



Book Review

Jonas Axelsson, Jan Ch. Karlsson, Egil J. Skorstad (2019): Collective Mobilization in Changing Conditions. Worker Collectivity in a Turbulent Age. Palgrave¹

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In 1961, the Norwegian sociologist Sverre Lysgaard published the book ‘The Worker Collectivity. A study in the Sociology of Subordinates’. The book has become a classic in Nordic working life research. The authors’ intention is partly to present Lysgaard’s work to an international audience, and partly to further develop Lysgaard’s theory.

Based on a comprehensive and vivid case study on a Norwegian pulp and paper mill, Lysgaard presents a theory of the subordinates’ establishment of a strong and defensive collectivity. Lysgaard’s book provides a theoretical framework for understanding the collectivism that characterized ‘industrial society’. Furthermore, Lysgaard’s book has been used to create an understanding of the collective organization and the establishment of systems to regulate conflicts in companies. Today, the book is also used in teaching as a presentation of how it used to be – under industrial production conditions and before individualized forms of employment relations and management systems took over.

The book’s authors have set out to analyze whether ‘The Worker Collectivity’ still exists? Whether it has changed since Lysgaard published his book almost 60 years ago? Whether a revision of Lysgaard’s theory is needed? All in order to formulate a modern theory of ‘The Worker Collectivity’ and Collective Mobilization. The authors do this by digging into Lysgaard’s work, both theoretically and empirically.

First, Lysgaard’s theory is presented, based on his study in the pulp and paper mill. This is done relatively thoroughly and systematically, because although Lysgaard’s book has played a significant role in Nordic working life research, it has never been translated into English. Lysgaard, like many other sociologists of his time, had a systems-theoretical approach to his studies. He found that working conditions were created in a relationship between two systems: the technical/economic and the human system. The technical/economic system is ‘insatiable’, whereas the employees are ‘limited’ in their resources. The technical/economic system is ‘one-sided’, whereas the employees are ‘many-sided’. The technical/economic system is ‘inexorable’, whereas the employees are ‘security-seeking’. The technical/economic system, where employers, supervisors and technicians prevail, is thus in incompatible conflict with the human system in which the employees act. However, the two systems are also interdependent: there is no technical/economic system without employees, and there are no employees without a technical/economic system. Therefore, the workers develop an informal system, ‘the Worker Collectivity’, which sets

¹ You can find this text and its DOI at <https://tidsskrift.dk/njwls/index>.

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limits for the technical/economic system, but without threatening the technical/economic system. Lysgaard describes in great detail the dynamics of The Worker Collectivity. He did find a strong division between ‘them’ (managers and technicians of every kind) and ‘us’ (workers). Workers are not ‘allowed’ to talk to managers. Performance limits are set by the Worker Collectivity. Lysgaard find that the Worker Collectivity is created and maintained through interaction, interpretation and identification.

The authors of this book investigate how the Worker Collectivity, which Lysgaard identified in the 1950s, has evolved. They have therefore (partially) replicated Lysgaard’s study by following the development of working conditions and working relationships in the Norwegian pulp and paper mill Peterson & Son, where Lysgaard 60 years ago made his studies. The authors have studied the factory since the early 1980s until 2012, when the factory was closed. More than 100 qualitative interviews have been conducted, primarily not only with employees, but also with managers.

By the new century, working conditions in the factory had changed dramatically. In the 1950s, employees performed hard manual labor. The work was dirty and the difference between workers on the one hand and managers, salaried employees and technicians on the other hand was very visible. In the new century, the production was largely automated, and the work largely took place in a control room. The difference between worker and employer was no longer particularly visible. Nevertheless, the authors find that the Worker Collectivity still exists and still is maintained. In 2006, the factory was bought by a foreign investor. The new owners tighten the requirements for employee performance, which, in turn, strengthened The Worker Collectivity.

On the basis of the empirical work and on the basis of theoretical considerations, the authors arrive at a revised version of Lysgaard’s theory, which I will briefly discuss.

According to the authors, it is necessary to divide the technical/economic system into two systems: the technical system and the economic system. This is initially empirically justified: in the last decade of the factory, alliances were formed between workers and technicians to secure the production machinery and the quality towards managers representing the economic system.

In addition, the authors find that it is necessary to elaborate much more on the ‘human system’, which expresses values that are socially applicable.

According to the authors, it is therefore necessary to identify four systems for analyzing working relationships. Four systems to which the subordinate workers are all related: the economic system to which the subordinate worker is attached as an employee. The technical system to which the worker is attached as an operator, the human system to which the worker is attached as a human (and citizen?), and the The Worker Collectivity to which the worker is attached as a workmate. There are thus four systemic positions to which the worker will be attached in a stronger or weaker relationship. How the workers perform these positions depends on the conditions and mechanisms that apply in each of the systems.

It seems interesting and promising to use these four positions as analytical approaches to investigate social relationships in companies. The authors show how workers’ positions change under the influence of the conditions under which the work takes place. When the company is in crisis, the position of employee is strengthened. As technology changes, workers’ understanding of themselves as operators changes. As labor market regulation changes, so do workers’ relationships within the company. When intensification and managerial control are strengthened, the position of workmate is also strengthened.

There is one thing I miss in the book: a clearer discussion of the clash throughout the book between the position of Lysgaard in system theory and functionalism and the authors' positions apparently in critical realism. Lysgaard presents *The Worker Collectivity* as a functional and almost necessary system. The authors, on the other hand, propose, based on Lysgaard, an analytical framework for studying how societal mechanisms can influence concrete working relationships.

In my opinion, the four positions identified deserve further development. Not only in the shadow of Lysgaard's work, but also in their own right. It will be interesting if the analytical positions were applied to empirical studies other than the pulp and paper mill, Lysgaard based his study on.