



Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson (2022). *Organisational Misbehaviour*, SAGE, xxvii+322 pages¹

■ **Jan Ch. Karlsson²**

Working Life Science, Karlstad University, Sweden

It started with an article with the ingenious title ‘All quiet on the workplace front?’. Here, Paul Thompson and Stephen Ackroyd (1995) criticized the dominant types of analyses of work organizations in British working life studies of that time. In these studies, they pointed out that workers had disappeared as agents of workplace life, which was the quiet to which they alluded. According to much of the sociology of work, management had succeeded not only in subjecting workers to total control, but also in turning them into self-controlling dopes of company cultures. Already in Thompson and Ackroyd’s critique, we find concepts such as misbehavior, recalcitrance, and appropriation of time and products – concepts that are further theorized in the first edition of their book *Organisational Misbehaviour* (OMB, Ackroyd & Thompson 1999). Throughout, the authors emphasized the importance in workplace life of employees’ collective agency through informal self-organization. Undoubtedly, this is the most important book in the field in the beginning of the 2000s and it had a huge influence on working life studies. The success of the book meant that many have been waiting for a long time for a second edition – and now it is here. As before, Ackroyd and Thompson’s foremost targets of criticism are, on the one hand, the individualistic explanations of the managerialist tradition of Organizational Behavior (OB) and, on the other hand, shallow post-structuralist analyses. In the former case, the title of the book, *Organisational Misbehaviour* (OMB), is of course an ironic twist, alluding to the OB claim that employees always follow management’s wishes – and if they do not, it is due to the influence of individual ‘bad apples’. Ackroyd and Thompson instead puts forward the explanation that new forms of OMB emerge as a consequence of changed managerial regimes. In the latter case, most claims on management controlling workers ‘all the way down’ and electronic panopticons have disappeared by now, but have been replaced by other favorites such as fractured identities. In this book, worker agency is again being emphasized.

The new edition bears the stamp of changes in organizations and working life, leading to new relations underpinning variations in causes, conditions, and consequences of OMB. This leads to both deeper and wider analyses as compared with the earlier one. Mainly, there is a general sharpening of the conceptual tools of the theory of OMB. This includes the insistence that OMB is relational; it is coproduced by representatives of a managerial regime and employees further down the hierarchy, that is of managers and workers or managers and their managers. In the first edition, there was some uncertainty

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

² Corresponding author: Jan Ch. Karlsson, Working Life Science, Karlstad University, Sweden.
E-mail: Jan.karlsson@kau.se



concerning the relation between the concepts ‘organizational misbehavior’ and ‘resistance’. Ackroyd and Thompson insisted that OMB was a qualitatively different phenomenon as compared with resistance, but they did not succeed entirely in making the conceptual distinction clear. This resulted in many sympathetic working life researchers beginning to use the phrase ‘organizational misbehavior and resistance’ to be on the safe side and avoid terminological problems. It is therefore highly satisfactory that the authors now have taken an important step toward greater clarity. Under the overriding concept ‘oppositional practices related to work’, they formulate three overlapping types of practices (p. 251): 1) *Employee misbehavior*, defined as ‘anything you do or think at work that you are not supposed to’. These actions are usually of a collective nature. In comparison with the first edition, one can notice that thinking has been added to the definition. 2) *Workplace resistance*, meaning ‘intentional, upwardly-directed action against employers or their agents (actual or inferred) in pursuit of perceived interests or identities’. It is usually more formally organized than OMB. 3) *Class-based resistance*, which is ‘distinguished by a consciously collective/solidaristic frame of reference, organization building, transformative and/or strategic objectives directed towards capital and/or the state’. These definitions give additional theoretical weight to their claim that OMB is a specific form of oppositional or recalcitrant practice, not some lesser kind of resistance, trade unionism, or class action. The new distinctions are now placed in the last chapter, but it would have been better for readers to understand and reflect on the value of the concepts if the authors had discussed them already at the start of the book. They could then show their fruitfulness as the argumentation unfolds. Still, these clarifications seem promising, but of course, we cannot know until they have been put to the test of empirical research.

Another important theorization concerns the informal, collective self-organization behind OMB. In the analysis, it is the result of a dialectical relation between employee identity and material interests (p. 63): ‘interests and identities are not opposites or mutually exclusive. They reciprocally and discursively form one another. It is an effective combination of collective self-interest and collective self-identity that is always present and the bedrock of group action in the workplace’. When a self-organization has emerged, it can be of three different kinds depending on the relation between interest and identity: a) Interest dominates over identity, b) identity dominates over interest, and c) there is an equal position of the two dimensions. In the first case, the self-organization is characterized by ‘responsible autonomy’. Autonomy in work is protected by taking responsibility for work performance. At the same time, autonomy is guarded not only against management encroachment but also against other workers who might try to trespass on the group’s territory. In that way, this type of self-organization is outward-looking. The second type is instead inward-looking. Here, identity is more important than interest in that workers prioritize controlling the attitudes and behavior of their own membership. It is about upholding norms and substantiate internal hierarchies in self-organizations. In the third type of self-organization, interests and identity are balanced and intertwined. This is regarded as the normal kind. The self-organization is outward and inward-looking at the same time, being characterized by intense involvement in wage–effort bargaining.

Furthermore, the analyses are widened to changes in the relation between the private and the public sphere. The private sphere is defined as the one in which individuals are more autonomous and can manifest their authentic selves, such as the family,

home, and leisure. The public sphere is where instrumental behavior dominates, such as in business, politics, and work. Redrawing the borderlines between what is private and what is public is a new field in which OMB occurs. One example is social media. Employers screen employees' and job applicants' activities in blogs, Facebook, Twitter, etc. In the first case, they are looking for derogatory remarks about the organization and the job – anything negative that can threaten the employer's reputation and brand. All such expressions thereby become OMB, counteracted by management. In the second case, employers are searching for indicators of applicants not being suitable for employment. Employees and job applicants tend to regard what they write on social media as a private matter, while employers treat it as being part of the public sphere.

The authors introduce the book by motivating their writing a new edition. Materially, they point to developing globalism and financialization with wide-ranging consequences for employees' working conditions and work environment – and thereby for forms of OMB. Intellectually, they acknowledge that the first edition has had an enormous influence on studies of organizations, but they still disapprove of much of the research on OMB and resistance – especially from representatives of OB and post-structuralism. This is mirrored in Part I of the book, in which Chapter 1 is an overview of the evidence of the existence of misbehavior in organizations and Chapter 2 deals with historical and current approaches to misbehavior. In the first respect, it should not be a surprise that the argumentation continues to be based on OMB being a substantial fact of organizational life. At the same time, Ackroyd and Thompson accept neither the idea that OMB is everywhere nor that it is nowhere, concisely expressed as that OMB 'is often tractable – it can be reshaped – but not corrigible – it is not likely to go away' (p. 50). They conclude the chapter with an updated version of their model of appropriation of time, effort, product, and identity. In the second Chapter, they find that there is a new orthodoxy in analyses of OMB after decades of neglect, claiming that it is common as a result of activities of reprehensible individuals.

Part II deals with Ackroyd and Thompson's basic relational approach to OMB, analyzing it as being co-produced within the hierarchy of the organization. This is analyzed in three steps. Chapter 3 has the formation of self-organizations of work groups at its center seeking autonomy, in which relations between identity and interests are the driving forces. This is a theoretically important chapter, as informal, collective self-organization is regarded as the mechanism behind OMB. However, as OMB is co-produced, Chapter 4 analyzes the role of management and managerial regimes at different levels, namely, local, corporate, and international (accumulation regimes). In questions of changes of regimes, the authors are much more sophisticated than the usual sequential distinctions between Taylorism and Post-Taylorism or Fordism and Post-Fordism. They talk about partial breaks with Taylorism and Fordism and then regimes involved in financialization of the economy without regarding it as linear developments. Then, there is a chapter on 'misbehavior' of corporate management elites, Chapter 5. I put misbehavior in inverted commas because the topic is not really covered by the theory of OMB, as there is no coproducer to the analyzed actions. There is nobody in the work organization above the executive elite who can define what it does or thinks as not allowed. However, this does not make the chapter less interesting or less important – or less shocking in what it reveals about what these people are able to get away with.

Part III, which comprises Chapters 6–9, provides more detailed analyses of the development of OMB in specific empirical arenas, namely, humor, social media, sexual



behavior, and bullying. Common to them all is that identity stands out as more important in the analyses than material interests. The main argument concerning humor is that there is an 'increased use by employees of cynical and satirical debunking of managerial pretensions and/or outright dishonesty' (p. xxiv). Social media are analyzed as a new contested terrain between management and workers, in which employers tend to try to control employees' comments on their work, which thereby becomes a new form of misbehavior. Sexual OMB is given an intricate scrutiny through changes in the spectrum of what the authors call convivial and coercive misbehavior. Both can be deemed OMB by management, but the first kind is consensual while the second is not. Their perspective on bullying at work originates in it largely being produced by relations in organizations – and thereby a new site for OMB. They differentiate between three types of bullying: Supervisor/manager on worker, customer on worker, and worker on worker. Research shows that the first kind is by far the most common one, here explained as part of employers' striving for control in order to pressurize workers to more profitable work in new management regimes.

In the concluding Chapter 10, Ackroyd and Thompson take stock with the 'resistance debate' in the social sciences and OB – a debate in which they themselves have been the most important contributors. Without their 'All quiet' article and the first edition of this book, there would have been a less fruitful debate – if any. They discuss how their opponents have oscillated between two main positions: The first one claiming that there is not any resistance anymore, the second that resistance is everywhere and made up of any act. As a corrective, Ackroyd and Thompson analyze changes in managerial regimes as contexts of OMB.

I am not one for making predictions, but in this case, I can safely say that the success of this book will continue with the new edition.

References

- Ackroyd, S., & Thompson, P. (1999). *Organisational Misbehaviour*, London: SAGE.
Thompson, P., & Ackroyd, S. (1995). All quiet on the workplace front? A critique of recent trends in British industrial sociology, *Sociology* 29(4): 615–633.