The study has a great deal of statistical information relevant to the period covering a wide range of local government responsibilities. But for present purposes there are a number of points worth noting.

There is, first of all, a serious attempt in the opening chapter to put questions concerning the relationship between local and central government in historical context. Burns described how the form of local government envisaged in the Municipal Corporations Act (1835) and the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) were designed to create systems of local administration in rural and urban areas that would operate under strong central control from London. The general idea was to combine effectiveness with democratic control. This Benthamite ideal did not work, not least because the effects of the New Poor Law on the dependent poor were inhumanly savage.

The resistance to the New Poor Law was very strong which, while plainly understandable, led to great variation in the practice of local administration. Burns observed: ‘Some parts of the country were reformed by the central government, some adapted themselves to the conditions and demands of changed times, and some resisted, or escaped, change for more than half a century…Good local government became associated with the best urban

---

9 Ibid p. 1
authorities – those which were organised on democratic lines and which dispensed the growing number of services required by an industrialized society.'\textsuperscript{10} Even the weighty Royal Commission of 1870 on local government did little more than accept the \textit{status quo}. Whenever attempts were made to centralise control in one area of administration or another – commonly labelled Chadwick centralisation – they were contested and uniformity of practice was little more than an administrative fiction.

Burns identified the period between 1834 and 1894 as the time when local government as we know it was established in England. He described this period as one of violent and massive change with ‘not one but many revolutions accomplishing themselves at the same time but at different speeds, and at different depths below the surface… the observer receives the impression of events continually out-running human control. Social forces were moving so strongly and swiftly that remedies for a problem were themselves turned into fresh complications within a decade. And that same decade would throw up so many immediate problems of its own that it was impossible to reconsider even the most recent decisions in the same terms.’\textsuperscript{11} Here we can see early indications of a sociological mind at work. It has much in common with Durkheim’s treatment of anomie which, of course, broadly related to the same period in Europe.

As the account moved into the twentieth century, Burns identified the tendencies towards state centralisation of services as they affected such matters as agriculture, national insurance, health, education and housing. The emphasis was on national planning, the provision of ‘universal services’ was an aspiration which went far beyond the membership of the Labour Party. The experience of war and what Burns referred to as ‘the increasing solidarity of the nation as a social organization’\textsuperscript{12} gave impetus to these developments. They were, in his view, based on a belief in the superior effectiveness, moral and technical, of professional, managerial organization.

Secondly, as with later studies, Burns combined the historical treatment of the issues under investigation with an interviewing programme, in this case with a wide range of local government officials. These provided thoughtful, if varied, interpretations of their experiences of changing relationships between central and local government. In the course of them reference was

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Ibid p. 12
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid p. 22
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid p. 36
\end{itemize}
made to ‘the flood of papers from Whitehall’, the sense that local councillors felt disempowered and in one graphic instance, the sense that ‘we have become the sorcerer’s apprentice. The Industrial Revolution has initiated an epoch in which technology, economic and social devices and relationships had been increasingly multiplied, diversified and mixed. It is now impossible to sort out the mess and there was no way of stopping the process. It seemed as though we would have to go on living in an environment which was growing increasingly complicated and out of control, and at the same time go on trying to impose control through increasingly complicated organizations which were getting beyond our understanding.’

Nevertheless, Burns did not leave it there. He and his committee argued for a view which included local and central government in a single system of domestic administration, with central government departments and local Authorities subordinate to Parliament. They concluded, somewhat surprisingly one may now think, that ‘the problem of local government is not political but organizational, not a debate on efficiency versus democracy, but one of choosing the most effective means towards achieving administrative ends.’ The underlying concern was to assert the need for representative bodies of citizens to occupy mediate positions between the State and the individual and for flexibility in the administration of services that took account of local needs more closely than central government on its own could possibly achieve.

Although the term was not used, the approach to the problems identified was a pluralist one. Burns was clearly aware of the forces of centralisation, with London (and not only in politics but in such matters as the mass media and the concentration of finance capital in the metropolis) at the heart of it. He looked for countervailing ways of modifying these tendencies. In this we can again hear echoes of Durkheim. The dichotomies of centralisation versus decentralisation, of central control versus local autonomy, could be resolved in feasible ways. One of the steps forward was what we would now call greater transparency. Burns called in Weber, as it were, to warn against the ways in which the principle of ‘confidentiality’ could control and mask what could and could not be done at local level. It assures the accumulation

---

13 Ibid p.261
14 Ibid p.274
of secret ‘inside’ information and serves to increase the power and prestige of bureaucratic systems. This again was what Burns sought to curb.

Transparency and accountability were the twin pillars that run like a thread through the report to transform what Burns described as an ‘organizational jungle.’ This was seen in very explicit terms: ‘Before local government can become effective, the limits of autonomy must be made explicit and public. In financial terms these limits relate to cost, adequacy, and aggregate capital expenditure.’

We can also see in these pages the emergence of an organization theorist. Burns argued that large organizations could vary in purpose and character. Local government practice, he suggested, had not fully understood this. In particular he distinguished between those organizations which produced goods and those which produced services. Whilst it can be recognised that the customer, the client and the public all have a part to play in these organizations, when it comes to service provision ‘there is a relationship between provider and consumer so direct that it must be regarded as different in nature. In retail trade and professional services interpretation of the needs of the consumer or client in terms of the utilities, which are there to satisfy possible needs becomes the central task, and any organization is built up on the basis of that task. Thus, in the case of a service, the closer the organization can get to the consumer – and therefore the more fragmentary it is – the more effective it becomes.’ On the basis of this, Burns argued, the administration of services in local government should be connected to a representative group of the public – a consumer council no less. And he concludes: ‘Only in this way can the efficiency of a service, which must be measured according to the satisfaction of the public served, and not according to profits, be ensured.’ So it is that upon such analytical distinctions important consequences may flow. Even so, although such structural distinctions were empirically important, given his on-going interests in literature, other ways of understanding the behaviour of people in organizations came into focus, as we shall now see.

Conceptual fictions.

---

15 Ibid p.282
16 Ibid p. 274
17 Ibid p.275
'Literature is an attempt to make sense of our lives. Sociology is an attempt to make sense of the ways in which we live our lives.'

Burns’ interest in literature was deep and longstanding. He even taught it at Helsinki University before the Second World War. As a young man he had made several contributions to journals such as Penguin New Writing and The Fortnightly. These included two autobiographical pieces, based on his war experiences and which are included in his collection of essays Description, Explanation and Understanding. These were specimens of what he later called reportage. Burns clearly saw potential linkages between his trilogy of description, explanation and understanding. Descriptions contain narratives, even if some of them are only at surface ‘common sense’ levels. As we know, different people may describe the same event in different ways. The significance of this I think never left him and informed his attempts to make sense of interview material and indeed with self-recorded diaries, a technique which he tried out early in his research life. Attempts to go beneath the surface, as it were, to account for motives and reasons for conduct represent a part of the discipline long associated with Weber’s concept of ‘understanding’. It was Weber who famously argued that a sociological explanation should be adequate at the level of meaning and also causally adequate. When it comes to causal accounts Burns accepts Hume’s reservations as to whether this can be done but he continued to wrestle with the issue throughout his later work. However, for him, the principle of doubt was important so as to allow space considering discrepancies in accounts of actions and events. Hence when there are discrepancies between what are claimed to be facts or between intended and achieved results of action this merits further enquiry. So it is that one of the critical tasks of the sociologist is to learn to ask questions which can at least begin to uncover hidden complexities and to explain what has hitherto (wrongly) been taken for granted. In such ways do sociologists attempt to make sense of the ways in which we live.

---

18 E.Burns and T.Burns eds. (1973) Sociology of Literature and Drama Harmondsworth: Penguin p .9
21 M. Weber (1978) Economy and Society Los Angeles: University of California Press. See, for example: ‘Sociology (in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here) is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course.’ p.4
22 We can observe a strong parallel in W.G.Runciman (1983) A Treatise on Social Theory volume 1 on The Methodology of Social Theory, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, where the distinction is made between reportage, description, explanation and evaluation.
Making sense here is to uncover the world of meanings. In their editorial introduction to Sociology of Literature and Drama, Elizabeth and Tom Burns call to mind the notion of ‘composition’. ‘Composition…refers to the creation of a consciously fictive world of action, people, or appearances, individual people, etc. known to us fleetingly and doubtfully and only insofar as they appear on the scene in the course of the vicissitudes and pursuits of our own personal everyday lives.’ 23 This, they point out, can help us to understand the real world better because beneath it is a shared conceptual vocabulary, grammar of conventions and rules of the game – shared that is between writers and readers. Here they see a parallel between this shared fictive world and what sociologists do in establishing conceptual vocabularies. Not only so, but just as novelists and dramatists deploy images, metaphors, stories and ideas, so too do sociologists. Acknowledged or not analogy plays a continuing part in sociological work. It offers what they term ‘the shock of recognition’. The use of analogy can indeed be fruitful – we find it fully deployed, for example in the work of Goffman – but it is a mark of a scientific discipline that it is able to recognise the purpose, the limits and indeed the rhetoric of such a practice.

We can in fact identify a much earlier discussion of conceptual fictions in Burns’ paper The Idea of Structure in Sociology, published as early as 1958.24 There he begins with the observation that in linguistic analysis there is an established position which claims that thinking as a purposive activity operates by means of fictions of varying adequacy. It is this which enables us to find our way about the world and deal with ‘the real world’ in a practical sense. What matters is how these fictional constructions are ‘translated’ back into action and experience. This provides the lead-in for what he wants to argue in relation to the social sciences.

‘For the social sciences, indeed, the question of what construction we put on the world is of crucial importance. This is not only because of their anthropological character, but because they begin and end with common human experience – they exist to explore and extend awareness and control of conduct, and not to enlarge the area of the external material world that human conduct may control. To a large extent, therefore, the social sciences do not begin to exist as scientific disciplines until they stand apart from

accepted modes of considering conduct, and thereby are able to perceive the constructions that we put on the world around us.’”

There is in this passage a characteristic emphasis on the category of conduct. But to study conduct in this way is to go beyond common-sense modes of thinking. In this, of course, Burns was following Durkheim’s concerns to get beyond common sense in order to establish a scientific sociology. Like Durkheim, he was clearly aware that in everyday life, like everybody else, we are already confronted with ‘a large paraphernalia of ready-made terms – society, community, role, class, status, family, relationship, power, association – which are there in common language, at the beginning of any attempt to study behaviour, interposed between observer and object.”

What is required is for sociology to extend the constructions which all of us use in everyday life to negotiate our way through the world. These too will have a fictional character, whether we are employing metaphors and images or ideal types in the classic Weberian sense. Burns concludes:

‘There is a detectable shift of attention among some social scientists from the further elaboration of social interpretations in common usage to the study of such interpretation itself and the uses to which it is put. The shift suggests possibilities for the development of the study of social conduct in diachronic terms.”

This approach might be said to express a form of methodological individualism, albeit one which sees individuals operating in varying social mileux, contributing to and experiencing change. It is the conduct of individuals which is located in a whole range of topographical settings that may involve, for example, religion, occupation, languages, ethnicity, technology and so on, that appears to be the starting point. These settings are explored, navigated and modified by individuals in purposive ways, hence the importance for sociology to focus on the nature of social change. Indeed, for Burns, change was regarded as the normal condition of social action. Indeed, in what was effectively a companion article – *The Forms of Conduct* – Burns concluded that social stability and social change could be see as concomitants of the creation and failure of routine substitutes for spontaneous conduct. It is in these early papers, which in their own

25 Ibid p.218
27 Ibid p.227
understated way were a challenge to the then prevailing orthodoxy of Parsonian systems theory, and which represent an interest in how we are to understand social change as well as social order, that we get a strong clue to his later decision to write a full length study on Goffman.  

_Burns and Goffman._

It is at the very end of his Goffman study that Burns looks at the fundamental question in sociology: how is society possible? He maintains that Goffman did not in the end explain how social interaction linked up with a more general theory of social order or explain how they might be connected. One reason for this could be linked to Goffman’s lack of interest in history. In somewhat schoolmasterly fashion Burns wrote that Goffman ‘scarcely ever betrayed the slightest interest in the history of anything.’ His thoughts here, Burns claimed, are not so much about connections but remain as frayed loose ends. In social interaction we compete and cooperate with each other. The question for Burns was how the processes of social interaction are ordinarily as well conducted as they are. Goffman, he suggest, was not really interested in causal explanations but only in interpretative accounts. Hence he treated concepts like rules and rituals as givens, rather than accounting for their presence in the first place.

Burns points out that we live now in a society of organisations so that social interaction mainly occurs in situations which are organisationally prescribed. Each of these situations has their own cultural inheritance, their own conceptual repertoire which individuals learn, use and experience. So much of this takes place ‘in the locality’ as it were: social order is essentially locally produced. He accordingly concludes that social structure, social institutions, organisations are not factual entities, or causal processes but concepts. ‘And it is these which fashion social behaviour as it occurs at the generic level of social interaction, on the occasions and in the encounters when, our social identities being manifested to anonymous others or mere acquaintances, we are engaged in sustaining our virtual personal identities.’ He concludes by arguing that social interaction is where ‘the solid buildings of the social world’ are in fact constructed. The implication for social theory is of course considerable. On this reckoning to try and work out connections between social interaction and the wider social order is

---

30 Ibid p. 88  
31 Ibid p.380
pointless. ‘Instead it might be that the social order and social values which we think of as prevailing throughout society at large are not just abstractions but empty abstractions.’\footnote{Ibid p.376.} This is a diverting thought, albeit offered in the subjunctive. His later work after all dealt in these abstractions.

Given these intellectual positions it is not surprising that Burns never lost his interest in the concept of community, which would no doubt have been buttressed by the anthropological perspectives of the Edinburgh department. In his early studies of industrial organisations he began with the sense of them as ‘communities at work’. Hence, in \textit{The Management of Innovation} we read: ‘Every firm is a community, with its own particular flavour, its own social structure, its own style of conduct.’\footnote{T. Burns and G. M. Stalker (1961) \textit{The Management of Innovation} London: Tavistock, p.258.} When he went on later to examine the BBC as an organisation he wrote that the notion of ‘working for the BBC’ involves ‘membership of a working community made up of a numerous and varied array of distinct small-scale social networks, each with its own set of “rules of the game” for cooperating and competing with each other individually, and for cooperating and competing with other networks of persons linked by working relationships.’\footnote{T. Burns (1977) \textit{The BBC: Public Institution and Private World}. Edinburgh: Edionburgh University Press, p 86.}

As it happened, Erving Goffman was undertaking a postgraduate study of communication conduct in a Shetland Island Community and Burns had good contact with him in Edinburgh, his academic base. Much of Goffman’s unpublished doctorate was incorporated in \textit{The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life}.\footnote{Erving Goffman (1959) \textit{The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life} London: Penguin.} It is noteworthy that very early on in the book Goffman comments on the ways individuals seek to control the conduct of others especially through influencing the definition of the situation which others come to formulate. In a footnote he refers explicitly to Burns: ‘Here I owe much to an unpublished paper by Tom Burns of the University of Edinburgh. He presents the argument that in all interaction a basic underlying theme is the desire of each participant to guide and control the responses made by the others present.’\footnote{Ibid p.15 (footnote 3).}

This kind of approach was to become evident as Burns turned to research on organisations and the micro-politics of social relations. This was evident in arguments he was to pursue with organisation theorists such as March,
Simon, and to some extent the influential Tavistock researchers Trist and Emery, who tended to focus on the characteristics of formal organisations. This is particularly well illustrated in a seminal paper *On the plurality of social systems*. Indeed, he threw down the gauntlet by contending that the kinds of rationality models of organisation which these represented were dangerous instruments for research (because misleading) and therefore bad guides for consultative work and management practice. Since some of these writers were not averse to consultation, not least at the Tavistock Institute, with whom at least in publishing terms he was himself associated, this was laying it on the line. It is worth adding that Burns himself undertook consultancy work for a major oil company early in his career. His relationship to the Tavistock Institute was also evident in that several of his early publications appeared in the Tavistock journal Human Relations. In one of these (Burns, 1954) he explicitly acknowledges the support of Fred Emery so at the time would have been reasonably sympathetic to the Tavistock ethos, with its systems approach and emphasis on socio-technical systems. It was, after all, a considerable advance on traditional management thinking of the Urwick-Orr school. But as his thinking develops, I sense a growing distance between him and the Tavistock researchers.

*Industry, organisations and social change.*

‘If history is to be more than narrative, then it has to explain. Even as narrative, the historian’s selection and ordering of events and attitudes, of successful and unsuccessful actions, of speech and writings can be meaningful only if he *(sic)* observes a set of principles by which he selects and orders. If history, in short, is to be something other, and more, than news, then it is a search for explanation. Historical explanation is a process of simplification, by which a great many diverse things are shown to be connected or similar.’

Burns and Saul, in their introduction to *Social Theory and Economic Change*, not only argued for the importance of trying to show how events in history were causally connected but also that the causal principles themselves were ordered according to some hierarchical system. This, they argued, was the approach advocated by the historian R.G. Collingwood if

---

history was to be regarded as a science. For their part, Burns and Saul emphasised the importance of the comparative method of the kind advocated by Reinhard Bendix.\textsuperscript{39} Yet at the conclusion of their essay they also want to warn against the reification of concepts. It was necessary, they argued, ‘to keep in mind the processual, dynamic qualities of historical societies – the actions that kept them in being – and to develop adequate analytical models by which they could relieve or complement the static thinking to which thinking in terms of systems lent itself.’\textsuperscript{40} I want to explore further how this played out for Burns.

In 1962 Burns wrote an essay on the sociology of industry.\textsuperscript{41} At the time it was published it was one of the most succinct, clearly written pieces on the subject one could wish to find. He looked sequentially first at the external relationships of industry with the social order, the sociology of industrialism; and secondly at the internal structure of industrial concerns which, for him, was the province of industrial sociology and the sociology of organisations.

In his treatment of industrialism Burns offered a schematic account of the development of material and social technologies. He identified three major phases of development. The first takes us back to the early conjunction of the division of labour with machines, of which the textile industry was the prototypical example. This early factory system took Britain, the first industrial nation, into the 1850s (alongside other forms of work performed by tradesmen and the continuing existence of traditional domestic system). But, by the mid-nineteenth century, alongside developments in transport and communications, came the invention of machine tools and new technologies for the steel and chemical industries, together with the extension of the factory system into a wider range of industrial activity. Alongside this were organisational developments which these new, more complex, technologies required. New forms of administration came into being, industrial bureaucracies with a plethora of managerial roles and their associated hierarchies. Among other things this had consequences for the separation of ownership from control. The contribution of Max Weber to the understanding of this form of industrialism is explicitly acknowledged by Burns.

\textsuperscript{40} Op cit p.8
\textsuperscript{41} T. Burns (1962) op cit.
At the time he was writing Burns took the view that the second form of industrialism, with remnants of the first, was predominant, but that a third form had come into being from the 1930s onwards:

‘A new, more insecure, relationship has caught up and overtaken spontaneous domestic demand and the propensity to consume has to be stimulated by advertising, by styling, and by marketing promotions guided by consumer research, motivation research. Also, partly as one of the endeavours to maintain expansion, partly because of the stimulus of government spending on the development of new weapons and military equipment, industry has admitted a sizeable influx of new technical developments, and agreed to accept industrial development as a major commitment of its own. So far, the implications of this new phase in the evolution of industrialism have been studied only in so far as they have presented themselves as overt, public, social problems: the shortage of scientific manpower, the new forms of human effort called for by machinery automatically operated and controlled, and the effect of automation on employment.’

The important implication that Burns drew from this was that the new relationship with the markets, which such industries catered for, called for much greater degree of flexibility in their internal organisation. Traditional forms of bureaucracy were not adequate for this purpose. They could not cope adequately with ever more rapidly changing technologies and unstable market conditions. Burns signalled that these changes would have consequences for the practice of industrial relations and the organisation of trade unions and for our understanding of new work organisations. The sense of what he had in mind is encapsulated in the following sentence: ‘The autonomy that used to invest work, once orders were received from superiors, is now replaced by enclosure in a network of requirements and expectations from an increasing number of functionaries.’

This takes us into the terrain of industrial sociology. Like any alert industrial sociologist, he was aware that studies of industry could easily become a support to industrial managers. This was in part because of their gate-keeping functions. But Burns recognised a more general consideration:

---

42 Op cit. p.191
43 Op cit. p. 195
‘The moral issue may not be different in essence from that present in any study which may result in increasing the power of controllers and manipulators and the subjugation of the controlled and the manipulated… But it presents itself more blatantly and unavoidably. It certainly is not avoided by rotating the axis of moral values and applying terms like pathology and therapy to business concerns; the one still finds its only effective expression in less earning capacity and the other in more. It cannot be glossed over by professing sympathy with the underdog or squaring trade union officials.’

Burns here had explicitly in mind the influence of Taylorism and scientific management approaches and the somewhat parallel interests in questions of absenteeism and fatigue, which went back to studies of the Munitions Industry in the First World War. This ‘human engineering’ approach became associated with the National Institute of Industrial Psychology and the Industrial Health Research Board and was primarily concerned with how to improve industrial efficiency among the labour force. Coming into play a little later was the ‘human relations’ approach encapsulated in the famous Hawthorne studies of the Western Electric company in the USA. Although there is much to be learned from these intensive work group studies, Burns pointed out that they were done during the period of the Great Depression and a time of great conflict in management-labour relations, yet issues of unemployment and the role of trade unions are scarcely mentioned. There is then a critical edge to his view of both Taylorism and the so-called ‘human relations’ approach. The first, in the name of scientific management, sought to take intelligence away from the shop floor and put decision-making solely in the hands of management. The second, in the name of collaboration, was actually an alternative way of management trying to achieve its own objectives. Both were ways of trying, in the name of rationality, to enhance and extend managerial power.

Burns had his own rationale for studying management and its organisation and this comes out clearly in the following comment:

‘…..for every twenty studies of the lowest ranks of manual operatives there is perhaps one of managing directors, whose work and occupational situation are possibly of equal interest and significance; that demarcation disputes and

44 Ibid p.195
absenteeism among workers, and identical conduct equally prevalent among managers never does; that there are scores of diagnostic studies of such delinquencies as shirking, or of ‘lightning’ and unofficial strikes, and none of such offences as pilfering and expense account swindling, which are possibly more prevalent, more costly, and more damaging to industrial efficiency, but are either condoned or are cloaked under a conspiracy of silence which involves the highest and lowest ranks in industry.\footnote{Ibid p.196}

This is, of course, a somewhat subversive comment in the then prevailing context of views about management that assumed hierarchical structures with top-down lines of communication. The view of management organisation grounded in management rationality also carried with it the notion that informal organisation was pathological and had to be brought in line – whether by human engineering or human relations, not to mention the tougher sanctions that could be employed in times of high unemployment. These assumptions were more and more being challenged and Burns’ own work represented part of that challenge.

This schematic account of the sociology of industrialism found later expression and development in a 1983 essay, ‘The moral economy of the rat race’.\footnote{T. Burns (1983) The moral economy of the rat race, in Edward Goodman ed. (1983) Non-conforming Radicals of Europe, London: Acton society Trust, pp. 74—92.} This drew its inspiration from Fred Hirsch’s seminal Social Limits to Growth (which he described as ’brilliant’)\footnote{F. Hirsch (1977) Social Limits to Growth, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.} as well as drawing on E.P.Thompson’s concept of the moral economy.\footnote{E.P.Thompson, The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century, Past and Present No. 50 pp. 76-136} When we say that modern societies are founded on industrial capitalism what does that mean? Compared to the pre-modern world it has to do with rapid population growth, economic growth and a changing role for the market. England, the first industrial society, was transformed into a competitive market society, which had profound effects on social relations. The old moral economy of the earlier period was overtaken by the new political economy of the market. Industrial capitalism as a social formation does not stand still. Its changing character becomes much more complex. There are new forms of corporate, institutional capitalism with widespread implications for educational changes and occupational structures. Despite widespread forecasts of the demise of capitalism, Burns pointed out that it continues to re-emerge albeit in different forms; ‘what emerges is not a capitalism one step nearer the
grave, or capitalism with a new mask, but a regenerated capitalism, one with a new, or at least reconstructed, *modus operandi* and structure.⁴⁹

The global significance of these developments was clear to Burns: ‘Industrialism now supports a vast superstructure of money management, and industrial capitalism itself is now largely controlled by money empires controlled from the finance capitals of New York, London, Frankfurt, Zurich and Tokyo.’⁵⁰ Here was a sociologist who, as early as 1983, was signalling how important it is to analyse the processes of globalisation. Among other things, this has had transforming consequences for patterns of consumption and has led to what Hirsch called ‘the paradox of affluence’. We are confronted, that is to say, with the social costs of economic growth. We are faced, therefore, not only with global problems of population growth, of the need to find alternative sources of energy and other finite resources, but with questions of how we are to transform the values by which we live and the normative structures we are constrained by. Just as Durkheim had seen nineteenth century industrial societies as moving into a condition of acute anomie as activity in the economic sphere dominated society, so Hirsch saw modern industrial societies as characterised by turmoil, generated by a growing lack of legitimacy and social justice.

The problem Burns posed was how can we extract ourselves collectively from this rat race and the moral values it embodies? He does not answer the question but he concludes in a practical vein: ‘The task we have is to show what rational, practical alternatives exist at this time and in our society, and what we can do to favour that increase in rationality which will make them feasible.’⁵¹ Nearly thirty years later the task is still with us and the clamour for solutions ever louder.

*Down to Cases: The Management of Innovation*

In 1967 Burns offered an account and assessment of the state of research on organisations.⁵² It was trenchant in tone and comprehensive in coverage. He offers, in effect a template of the variety of ways in which organisational studies have been carried out. In the course of this he refers to his own style

---

⁴⁹ Op. cit p. 82.
⁵⁰ Ibid p. 85
⁵¹ Ibid p.90
of work and preferred modes of procedure. His declared emphasis was on processual and diachronic studies. This, I think, was because, on the one hand, the analysis of process allowed scope for the role of agency and on the other, diachronic studies provided an opportunity for causal analyses. He also valued studies that could be located in their historical context. We will see how this played out in Burns’ own work.

Burns’ views about the nature of organisations were not simply provocations but they stemmed from primarily ethnographic research and extensive interviewing in industrial organisations during the 1950s and found their fullest expression in the book written with G.M. Stalker, *The Management of Innovation*. Stalker was associated with the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, which had funded some of Burns’s work. He was, according to Burns, a superb interviewer, but as Poggi makes clear, ‘the book that came into existence and found its way to widespread acclaim had been conceived by Tom and was totally his work’.54

My own view is that *The Management of Innovation* is one of the best British contributions to industrial sociology and the sociology of organisations. In elaborating on this it is helpful to bear in mind the Preface which Burns wrote to the 1966 edition of the book. This is a lucid example of sociological reflexivity and in particular raises challenging questions about the relationship between theory and method in social research.

It is worth emphasising that *The Management of Innovation* is explicitly as a study based on anthropological field methods. ‘Everything has had to depend on what ability we had to appreciate the significance of the things and happenings we saw during our spells inside factories, and to elicit information in interviews and conversations. We had also to distinguish the tones and additives which were occasioned by our roles as outsiders, as academic people, as confidants, as critics.’55 Interviews could last for varying lengths – sometimes a whole day. Burns argued that such interviews (or conversations, as he sometimes preferred to call them) should be reciprocal. ‘This can be done only by showing how he is making use of the information he is receiving; by the occasional interpretation of the situation as an outsider and as a sociologist or psychologist, and which are also appropriate to his informant’s ability or preparedness to comprehend it.

54 Poggi op cit. p.49
From then on, whether the interpretation is accepted or not, there is a freer, more satisfactory quality about the interview, a stronger desire to recruit and present facts, examples, views.\(^{56}\)

Burns continued to reflect on this method of investigation. Initially he had somewhat defensively conceded that this was far removed from a scientific investigation. Later he came to the view that this kind of activity and research relationship in such a study was positively desirable: ‘Research becomes, in fact, a true search process among the experience of individual members of the social system, in which hypothesis and deduction become a serial process. There is a sense in which, in their eagerness to achieve “scientific detachment”, social scientists have cut themselves off from their main source – the ability of human beings to memorize and report their own experiences.’\(^{57}\) This I think was the hallmark of Burns’ approach to field work in all that he subsequently did. And in this he displayed the skill of a master craftsman.

What comes through in the Introduction to the book is the sense of a research project, which, after a false start with a different agenda, only gradually begins to define its problem and then refine its analytic method and purpose as it proceeds. First we are told about the preliminary studies (although at the time I doubt they were conceived as such). One was a rayon mill that was commercially prosperous. Its management organisation was of a traditional kind with paternalist overtones but its Research and Development Laboratory was, however, impotent and regarded with hostility. The second was an engineering plant that was also commercially successful. Here there was a large and active Research and Development function but the atmosphere was one of insecurity, uncertainty and stress. When asked about their jobs managers would typically give a history of their career. This stopped short of the present. When asked about that they would refer to what they would be doing in the future when the present emergency had passed. It was sharp of the researchers to realise that here was a problem worth exploring further. The present, so to speak is not ‘normal’.

Burns states that these early experiences of industrial research led him to think not just of individuals applying themselves to the technical and

\(^{56}\) Ibid. p. 14
commercial tasks of the firm but rather of the social relationships between individuals in the enterprise. This was a central consideration as he moved on to a broader study of the organisation of electronics firms in Scotland. The funding for this project came from the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. Such research support was not too surprising since the government wanted to encourage the growth, research and development of the electronics industry in Scotland and to support such firms with contracts from the Ministry of Defence. Burns was interested in how firms adapted to situations where there were rapid changes in technology, whereas previously they had existed in relatively stable situations. As it turned out most of the Scottish based firms failed to do this and the Research and Development laboratories were either shut down or severely curtailed in their activities. Burns identified some of the reasons which led to this state of affairs: power conflicts concerning the status of the laboratory engineers and no doubt the inter-linked tendency to turn management problems into personality conflicts. Structural difficulties were put down to ignorance, stupidity or the obstructiveness of particular individuals.

It was from immersion in these early studies that Burns hit upon the now well known distinction between ‘mechanistic’ and ‘organic’ systems of management practice. This was really an ideal type distinction because no enterprise was simply one or the other. In essence the mechanistic system was seen, by the researchers, as appropriate for enterprises operating in stable environments. The organic system by contrast was appropriate for enterprises operating in conditions of rapid change. The first system was a hierarchical ‘top down’ arrangement where information flowed up but decisions and instructions flowed down. The second entailed much more lateral communication than vertical command and occupational roles which were much less fixed and rigid. The emphasis was on fluid interaction intent on solving problems rather than relying on some omniscient person at the head of the firm. These two types were actually described in some detail and were explicitly regarded as ideal types.\(^{58}\) It can be clearly seen that there are resonances with Durkheim’s organic and mechanical solidarity and also, in the mechanistic type, with Weber’s treatment of bureaucracy.

It is important to emphasise, as the authors did, that the key word underlying the distinction between mechanistic and organic systems is ‘appropriateness’:

\(^{58}\) Op cit. pp. 120-121
‘We have endeavoured to stress the appropriateness of each system to its own specific set of conditions. Equally, we desire to avoid the suggestion that either system is superior under all circumstances to the other. In particular, nothing in our experience justifies the assumption that mechanistic systems should be superseded by organic in conditions of stability.’

However, the central question posed by the Scottish study, was why they did not shift from a mechanistic to an organic form of management when it was more appropriate to do so? Putting the matter in conceptual terms, Burns and Stalker identified the answer in the co-existence within the organisation of political and status systems and to the differing ways in which power conflicts were played out. In the Scottish cases instead of seeing the Research and Development laboratories as essential to adapting to change they were seen as threats to the status system and to the existing form of political control within the organisation. In these firms the main line of conflict was between production and research and development. However, in the English based electronic companies which Burns and Stalker went on to study the main line of conflict was between sales and development. They noted that the market situation was different. In the Scottish cases the markets were more protected by government contracts, whereas in the English cases the relationship with commercial markets was stronger. Hence the power balance between the various occupational and sectional groups was different. This, it was argued, was why the English based electronics companies moved towards more organic forms of management and proved to be economically more successful.

The data which informs The Management of Innovation is rich in ethnographic detail, based as it is upon extensive interviewing and non-participant observation as well as documentary analysis. Even so, for all its richness of detail and thickness of description, the analytical framework is grounded in a particular variant of functionalist theory. In this model there are two independent variables which impinge on the organisation from the outside. These are technical and commercial change. The management system becomes the dependent variable. The ‘fit’ between the external and internal systems then becomes functional or dysfunctional, that is appropriate or not appropriate depending upon the way the management

59 Burns and Stalker (1961) op cit. p. 125
system ‘adapts’. Hence, in principle, on an examination of the external environment a diagnosis might be offered as to the ways in which the internal management system needs to adapt to be economically successful.

Yet, as we have seen, the work system is not the only one. The political system has power implications with its concerns over competing demands for resources. Status systems are concerned with the rights, privileges, duties and obligations distributed among organisational members. What is more neither of these two ‘systems’ can be fully understood by internal studies of organisations, but need to be related to the wider society – not least the changing class structure of Britain. The effect of the political or status systems on the work system can be distorting when the individual finds himself or herself with conflicting aims. In general terms this is related back to the ‘appropriateness’ or not of the mechanistic or organic system which prevails in the organisation.

Where then does this leave the business of managing? It would appear to be to subordinate and mesh in the political and status systems, to the work system in order to minimise ‘distortions’ (and Burns and Stalker use this term). The implication appears to be, indeed it is the stated conclusion at the end of the book, that ‘there is an obligation on management not only to interpret (my italics) the external situation to members of the concern, but to present the internal problems for what they truly (my italics) are, namely, the outcome of the stresses and changes in that situation – in markets, technical requirements, the structure of society itself.’ ⁶⁰ That is, to say the least, a tall order. It is almost the managerial equivalent of the philosopher king. We might imagine that this is the beginning of managerial wisdom but, of course, it is in interpretation that difficulties reside. Within management itself we cannot assume that consensus will always occur let alone when it comes to communicating with employees and trade unions. Even so we can see why The Management of Innovation has had a long shelf life and why when a new edition was published in the 1990s the Financial Times observed that Burns ‘created a string of concepts which have had an increasingly international influence. …They have improved Western management practices immeasurably … and made millionaires out of several famous American pundits who embroidered them.’ ⁶¹

---

⁶⁰ Ibid p. 262
⁶¹ Cited in Poggi op cit. p. 51.
The Management of Innovation, for all its richness of detail and thick description, does represent of variant of functionalist theory, albeit a sophisticated one, with its emphasis on systems and their interaction. But, given its central concern with change it is certainly not static, nor does it make assumptions about systems ‘naturally’ returning to equilibrium. Indeed Burns and Stalker explicitly reject that style of thinking. But they are fascinated by what some firms are able to do in times of rapid external changes, namely, to work out effective systems of organization in the face of contingencies and uncertainties. They learn to develop non-programmed decision-making processes.

‘In exploiting human resources in this new direction, such concerns have to rely on the development of a “common culture”, of a dependably constant system of shared beliefs about the common interests of the working community and about the standards and criteria used in it to judge achievement, individual contributions, expertise, and other matters by which a person or a combination of people are evaluated. A system of shared beliefs of this kind is expressed and visible in a code of conduct, a way of dealing with other people. This code of conduct is, in fact, the first sign to the outsider of the presence of a management system appropriate to changing conditions.’

These references to common culture and codes of conduct are a reminder that Burns was influenced by anthropological work. Indeed, as we have seen, at one point he writes of the firm as a community, which has its own particular flavour, style of conduct and social structure and points out that individuals coming in have to learn the culture and become familiar with it. Needless to say this is not always a straightforward matter since we come to recognise and identify that struggles for power and control that may in practice be involved. There may be reluctance to accept newcomers and what they are perceived to stand for. There may be formations of counter-cultures, located in some instances by the emergence of cliques and cabals.

Considerations such as these do tend to move one away from a straightforward functionalist perspective. One can see the significance such considerations began to have for Burns in the light of his Preface to the

---

62 Op cit. p. 119
63 Ibid p.258
64 This is notably well developed in Tom Burns (1956) ‘The Reference of Conduct in Small Groups: Cliques and Cabals in Occupational Mileux’, Human Relations vol.8 pp.147-167.
Second Edition of *The Management of Innovation* which he wrote in 1966. There he reflected on the ambiguity in the analytical connotations of the information that had been so assiduously collected. The subtle point he made there was that the ambiguity existed because the events and actions described were both elements of individual personalities and of the organised social environment. Individual identities and institutional systems were inextricably intertwined: each was the creation of the other.

What this suggests to me is that what can be seen at one level as a structural-functional study contains within it the seeds for the re-interpretation of behaviour as variously oriented forms of social action. This, surely, is the implication of what Burns wrote in the new Preface under the heading of organisational dynamics:

‘We are, I believe, closer to the study of the social world as process, instead of an anatomy frozen into “structured” immobility; closer to the identification of the abstraction, society, with empirical fact, behaviour, if we accept the essential ambiguity of social experience and organise interpretation of it in dynamic rather than structural terms. It is in this way, by perceiving behaviour as a medium of the constant interplay and mutual re-definition of individual identities and social institutions, that it is possible to begin to grasp the nature of the changes, developments and historical processes through which we move and help to create.’

I think this gives us a strong lead as to how Burns perceived the practice of sociology, what he understood to be entailed in examining and dissolving the relationship of the individual and society. There is the importance of understanding the complexity of individual behaviour in social relations, of delineating and interpreting social interaction. But the importance of understanding historical processes is not neglected. Such understanding can, after all, inform and guide the interpretation of ethnographic data.

The Preface to the 1966 edition of *The Management of Innovation* displays an admirable reflexivity to the work. He emphasises how much of his thinking emerged out of what people had told him about their work experiences and what they thought about them. But it is his final comment that I find arresting since it expresses a paradox and a puzzle:

65 Ibid p.xvi
‘Now, some years after writing the book, and with the added experience of a
good deal of subsequent research, I am more than ever impressed with the
extraordinary gap that exists between the perceptiveness, intellectual grasp
and technical competence of the people who work in industrial concerns,
and the cumbrous, primitive, and belittling nature of the administrative
structures by which they direct their efforts, and of the constraints they see
fit to impose on their thinking and liberty of actions.’

Burns did indeed come to recognise that the lived experience of
organisational life contains many elements. Some twenty years after the
publication of *The Management of Innovation*, in an unpublished paper, he
put the matter in a methodologically radical way:

‘In practice working organisations seem to be makeshift assemblies of
relationships and activities which operate in accordance with quite different
sets of principles and assumptions and different rationales. They are, to use
Lev-Strauss’ useful word, *bricolages*, composed out of second-hand bits and
pieces of rather general notions and traditions of how to go about things,
each having its own semblance of logic and its own semblance of
legitimacy.’

I would only add that, while this formulation emphasises the element of
contingency and the many, often discrepant, facets of organisational life, we
should still recognise (as Burns did) that inequalities of power, skills and
resources can and do affect outcomes. It necessarily requires good
ethnographic research, combined with a wider awareness of social
topography to show how and why things work out as they do.

**Excursus. On the shoulders of Burns.**

Sometimes, if you are lucky, it is possible to build upon the work of others.
Here I want to give a brief illustration of how my colleagues and I were able
to benefit from Burns’ earlier work

---

66 Ibid. p.xxii
In the late 1970s and early 1980s we were engaged in a study of industrial participation in Scottish Industry. After some more general survey work a number of case studies were undertaken in individual enterprises. One was a multi-national US-owned company with a plant near Edinburgh which produced high-quality electronic equipment on a small batch basis. This was, at the time, a very successful company and, sure enough, we found that the organic system of management was alive and well there. The company had an explicit philosophy which emphasised a common culture and shared values, informal processes of interaction. All of this operated within a context of market expansion. This experience of course gives one renewed respect for the earlier researcher and some re-assurance that your own work is being vindicated. At the same time it also represents a challenge. Is there nothing more to be said? As it happened there was. We realised that not all sections of the enterprise were involved in this organic web of dependency. Indeed, the company had come to recognise this and in consequence had set up quality teams and circles as a means of developing a sense of ‘enterprise consciousness’ and involvement for all employees.

But there was something else going on too. The research and development activities embodied the notion of a ‘community of science’. Yet, for all the informality and apparent lack of any formal structure in the work place there was also in practice an emphasis at the highest level on the need for systems to organise and control the engineering and intellectual efforts. There was no doubt that these could be and were monitored by the California head office and failure to satisfy defined criteria at various check points could lead to innovating developments being stopped. As we wrote at the time:

‘This organisation structuring is the invisible girders upon which the apparently informal work interaction takes place. It is the very process that determines what space each worker has, what autonomy they can expect, what interaction they undertake and what participation they can expect in their day-to-day work. As we looked at those people involved in the project development we saw very different opportunities for participation and different forms of satisfaction and legitimacy ceded to management.’

What we sought to do in this particular case study was to show that, while hierarchy and overt systems of discipline were not evident, as in other more

---

69 Ibid p.48.
traditional forms of organisation, there were deeper structures and less visible forms of project administration which powerfully affected what was and what was not done. Our sociological task here was to show how and why, in certain circumstances, forms of organic management could mask underlying bureaucratic controls. Although going beyond Burns in this respect, it was by standing on his shoulders, so to speak, that we were able to do so.

*Down to cases: The BBC. Public Institution and Private World.*

One can readily see the kinship between *The Management of Innovation* and *The BBC*. Both are ethnographic studies of organisations and it is not difficult to see the same hand at work. They both make use of the analytic distinction between work, political and status systems and seek to trace their interaction to great effect. However, whereas the first study related to a number of organisations the second focussed on just one. This among other things led to a closer interest as to how and why people in the same organisation came to give different accounts of the same situation or event. Again, while both studies emphasise the importance of studying social processes, the second turned out to be much more diachronic than originally intended.

The career of the project is itself worthy of comment. Burns was invited to contribute to BBC management conferences in 1960 and 1961. He was invited back to spend a week rather than a day at a further conference later in 1961 and asked to do some interviewing ahead of the conference of senior people who would be attending. This all went well and so he sought to carry out a much more extensive interviewing programme – which he regarded as extended conversations rather than standardised interviews – and this took place in the early part of 1963. He met two hundred people in this way in four of the BBC’s sections as well as many others throughout the Corporation in a more tangential way. He describes how he began to discern something he termed the BBC ‘manner’ which pointed to a normative system, an organised code of conduct and values and expressed in the ways in which participants described ‘the rules of the game’. So far so good, until in 1964 he sought the Corporation’s permission to publish his report, as any academic would want to do. This was refused. Indeed he was warned not to ‘leak’ material to professional colleagues. Burns was puzzled and frustrated by this but cited Paul Lazarsfeld’s comment written 25 years earlier:
‘If there is any one institutional disease to which the media of mass communications seem particularly subject, it is a nervous reaction to criticism. As a student of mass media I have been continually struck and occasionally puzzled by this reaction, for it is the media themselves which so vigorously defend principles guaranteeing the right to criticise.’\textsuperscript{70}

It was not until 1972, with a new Director General in post and other changes in the Board of Management, that Burns obtained permission to publish. Not only so but in 1973 he spent seven weeks interviewing another sixty BBC employees, many of them senior managers and up dating other material. What this meant, therefore, was that he made a virtue out of necessity by making the study more longitudinal than he had ever intended it to be. Hence the private world of this public institution was even more revealing when eventually the work was published. The whole study is a very good example of a researcher who had the skill and nous to improvise when things did not turn out as originally intended.

The study does not purport to be a history of the BBC although care is taken to place the account in its historical context and the circumstances that led up to a public service, rather than commercial broadcasting organisation. This dealt with government-broadcasting relations from the beginning, the role of John Reith as the first Director-General (the Reithian ethos) the growth of television and the emergence of commercial competition in the 1960s. A bureaucratic form of management evolved that had a double-edged character to it:

‘The BBC…sees itself as perpetually beleagured, under pressure, being lobbied, or being compelled to lobby. The outsider tends to read this as caginess, defensiveness – or complacency.’\textsuperscript{71}

Burns was fascinated with the way in which the concept of professionalism dominated the self-images of the interviewees and the ways in which notions of professional standards came to serve as criteria for good work and good programmes. The concept also embodied a sense of moral order. The importance of this comes out in his reflections on its implications for the idea of public service broadcasting:

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid p. xv
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid p. 32
‘The moral order endows them with a legitimacy and authority which are regarded as distinguishable from and at times superior to contractual obligations, loyalty to the organisation, or compliance with public or other “outside” demands or claims. It is in this …capacity that the professionalism of the broadcaster can be regarded as having supplanted the idea of public service as it was defined and established under Reith, and as it was developed during the thirties and forties.’

The inference Burns drew from this was that in practice the ‘professionals’ in their occupational roles tended to pay little attention to audiences. Audiences and their concerns were left to ‘management’. The concept of professionalism could function as a barricade to shelter away from public opinion. This in turn helped to foster the growth of managerialism in the BBC as a Corporation. Indeed between the 1963 and 1973 interviews the McKinsey Consultants were called in. Their report was never made public but it was seen as an occasion for and a justification of a more ruthless style of management, from very career-minded management ‘types’. Part of the on-going process, which had taken place through these ten years, was a re-organisation of administrative systems to tighten up financial controls. This led to more monitoring of work activities, more reviews, and in general closer supervision

By the time the BBC book was published Burns had come to a conclusion that the Corporation was beset by competition from within and without, that its client relationship to the government of the day was fractious and brittle and that it was in danger of being incorporated into the world of business and industry. It was in danger of losing its sense of what it was to be a public service organisation. He makes clear his own position on the role of the BBC in a robust statement:

‘The BBC is even now, I believe, comparatively immature and unformed. Misguided and intolerant though he may have been, Reith’s conception of broadcasting as a public service, of a BBC imbued with a sense of mission, of the people who worked in it as a community dedicated to the public good was, I believe, wholly appropriate. It is also the only conception which makes political and economic sense, perhaps especially in the present situation of the country. It is also the only conception which has a hope of superseding the miscellany of values and purposes compounded of

---

72 Ibid p.126
individual commitments to professionalism, to carers, to management efficiency, to saving money or making money, which are the prevailing currency. Potentially the BBC still represents an enormously effective agency of political, cultural and social enlightenment.\(^73\)

Burns’ work on the BBC remains a landmark study. Indeed, while there have been a number of journalistic, biographical and autobiographical accounts, which give insights into the BBC and the experience of working there, only one full length academic study has been written since.\(^74\) Georgina Born’s work makes it amply clear that the managerialist trends observed by Burns and the growing pre-occupation with finance and accounting, had carried on apace. It reached its apotheosis during the period in which John Birt was the Managing Director. The auditing culture led to widespread demoralisation within the organisation. It was widely reported that speaking out of turn about the BBC became a sackable offence.

Born’s very fine anthropological study did not envisage a return to a Reithian one-nation BBC. But, like Burns, she endorsed the value of public service broadcasting. At the end of her study she offers a comment which has clear echoes of Burns’ views on the plurality of social systems:

‘The BBC’s role….is to provide a unifying space in which plurality can be performed, one in which the display and interplay of diverse perspectives can animate and reshape the imagined communities of the nation. It is a space in which plurality not only of information and opinion, but of expression, of aesthetic and imaginative invention, must have full rein. The BBC’s task, now as always, is to be hopeful. The realisation of its vision will be uncertain; but the vision must be inspired.’\(^75\)

**Conclusion: an Intellectual Craftsman**

To speak of Tom Burns as an intellectual craftsman seems to me to be entirely appropriate. I think that Poggi was right to observe that ‘throughout his career he preferred being a practitioner of sociology to being an apologist for it’.\(^76\) This did not stop him from outlining in his Edinburgh Inaugural Lecture why sociology, both in its descriptive and explanatory aspects, was

\(^73\) Ibid p.296
\(^75\) Ibid. p.517.
\(^76\) Op cit. p.44
always a critical activity. He laid great emphasis, for example, on the ways in which sociological practice routinely questions the assumptions of those in authority in education, law, politics and so on. Assumptions about equality of educational opportunity were cited by him as a case in point. And to a more general public who might see sociology as disclosing what everybody already knows, what is ‘obvious’, he pointed out that sociology can sometimes overturn common sense assumptions. Of course once such findings are made known they become part of the world of the ‘obvious’!

But the practice of sociology for Burns meant a serious engagement with empirical work. For him this was primarily ethnographic, although he was well aware of the importance of statistical data where necessary, as in the case of demographic trends when looking at changes in community relations. In his ethnographic field work he was innovating in his use of concepts, of which the mechanistic and organic systems contrast is the most well known. Not only so but he made strenuous efforts to link macro and micro considerations in social analysis. This was certainly in part because of his awareness of the importance of politics in small and large settings. It was this which enabled him to grasp something of the character of social change. For example in the course of an analysis of social change in a research laboratory he extends his argument to the wider sphere:

‘And while politics are always about the terms of our contract with the wider society, and about justice and injustice, and about who are to be the top people, there are manifest differences between the kind of terms possible to such contracts today and yesterday. So that politics are not only about the rules of the game – the game itself changes. It changes with the nature and extent of the resources which the game is about.’

In recent years, thanks to Michael Burawoy, we have been encouraged to think of the importance of public sociology. In the broadest terms this has to do with sociologists engaging in conversation with publics, who are themselves engaged in conversations in the wider society. Burawoy distinguished between what he termed traditional and organic public sociology. The first relates to sociologists whose work reaches beyond their own profession and addresses matters of public importance. The second

---

77 T. Burns (1995) Micropolitics in Burns (1995) op cit. p. 117 Originally this article was published the Administrative Science Quarterly vol. 6 no. 3 1961, pp. 257-81
involves collaborative work in and with civic associations of diverse kinds. Burns’ work connects with both of these. His most well known works The Management of Innovation and The BBC: Public Institution and Private World spoke to publics in industry, management, trade unions, the mass media and government. Moreover, his interviews, which he more readily regarded as conversations, were models of how to seek information and clarity from knowledgeable and articulate people and to do so without condescension.

While his reading stretched far beyond sociological boundaries he clearly benefited from the sociological tradition. From Durkheim there was an abiding interest in the nature of the moral order; from Weber a deep historical understanding of the nature of bureaucratic organisation; from Simmel, a sensitivity to the fine threads and nuances of social interaction; and from Marx a fascination with the dynamics of social change. When we consider his work in its totality we can surely appreciate that we are in the presence of a master craftsman.

Acknowledgements.

I thank Professor Bridget Fowler, Professor Lee Parker and Professor Gianfranco Poggi for their very helpful and constructive comments.