A Sociological Theory of Industrial Accidents

The heart of this chapter is an attempt to follow Hale and Hale’s demand and build a new theory of industrial accidents. To do this, it has been necessary to “reassemble” the sociology of work in such a way that it can be used to understand a series of analytically separate, yet empirically interlinked, social relations in the workplace. The new comprehension is formulated to be sufficiently abstract to lend itself to the analysis of the production of a variety of errors within organizations. Subsequent to this formulation, a specific treatment of accidents takes place. The theory conceptualizes that peoples’ relationships to their work are managed through social relations of work and that these exist at three levels in the firm—rewards, command, and organization—as well as a nonsocial individual member level. Accidents, which are taken to be a specific case of organizationally produced error, are seen to be produced through the functioning of these levels. Both the accident literature and personal field research are mustered to provide empirical backing for the theory developed. Through the evidence gathered, and through deduction from the theory, a series of hypotheses pertaining to work accidents are constructed, social relation by social relation. Subsequent to detailed discussion of the theory, some general and more abstract hypotheses are made that will guide empirical research. Such is the scope of the main body of the chapter.

The theory of work is essentially a synchronic one. It is obvious, however, that all workplaces come into being as a result of diachronic processes. The introductory section will outline the sociological theory, first placing it against a background of a series of reflections and insights drawn from the previous two chapters, and subsequently turning to an
elementary discussion on a sociology of accidents that will give, if one likes, a bird’s-eye view of the topography of the theory by pointing out a few valleys and hills. A series of reflections on the relationship between synchronic and diachronic analysis will be drawn in a final set of introductory points.

INTRODUCTION

Diachronic Analysis

*Transformations in the Spheres of Culture, Information, and Interests*

In this chapter, the workplace will be a central focal point, whereas in the previous two chapters it was of but secondary interest. In Chapter 1, British coal mining was initially portrayed, with a concrete example from 1583, as being carried out in modest-sized, open-cast mines, with work conducted in small homogeneous groups. By 1662, some mines had grown sufficiently for industrial action to focus on safety. Changes in three spheres appear to have occurred: (1) the increased scale of mining and its move underground required the generation of new information about the work environment to permit workers to execute their tasks; (2) members of social worlds with quite different cultural traditions, worlds that had hitherto been separate, entered into interdependent (although unequal) relationships and started to build what would become industrial society; and (3) conflicts of interest emerged. Such transformations culminated in a phenomenon unthinkable in sixteenth-century England: the great mining disasters of the first decades of the twentieth century. They also led to the escalation of professional and state interventions in the name of industrial safety and compensation.

*Information.* The growth of industrial capitalism in British society was accompanied by an increase in the information necessary to guarantee the execution of work. This is evident if one considers the transformation from open-cast to underground mining, or the transformation from human and water power to steam and electricity. Through investment, industrial employers sought to obtain those technical and scientific resources necessary to ensure the completion of work and the furthering of their interests. They also sought the products generated by new knowledge in order to remain competitive. Workers acquired new capacities to deal with information and skills in an environment where modern occupations emerged and others were transformed or destroyed.