Talking politics

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Abstract

This paper revisits the author's Ph.D. research in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester during the early 1960s. Wes Sharrock also was a PhD student there, and they shared dissatisfactions with the predominant approaches to sociology at the time, and turned for inspiration Winch's critique of social science and Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. At that time they also became acquainted with the empirical alternative to sociology offered by ethnomethodology. This paper describes how insights inspired through frequent and long conversations with Sharrock inspired the approach the author took in his observational study of active members of a local political party. The study was focused on 'The Left Wing' of that party, but rather than treating talk of 'The Left' as a representation of a stable ideological group, the study paid close attention to the discursive use of the distinction between members of the local party leadership, and elucidated the changing membership of 'The Left Wing' and the occasioned relevance of being included in that category. The study suggested that 'talking politics' was not a merely a matter of talking *about* politics, but was an expression of and constitutive feature of local party politics.

1. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In this paper I return to work I did for my Ph.D. on the Ording Labour Party[1] in order to illustrate the way in which working closely with Wes Sharrock has helped shaped my approach to sociology and my own studies of social life. I first met Wes Sharrock in 1966 when he was a post graduate working on his Ph.D. in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. Although I was working at the University of Salford I was also registered as a Ph.D. student in the same Department at Manchester, which I joined in 1962 as a postgraduate student before taking up the teaching position at Salford. Wes and I shared the same supervisor, Valdo Pons, and we soon found that we also shared similar interests in our work, particularly, we shared misgivings concerning the predominant

[1] This is a fictitious name used to preserve the anonymity of the people involved.

direction that sociology was then being driven in which, despite its claims to be 'scientific', was, for us, methodologically inadequate, lacking in *methodological rigour*.

The Department of Social Anthropology at Manchester also included Sociology, and under the forceful and charismatic leadership of Max Gluckman the Department placed an emphasis upon the analysis of observed interactional 'facts' as these revealed themselves to the observer through time. By so doing it was resisting the growing belief that a scientific sociology could best be achieved by the use of survey methods, the results of which could be quantified and thus be made available for correlation and putative causal analysis.[2] It seemed to me that if the departmental method of direct or participant observation was valid in what were predominantly tribal societies then it should be equally applicable and valid in the study of institutional life in modern Britain.[3] To this end I had commenced to study by direct observation the activities and relationships of 'Socialist' politicians as they unfolded in a local political party situated in a neighbouring town—at the time I thought of the party as my tribe.

However, whilst sociology had expressed interests in 'party politics', its methodological approaches were of little value in supporting the observational approach I was adopting. In particular I was concerned with the way in which sociology dealt with so-called subjective phenomena, with the role of ideology, with participants' understandings, and relatedly with the nature of activities themselves. These were subjects which were either ignored or peremptorily dealt with. In discussing this with Wes we found that we shared the same concerns. Wes presented a paper to the Department[4] that criticised the manner in which following Mannheim sociologists conceptually separated ideas or ideologies from activities in order to investigate the connection. Long before our shared interests and misgivings about sociology led us to Winch (1958), or even to consider the relevance of Wittgensteinian philosophy to sociology, he argued that, though in so many ways our ideas and beliefs may be seen as guiding our activities, those ideas are internally or logically connected to them. Lying beneath what he was beginning to comprehend was the understanding that participants' activities in the world document what they believe, because in a sense those activities represent, and thus

[2] Wes and I expressed our dissatisfaction with sociology's infatuation with methods such as survey analysis and variable analysis by suggesting that, whilst they might be useful for selling soap powder, it was useless for undertaking serious, rigorous sociology.

[3] I was not the first Manchester student to follow this route, as studies of industrial factory life had been undertaken by Lupton (1963), Cunnison (1966), and Wilson (1963), and of schools by Lacey (1971).

[4] At that time was an unusual and radical step for a post-graduate to present a paper to the Department, and it began the Sharrock tradition of being highly critical of positions adopted by some of the Department's respected staff. This tradition carried over to the new Sociology Department that eventually emerged from the Department of Social Anthropology.

are, what they believe. Collaboration and trust between people is founded on the basis of such 'knowledge' irrespective of what we or they might say or even think they or we believe; if activities do not conform to or are not in line with those announced 'beliefs', then the person may properly be seen as not having, or not having had, those beliefs in the first place. Where this is the case, a seeming 'inconsistency' may be found by others to exist and may even be found to exist by oneself. Such findings might be found accountable and reviewable for explanation and possible behavioural consequences.

However, I was not totally convinced by Wes' account, and my response to his version that we should respect the senses in which belief and action are internally connected was to object that this could not be so, and I cited Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis as making my point and I did so knowing that at that time at least some form of the Weberian position on subjective understanding was common to both of our sociological perspectives. In the course of continual discussion, we, and especially he, came to develop some of the ramifications of his position. He convinced me that what he had to say was important but also that the methodological troubles that I was encountering in my research were an essential consequence of the organisation of the very social world that I was encountering. Thus, we began a journey into rethinking his understanding of the ramifications for our research of his earlier argument. Our discussions at this point were involved in, and deeply related to, the practice of our doing Sociology. The relevance was obvious enough: he was at that time involved in the observation of expressed thinking in the work of the planners, as they worked in the University Planning Department. Our immediate concern was with the fact that in both our fields its members talked—in fact talking constituted most of what they did—and our sociological reading even of case studies had not prepared us for this now obvious fact. So, the question arose as to what this talk *was*. What was it doing, how did it have consequences, and how did it relate to a sociological study of our yet to be discovered social organisations?

2. TALKING POLITICS

Because of our discussions, I became interested in the issue of how to deal with the talk that made up the activities of 'my' politicians as these talk/activities made up the content of my field studies. I was, however, continually faced with analytic questions as to how properly to define my field: how properly to describe its membership and associated activities. I had started to concentrate upon the activities of a so-called 'Left-Wing' which was said to exist 'within' the Labour Party and which had so much significance in their talk. But not only was the term 'within' problematic, so was the term 'the Labour Party'. I could follow something like common practice and use the notion of party or party membership obtainable from official records. This might seem like an obvious and normal choice as an

operational gambit to define the field. However, the related question of how I should do so and of what I would be doing by doing so soon raised themselves. The point here is that sociology like psychology takes its objects of study and much of its conceptual apparatus for that study from the very language community to be studied. The logic of the language to be used is already ensconced in and pre-exists in the world prior to any study by the sociologist who might wish to use that logic, let alone to stipulate its meaning for research purposes. Hence even the word 'party' as in political party has use or usages dependent on context, both locally and in the wider society, and it must surely be important to see how, and with what authority, the researcher relates his or her usage to vernacular usage, both general and particular. The party might be seen as like a bucket containing members but, quite unlike a bucket, it meets on Wednesdays and does so without most of its members being present. Also, very unlike a bucket, *it* takes decisions. Each usage of 'party' within its context emphasises different senses of the word. As will become obvious this becomes a problem to the sociologist when faced with any natural 'group' or 'grouping' that they wish to study. The question is who or what counts as a member of a 'group' or 'party'? Immediately, I contemplated identifying the membership of my political party as part of defining the field I was faced with the fact that in varying contexts this turned out to be a question raised my members themselves, with the effectual answer given differently according to different priorities. One 'official' way they sometimes counted membership was to include all who had paid up their subscription. Occasionally, this version of membership was certainly raised, though in a manner that hardly made it fit my requirements. It was sometimes raised at meetings to object to the point of view of someone who it was claimed was 'not a paid-up member', This would almost always be embroiled in an argument that was either not resolved or was resolved by means that were coloured by the imperative 'that we get on with the business.' Use by the sociologist of such materials as part of a conceptual apparatus fails to respect that such 'facts' only had sense as part of the circumstances of their production and not as independent sociological facts or evidence of anything of more than momentary significance.

In fact, throughout my research period debate and sometimes bitter argument within the party revolved around the question of what their constitution really said and or implied for what they should be doing. Many who were, as far as they were concerned, members of the party had not 'paid their dues', or had they? What did 'paying one's dues' really mean? When on the rare occasions in which 'non-payment' was used as a challenge against a person's voting rights, they successfully responded that they had been fully prepared to pay their dues but no one had come to collect them. In fact, two of the sixteen party wards no longer had any collectors, yet they still held what were counted as constitutionally accepted meetings. I attended the meetings of one such ward and over more than a year no more than five people ever attended, and though not a member of that ward I was

included in the five. On the other hand, one ward was seen by some to have an 'astronomical membership', but this was explained to me, often critically by members of other wards, that these numbers were 'an exaggeration' due to the fact that two of its members, both city councillors, were retired and dedicatedly spent all day, every day, knocking on doors and asking for membership fees. 'They have nothing else to do.' This came over as a complaint. Of course, if I wished to obtain an 'official 'membership I could do so from the appropriate official of the City Party: the membership secretary. But if I had attempted to do so, what I would have seen to be asking or promoting as a topic would have been entirely dependent upon his knowledge of me. Given that he knew me well as a consequence of my acquired familiarity he would undoubtedly have laughed and winked his eye knowing that I 'knew the score' and that membership figures were given and adjusted 'for all practical purposes'. An important purpose, though only one such purpose, was to send such figures along with appropriate share of funding to official headquarters, for whom they were always found adequate.

This business of the embedded nature of social phenomena and its consequences for research is a major concern in the writings of Egon Bittner. Phenomena such as internally-generated documentation have no independent life. Instead, such documentation is itself a part of the field of study in that it is ongoingly and contextually interpreted and used by an organization's membership in the course of its social life. For example, amongst their many other uses, constitutional organisational documents and explanations may be given as a guide to a neophyte, including a researcher commencing a study of that organization. It then becomes a part of the neophyte's learning process to see how activities are themselves selectively related to constitutional rules, which are themselves ongoingly interpreted and elaborated by and in changing contexts of usage.

> … the point made is that factual realities of socially organised settings are themselves throughout permeated by the ways in-which-they-are-known, and derive, keep and change their meanings with it. Moreover, the tie of accounts to settings is unavoidable and irremediable because the accounts derive their sensibility and warrant from it. The absence of this feature—the feature of dependence of accounts, and incidentally of all expressions and of all practical action, on the natural habit of their occurrence for natural meaning, a feature known a 'indexicality'—tends to give representations of social settings the aspect of confabulation or fiction, an ever-present risk in historiography which Wilhelm Dilthey attempted to overcome through strictly period-bound hermeneutics of cultural events. (Bittner 1973)

What became one of my adopted objects of study—'the Left-Wing' of the local party— itself posed the question of what it was and who was in it, and this might seem to have been a resolvable problem for me because my study of activities/talk was done directly. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it was my

attempt at direct observation that revealed the problem. From the beginning of my research, I learned from newspapers of the existence of a 'Left-Wing' whose members proclaimed themselves as such and who were explained as being those city council party members who as councillors voted in council against the directives of the party whip. That is to say, they voted in council against the policy that had been decided collectively, but against their wishes in the group policy meeting preceding the town council meeting. The newspapers expressed the view of the majority of those councillors who had attended the meeting and referred to the faction as having 'broken rank'. Such 'breaking rank' occurred on some significant occasions, though the individuals involved were not always the same ones, and the numbers varied between ten and thirteen. The first occasion involved the council's use of a public order act to prevent what 'The Left' called 'Fascists' from staging a demonstration in the town. Whilst one might have expected otherwise 'The Left' opposed the use of a public order act to prevent the 'Fascists' from holding a public meeting. They were defeated at the meeting, but gave explanations for their opposition. 'Better to meet 'em and chuck 'em in the river', a self-proclaimed 'Left-Winger' told me. Another said 'We were against the use of the public order act because next time it would only be used against us.' By use of the term 'us', I take it that the speaker was seeking to discriminate between 'us' (the self-proclaimed 'Left-Wing') and what he saw as the more powerful 'Right-Wing', 'The Establishment' or 'The Controllers' of the group's policy. On another occasion the so called 'Left-Wing' 'broke ranks' over a decision to raise council house rents and was reported to the party regional office, from whence a warning was issued that the members concerned could have their party membership withdrawn. This gave rise to an internal constitutional wrangle wherein the so-called 'Left-Wingers' claimed that the authority for their position was given by a vote taken by the City Party executive; a source of authority that was denied by the council group meeting, which argued that the City Party was concerned with national politics and had no authority over the council group. Whilst the decision of the party regional executive suggested that this ruling was constitutionally correct, it was never accepted by members of 'The Left' who interpreted the situation as demonstrating the undemocratic and self-centred 'Right-Wing' tendency that had distanced itself from the party grass roots.

It will be noticed that throughout this account so far, I have made reference to a 'Right Wing' and a 'Left-Wing' and have suggested—as I was informed—that these were labels used to discriminate 'groups'. Given that there was rivalry between these two 'groups', which involved at least some of the former calling the latter 'Communist trouble makers' and the latter calling the former 'Jewish dominated capitalist minded middle-classes', it might seem that as a sociologist I should investigate this to see if this might contain the elements of a sociological explanation of the difference between the two 'groups'. At first I thought that this might be possible, and to this end I attempted to draw up a list of the two groups and to

relate a number of such indices as occupation or social class, expressed opinions etc. to each group member in order to gain a profile of those different groups. It certainly seemed to be the case that those preferring to see themselves as 'Left-Wing' displayed on the whole, though by no means exclusively, a different set of beliefs as to the goals of party support. Amongst these were a belief in nationalisation, strong support for trade unionism and, quite differently, a belief in the need to attend local ward and party meetings. Such attendance was deemed necessary so that members including councillors could keep in touch with their grass-roots support, and thereby better represent the interests of the working class both local and national. Amongst those that had been nominated to me as the 'The Left' was a frequently reiterated belief that the council had come to be dominated by a middle class elite that had removed itself from local party wards and had 'lost touch', if they ever had it, with the grass roots and therefore with 'genuine' Socialist ambitions. They were seen to have 'sold out'. But I cannot overemphasise the fact that these opinions—call them beliefs—were by no means exclusively associated with what I at first and many others called 'The Left', and there was little agreement amongst themselves that all such named were 'genuine' members of 'The Left' or were entitled to be called 'Left'. Even more troublesome for me was the fact that over time this membership appeared to change, and I was soon to find that even within the self-proclaimed 'Left' there were doubts as to whether some of the others were 'genuine' and could really be said to belong. So I found myself in the position of attempting to study the activities of a group that was in constant change, with a membership that was in continued disagreement as to who were really members. Worse still, seeming changes in affiliation were often greeted as indications that the persons concerned had never been honest, and from the so-called 'Right Wing' members of the party I found claims to membership of the 'real and honest Left Wing' as against the 'so-called Left-Wing' which 'is attempting to take over our party' So clearly expressed opinions on national issues, together with the above incident and a further refusal to accept group policy over a proposed rent increase, were constitutive of the idea that there was an operative 'Left-Wing', but it was not at all clear universally as to what it was and exactly, how it worked and who its members were. If I pressed for conditions of membership and its basis I might receive answers that indicated that it was the set of people who voted against the whip on 'The Rates Issue' and on 'The Fascist issue' or other such issues, even though these were never exactly the same people nor on the face of it the same issues. Or I might receive answers suggesting that it is those that attend and sustain the city party, though this could be put in a quite different way as being those 'Communists who run or dictate City Party policy.'

3. A METHODOLOGICAL DILEMMA

Although 'talking politics' was a 'real' matter for all concerned, the methodological question arose as to how I could address it sociologically. It was in discussions with Sharrock that I realised that I was now faced with a choice. I could decide who the real 'Left Wing' were and use my criteria for doing so in order to establish membership and to document changes in allegiance over time which might be explained by other changes. This would involve ignoring the inherently troublesome and inconsistent nature of my attribution of membership but would have the seeming sociological advantage of enabling me to theorise as to the variables or factors controlling membership of one group as against the other. Methodologically the situation was no different to that which confronted me when I attempted to define who or what the party was. As in most cases, so in this case theories were readily available to explain these characteristics. From 'The Left' themselves I obtained a form of lay sociological theorising—an almost classic neo-Marxist theory with a touch of Robert Michels' theory thrown in. This explained that, as they moved onwards and upwards in wealth and age, and gained 'the assumed responsibility of civic office', people move mentally away from the needs and feelings of the grass roots and orient towards 'The Establishment.' We could call this the 'sell-out' theory of vernacular theorising. Readymade social theory presents itself everywhere and certainly plays a significant role in the beliefs and doings of society's members, but its adoption by the sociologist as explanation involves a classic confusion between what plays a part in the field of study and the conceptual apparatus for studying it.

So it appeared to be the case that the organisation of that which I desired to study was ill fitted to the classical sociological mode by which I had set about to study it. Focussing upon the topic of 'The Left Wing' certainly seemed to have some form of reality and importance. Participants debated and sometimes disagreed as to its membership; they stated its policy but at the same time argued as to what that policy was and should be. Its organisation and, certainly and all importantly, the use which participants made of it did not, without forcing it, fit into the conceptual framework of classical sociology. The meaning and logical relationships of my object and objects of study, as they were revealed in their use in ordinary life, were not isomorphic with the meanings—their use and logic—as would be involved and required by their incorporation into models of contemporary sociological enquiry. This would leave unresolved the relationship between their use of concepts and my own. This fact would necessarily destroy the possibility of a serious warrant for my findings and would thereby render my results as equivocal. But just as importantly, it would obfuscate the role which their object 'The Left' played in their affairs—the object of my study in the first place.

The alternative choice was proposed and at least partially adopted over the course of time, and it certainly resulted from shop talk with Sharrock. Above all,

I learned from him of the need to take my troubles seriously because they were necessarily telling me something about the natural organisation of my materials. The notion of making a resource of methodological troubles was natural to the depth in his way of thinking, and as we were to find out during the later course of my work, it was central to GarfInkel's (1967) Ethnomethodology, which Wes discovered and which arrived to ears which were already prepared to hear it. We live in what Garfinkel called '[a]n awesomely contingent world', and yet we find that by the use of ad hoc rules of comprehension that we are able to find ways of seeing and achieving the world for what it is. The doing of such ways requires a learned methodicity involving the use of shared and shareable ways of seeing and talking. Our language itself affords us the tools for such achievement both at a most general societal level and, as Wittgenstein (1953: §§2ff.) showed us with his example of the builders, at what, by contrast, we might call a local cultural level. He also of course suggested that to understand how our language works we look not to what the words mean but to their usage—what it is they do—the role they play in our activities and understandings. As I said earlier, it is a strangely neglected fact that the most noticeable feature of human interaction and of social organisation is the talk which accomplishes it. People talk to each other and sometimes at each other. In that talk, words have particular resonances that may be used in order to accomplish social understandings, collective agreements, position takings, and sometimes differences.

Amongst both self-attributing 'Left Wing' politicians that I studied and their enemies, the word 'Left Wing' was a meaningful concept, but also an occasioned concept which in different contexts does different work in describing and accomplishing, or failing to accomplish, their affairs. Of course the concepts of right and left are relative, and the use of such terms make the sense and perform the actions they do in relation to, and by whom, where, and when, and for what purpose, they are being used. Amongst local Labour politicians in Ording as elsewhere, describing someone including oneself as 'Left-Wing' may be taken or have been taken at a general level, and remembering that left and right are relative concepts such a description might need to be elaborated by knowledge of the speaker's position and of the ideas and principles he or she endorses and uses to accomplish that description. Discussion and argument of what that involves, and of the nature of left wing ideas, could be made relevant. On the other hand and depending on context, the description of someone such as a local Labour councillor as one of 'THE Left Wing', would within Ording most probably be taken as indicating membership of the 'group' who broke the whip or who approved of such. It would also most likely have expressed or be related to approval or disapproval. But the term is also relative in another sense in that it is used to relate two phenomena: a loosely defined body of people, and a very loosely defined set of ideas or beliefs somehow expressed in and motivating their activities. The members themselves made such relationships in their talk, both privately and publicly, and this was not just being

done as a scholastic exercise but in an ongoing attempt to understand what was going on, and of course to establish a basis for next and future actions both by individuals and in collective collaboration. Thus the second choice which Wes suggested involved concentration upon the situated socio-logic of the words 'Left' and 'Left-Wing' in the affairs and doings of those people who just talked within their affairs using these words almost incessantly. The words represented their objects of knowledge, the meaning and use of which constituted their affairs and their organisation.

Therefore in what follows I propose to indicate how the relationship between these phenomena were manipulated by participants as organising devices to both understand and take a position on what was going on. In doing so I hope to be able to indicate some features of the ways in which cultural ideologies work in organizing peoples affairs.

4. CULTURAL IDEOLOGIES AS PRACTICAL ACTION

Two days before an important council meeting, I spent the evening with a friend, a Labour councillor and confidant Harry Held, who told me that there was to be an important meeting of the Labour Group to discuss the possibility of a rent rise for council tenants. He said he was going to vote against this, as he did when it came up last time, and he gave what he said was the same reason. It would represent another hardship for the Ording working classes. He saw his opposition as being in line with the rebel stance on the Fascist issue when he, as a self-described 'Left-Winger', had joined those who had broken ranks and voted against the use of the public order act. He thus saw his current 'Left-Wing' position as consistent with the position he held then. When I asked how it was consistent, he said that it was the same group who acted then to fight against the enemies of the working class, 'as we did when we opposed the last rent rise: It's the same again.' The question I then asked him was to tell me who the 'Left-Wingers' were. As I suspected, this gave him some difficulty, as between the votes there had been discrepancies, but he settled for his own operational definition which was '[t]hose who voted with us on the Fascist issue.'

Immediately following the all-important meeting I met him and asked him how things had gone. He replied that things had gone badly. 'We were split apart and what I told you the other night is all wrong, there is no Left-Wing in the Ording Labour Party.' He directed his venom against the City Party secretary who he said, having now become the Chairman of the Housing Committee, had led the argument for and not against the newly proposed rent rise. The significance of this was that he and some others made it clear that they had seen him as the leader of the previous vote against a rent rise when he had spoken volubly against it. He had also played a major part in the rebellion on the 'Fascist' issue. But what Held found significant was the fact that City Party secretary had become housing

chairman since the first rent rise. He suggested that this explained the change because it documented a 'well known' phenomenon. When you join the elite by attaining a high position you surrender your radical views and attachments to the needs of the ordinary people and you start to identify with the elite, to whose concerns, views and opinions you become vulnerable. 'It's a well-known story.'[5]

In the decisive vote in council, the 'Left 'opposition did not oppose the motion for the rent rise but some of them made their presence felt. Knowing that they might possibly reveal a split amongst the Labour members a Conservative opponent called for a named vote by which each voter was asked individually to make their vote known vocally. Two of the those seen as being from 'The Left' made their protest by announcing in that public meeting that they were 'against', thereby creating exclamations of success from Conservative benches. But after pausing they added that by 'against' they meant against there not being a rent rise and 'for' the motion.

These two, together with two others of the self-nominated 'Left', met the following night at the bar of the local Labour club and animatedly discussed these events with me. The spirit of bitterness and disappointment echoed what Held, who was present, had told me previously. In the course of the conversation we were joined by David Yancy, also a Labour councillor and also one of those who had 'broken ranks' in the previous rent rise issue, the 'Fascist' issue, and other issues. Seemingly however he had not voted as might have been expected against the new rent rise at the group policy meeting the previous day. On the occasion of his joining our group, his reception was less than convivial. Instead of a usual greeting he was addressed aggressively by David Yancy.

Held to Yancy:	I don't know what was up with you last night. Couldn't you see that it was a Left versus Right affair?
Yancy:	Oh! I don't know about that, you'd hardly call George Wilson a right winger. He was our leader on the Fascist issue. Though it's true that I'm not sure what he is playing about on Direct Labour. But we never said that we could keep rents down indefinitely.
Lough:	What you don't seem to understand is that Wilson is part of the right-wing now. It's the same old story. He's a council chairman

[5] This 'well known story' bears much similarity to the theory expressed by Robert Michels (1962) in his book *Political Parties* which Wes and I read at the time. Indeed, the Michels version just might be seen as an attempt to decontextualize 'what everybody knows', the contextually sensitive lay sociological version or versions that play an important constitutive role in the activities of a party's members.

	now—in charge of housing. He's done a deal with the group leader [most often talked of as the leader of the 'Right-Wing'—the fact that he was a factory owner was often used as supporting explanatory evidence]. He's been bought out.
Zach Tannenbaum to Yancy:	I'm surprised at you being taken in like that. Look what he's been doing to Direct Labour. He's more interested in keeping his chair. It was always to be expected when you think he was never in a trade union.
Joe Hill:	He never really was our leader. Our mistake was to support him for office. Look at Barbara Castle. She was a left winger. Now she's a part of the establishment.

David Yancy was later to confide in me that he could have been wrong in not voting against the rent increase though he noted that these others could be viewed as having a personal interest in retaining low rents. He explained that they, unlike him, were council tenants. As a matter of fact only two out of the four were. Nevertheless he confided, 'It's true he's not our leader now. It frightens me to think how fast a man can change when he gets a chair. By the way he is withholding contracts from Direct Labour—he'll finish it.'

The Direct Labour issue refers to the municipal building company seen as the brainchild and pride of 'The Left', as it was a non-profit organisation and was supposedly offering exemplary conditions for its workers. However it had allegedly fallen deeply into debt, though this was contradicted by its supposedly 'Right-Wing' chairman and by some of those within 'The Left', certainly by those in the discussion. It was not incidental that he and Wilson, who were both now chairmen, were renowned enemies. Direct Labour was soon to be forced into closure as a consequence of lack of contracts.

The one thing that one could say for certain was that the word or words 'Left' and 'The Left Wing' represented some form of objects of knowledge in the way they played a role in the council's affairs. This being the case, rather than in any way treating the 'Left' as independent of those affairs by saying what they stand for or as in the case of the 'Left Wing' who were members, it is to my mind necessary to focus upon the manner in which those words are used, how they function as concepts within the affairs of those that use them. What I was therefore concerned to do was to pay attention to the way they were used to understand and organise those affairs such that they could come to see them for what they were, to understand what they might indicate for the future so that they could act in appropriate ways in the here and now.

5. CONSISTENCY

It is a more than incidental feature of social life that we are required to act and are seen to act with some form of consistency. This does not mean that everything we say and do is either monitored for or seen against some consistency gauge. In the everyday world, if we ask a question we would expect it to be seen as such, we would expect it to be answered, and we would as a first option take the talk that follows from the potential respondent as being oriented towards answering it, though it might of course be otherwise and should that be the case then the response might properly be monitored for *how* it is otherwise. Of course, in everyday life such rule-following is mundane and natural, but potential exceptions to our mundane performances produce responses which show the sense in which our talk is accountable. Some responses, including non-responses, might produce in first speaker the view amongst many potential others that the recipient is not listening, is not understanding, and, even following an investigative sequence, is as mad as a hatter. From this latter case we can see how what we do when we speak becomes the basis of what I would call characterological work, and that work might provide a basis for us to decide how we should act with such a person in the future. Violations bring forward notions of trust and of reliability that might be always involved in interactions, but which become obvious and analysable for members in the circumstances of their breach. It is probably not saying too much when one says that social life is dependent on this form of rule-following consistency, though thankfully our communicative life is not always a matter of questions and answers.

Nor is our life spent, and our way of understanding that life spent, in some general speech community, but like Wittgenstein's builders, we interact in a variety of overlapping sub-communities which, though sensitive to the machinery of language in a more general form, has nevertheless for its participants more particular organisations to achieve. What I am endeavouring to show and analyse is how language used amongst Ording's politicians that invoked notions of 'Left' and 'Left Wing', provided a situated logic ongoingly and continually in use to organise and achieve their affairs. I would further suggest that the same sort of processes could be witnessed in the search for coherence amongst other politicians, both in Ording and the wider world and in a sense we are all politicians.

From the above data we can obtain the sense in which those who identified themselves with 'The Left' in that city sought to take collective action in particular and contingent events by reference to what they took to be their beliefs and goals. But collective action, the sense of being a group with common purpose, is not given but requires achievement in each and every case. Precisely because events and affairs are contingent, methods must exist to fit them into a framework which enables them to be seen as 'the same as this or that', or as quite different. The objective is 'consistency', both for the individual and for the group. A situated

knowledge of that 'consistency' enables members to simultaneously follow, and at the same time create and provide for the ongoing establishment of, the 'correct line.' How you use those methods 'correctly' or 'incorrectly'—to see things for what they are—is and will be judged as a sign of competence, or in some cases even a sign of 'betrayal'. Characterological work was omni-present in the affairs of the 'Left', just as it is omni-present in our interactive affairs. What the data illustrate is the way in which participants negotiate collective action, achieve it, and fail to achieve it in and as a result of the ways in which they see, come to see, and argue for a way of seeing. The collective life of many of the self-named 'Left' in Ording frequently consisted in establishing their line on the this's and that's of local affairs. This of course involved first seeing those affairs for what they were. The material exemplifies the ways in which they do this, and simultaneously the way they seek to concretise their goals and beliefs in relation to the particular. It indicates the ways in which seemingly different past events and involvements are selectively used as illustrating the nature of that particular—the here and now—so as to justify or establish a *raison d'etre* for what we should do now. Of course the question of what they are and of who they are is very properly raised. But it is being properly raised *by* them and *for* them on the occasions when they are called on to act collaboratively, and the answers to their question are always potentially revisable. The 'Left', in so far as it exists, is the ongoingly negotiated and renegotiated achievement of their activities, and it is ongoingly established and re-established by the way in which it, as a concept, is intra-involved in their activities.

The data discussed above reveal a view that Yancy acted inconsistently with the way he had acted 'with us' in the past, and particularly on this occasion with his previous vote to oppose a rate increase. This is seen as accountable and as a to-be-explained breach in group solidarity. The model provided by 'The Left' was being rejected—something that should not be done lightly. But, argues Yancy, this rate rise issue was not the same as the last rate rise issue—time has passed—'we can't keep rates down forever.' So he seeks to evade the charge of inconsistency, but does so by suggesting that George Wilson might be used as a model of someone who certifies his own 'Left-Wing' consistency. At the same time, he rebuts any potential claim of political blindness or of vacillation by showing that he can see there is a problem with respect to Wilson's attitude to Direct Labour. However, we also can see in Yancy's response another attempt to understand the present by invoking historical events linking how we might see the present event in relation to the 'Fascist Issue', thus emphasising Wilson's part in it as our leader. But the others reject this picture in the light of Wilson's inconsistency, which might have been described as inexplicable except for the fact that 'inconsistencies' are there to be explained. The explanation is given in the allegation of a new found 'consistency'; that is, a 'consistency' with the beliefs and attitudes of the 'Establishment' or 'Right Wing'. Further, what I am inclined to call 'the lay Michels theory'

is now used, not just to explain the behaviour but to CONFIRM the nature of what that behaviour *is*. The theory and its applicability are mutually self-confirming. It is constitutive, in that it enables the confirmation of the motives and the nature of the 'Establishment'. It also provides a picture and explanation that can be used to show that George Wilson's activities stand as a typical case. In this way those members who understand the applicability can reorganise George Wilson as now being one of them and not one of us. But that is not the end of the characterological work that these events are used to do to the character of George Wilson, such that he can be used as a model for future events. With such events in mind, it becomes appropriate to declare that 'he never was our leader'. He always was one of them really (despite appearances), and the reality is that 'he is out for himself'. A bid is made to review the past and rewrite it in our collective consciousness. As in all aspects of life, the categorisation of persons—the product of situated biographical work—is of the greatest consequence in deciding both the nature of events and the nature of a person's activity in those events. They are mutually constitutive but are of the greatest consequence in the way they organise our prospective action.

Of course George Wilson saw himself as totally consistent and even called in V. I. Lenin as witness to his own steadfastness. As Wilson expressed it: 'There are amongst them a pseudo left, victims of what Lenin called 'Left-Wing Infantilism'—one step forward two steps back.' He explained to me that we need that rent rise to build more housing for the underprivileged working class and that Direct Labour was costing the council money needed for the building of those dwellings, and thus should be reorganised according to proper Socialist principles. He further told me that the reorganisation should include the removal of its chairman, who was clearly 'in it for himself.'

In all of this we see the importance of the way the notion of consistency is used by members to review the activities of themselves and others. Collaboration, and the organising it depends upon, requires members to behave and be seen to behave consistently and thus predictably. In an organisation such as the Ording Labour Party, there is the constant task of relating goals and beliefs held in common at whatever level to the activities and affairs that such people are involved in . They are required to do so constantly and collectively despite obvious differences between events, and despite the fact that history guarantees that no two events are the same. A major part of the machinery for accomplishing the task involves the selective use of commonly known and often shared history together with lay sociological theories such as 'the lay Michels theory', which explains that history. In this sense, members of the 'Left' could be seen as possessing the past like a document which they apply methodically to a given present, as a way to see and to argue about what that document tells 'us' about the present and how to act in it. The document is not only used for biographical work, but relatedly for ongoingly discovering and establishing who we are or who should be counted as with us and

against us. This helps to decide who you can trust and who you cannot. As part of the analytic method so used members can find and use contextually relevant judgements such as, for example, 'it's the same again', or 'this is entirely different', as a basis of justification for what they have done in the past and a basis for deciding what to do now. The document is not like a normal history, in that it is selectively produced in edited form in relation to a relevant present, and of course what is selected or selectable may vary from person to person, though collaborating together involves interpreting and synchronising what it says, what is relevant in what it says, and what it implies for our collective future.

A most interesting question is the question of how, given the range of differences, judgements such as 'it's the same again' can be achieved. Taking up a position, which one argues is the proper collective position, necessitates showing that it is 'in line with' the collective policy which is documented by what we did before. The document provides devices for achieving such equivalence. One such device involves the invocation of the group, the 'same group', using the notion of the same membership (sharing the same ideology), and as we have seen this is usable despite the fact that membership might not literally be the same. Of course it helps if you can point to 'the same' opponents (even though they may be different). In relating the Fascist issue to the subsequent opposition to the first rent rise proposal, we see the 'same' people—'The Left'—even though in fact there were differences. A second such device is at work in relation to the way members related the two rent rise issues. By co-categorisation alone, it might be seen as another case of the same thing. Leaving aside the important question of who has or has not supported it, it is *another case* of a projected rent rise. Related to this is the way group members, such as Wilson (our leader), can be used as a model. Given that he is a trusted leader, then following his direction can be shown as a way of determining how we should see the issue. But, if it can be seen or made to be seen as the same issue, then the same action would obviously be appropriate. This was where the conflict arose. When it came to the second rent rise issue its opponents saw it and argued that it was 'the same thing', whereas Yancy like Wilson did not. For Yancy and Wilson 'the same action' was not appropriate. Yet none of the adherents saw themselves as inconsistent, and just as with so called 'Right Wingers' they saw themselves and their decisions as being consistent with their goals and beliefs. How they were consistent was made manifest by, amongst other things, asserting who 'was in it for themselves.'

Conversations of this nature, which in this way analyse events as they occurred, were a constant feature of the life of all of Ording's politicians. We might properly ask the question of what is going on organisationally. It seems to be that, whether by intention or otherwise, the conversation is concerned with the development of a collective view of the affair such that appropriate collective action may be justified, explained, and act as a guide to how one should behave in the future. Built into the analysis is its retrospective-prospective character, selectively relating what

we properly understood and did in the past to understanding the present, and therefore what we should do now and in the future. Crucially accepting with no reservation the picture agreed by the others involves a binding commitment to a logically derived course of action. Collaboration is achieved in just such ways. Of course, the holding of reservations involves not accepting any such picture and suggesting that it is not correctly formed in its relation to past events in which we may have collaborated. The sense of binding commitment means that activity produced in relevant affairs is accountable, and if found to transgress may be used as a basis of establishing a view of incompetence, or a change of position, which if viewed as a breach of trust might be called 'treachery'. What this means is that counting who is in the 'The Left', as well as how members count who is in 'The Left', are for those members themselves analytic questions embodied in the course of their activities. It is something that members necessarily do and something which is ongoingly revisable in the achievement and understanding of their activities. To witness the process further and to see how an individual's analysis occurs and recurs, let's consider what David Yancy had to say to me in private after the others had left the bar: 'You know I may have been wrong about the rent increase. It's true he's not our leader now. It frightens me to think how fast a man can change when he gets a chair. By the way he's withholding contracts from the Direct Labour—he's going to finish it.'

In reflecting on the conversation, Yancy was to reanalyse the possible nature of his activity given the account which saw him as inconsistent. He agreed that he may have been wrong, and that the others' analysis had merit. 'He subsequently and with some reservation agreed that he may have been wrong. The recognition of this enabled him to regain a position consistent with 'The Left' and his membership within it, but also to restore a position consistent within himself.

6. CONCLUSION

In trying to work out the nature of our concerns with sociology, as it was predominantly practiced in the 1960s, and how we could address these concerns, Wes and I would walk and talk, and pounded many, many, miles of the streets of Manchester. As I think about it now, it could well have been the case that in all that walking and talking what was happening between us was a form of reasoning redolent with just the kind of reasoning revealed amongst the politicians I studied. After all we came to an importantly changed viewpoint as to the nature of sociology, coming to embrace as a model for our thinking some major aspects of the work of Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks, as well as fully accepting the continued importance of Wittgenstein. It was an exciting though sometimes painful journey that is thoroughly embedded in my approach to sociology, and for that I thank Wes Sharrock.

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