

Book Review

Alan McKinlay and Philip Taylor (2014)
***Foucault, Governmentality, and Organization: Inside the
Factory of the Future.* New York and Abingdon: Routledge.**
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From the late 1960s onwards, Scotland's central belt between Glasgow and Edinburgh began to develop into a new centre for electronics manufacturing and assembly. Dubbed "Silicon Glen", some commentators considered it a promising example of a new, flexible post-Fordist economy, while others viewed it as a form of peripheral Fordism, dominated by US-owned branch plants of companies such as Hewlett Packard and Motorola. As this book – written by human resource management scholars Alan McKinlay and Philip Taylor – shows, both these views contain an element of truth, not least with regard to the organisation of the workplace.

The authors provide a detailed account of governmentality at work in one Scottish Motorola factory, Easter Inch, set up to produce mobile phones, and with the experiences of workplace governance at their already existing semiconductor factory in East Kilbride in mind. McKinlay and Taylor's analysis is grounded not only in extensive research into the company's strategies to develop the "factory of the future", but also – and importantly – drawing on the workers' own views and experiences with a new model of managing employment relations based on Motorola's corporate philosophy, embodied by its CEO at the time, Bob Galvin, and his successor, Chris Galvin.

The book is organised into six chapters. Chapter 1 provides a discussion and summary of how to "work with Foucault", his ideas of power and governance, and the relationships between discipline and freedom analysed through the lens of governmentality. Rather than focusing on power as discipline and punishment in a hierarchical sense, the governmentality approach is more concerned with specific ways and practices of governing the self and others, or the "conduct of conduct"; in other words, the attention shifts from disciplinary power to new technologies of power, anchored in particular times and places. Behind this lies the neo-liberal idea of autonomous, responsible individuals, and the authors emphasise the positive and productive intent of such an ideology of empowerment: "In other words, neoliberalism aims to transform key figures of social and economic life: citizens are recast as consumers, managers as leaders or entrepreneurs, workers as associates wedded to corporate missions" (p. 12).¹ We shall return to a critique of such a view further below.

Having laid the conceptual groundwork, in Chapter 2 McKinlay and Taylor proceed to present

¹ Citations that appear in this manner refer to pages in the book being reviewed.

an overview of the wider context within which Motorola's decision to establish a new mobile phone factory in Scotland was made. They chart the arrival of US electronics companies in Scotland and more specifically the experiences of Motorola with local labour regimes after establishing a semiconductor manufacturing plant in East Kilbride. The discussion of Motorola's anti-union strategy, HR management philosophy and workers' reactions to a form of workplace governance hitherto unknown to them is illuminating and demonstrates the challenges of transplanting particular varieties of capitalism into different institutional settings. Consequently, the company tried continually to align its labour recruitment and management strategy and corporate philosophy with the local practices of workplace governance in East Kilbride.

The planning of a new factory to produce mobile phones in Scotland was deeply influenced by the lessons learned over some twenty years in East Kilbride with regard to labour control, and is outlined in Chapter 3. To create the factory of the future, new geographical and organisational strategies were deployed by a team of managers given free reign from Motorola's US headquarters to implement a philosophy of workplace governance in tune with Galvin's ideas of leadership and empowerment. The location of Easter Inch was chosen – among other important reasons – to provide a tabula rasa that offered the chance to experiment with new recruitment and selection tools to create the right workforce “population” to be governed. Trying to avoid local commitment and becoming a “company town”, Motorola developed new structures and recruitment strategies that would target and select workers committed to the corporate values of total quality, leadership by example and – importantly – the will of the workers to improve and better themselves: a cornerstone of neo-liberal governmentality principles.

How such an approach to workplace governance played out in practice is the main topic of Chapter 4. It investigates the emerging practices of teamwork at the Easter Inch plant, which over time created a particular workplace culture where power became decentred and responsibility shared. McKinlay and Taylor's detailed analysis of the evolution of teamwork structures provides valuable insight into the mechanisms of creating entrepreneurial subjects (employees are not called workers but associates) and producing new structures of (self-)discipline, autonomy and empowerment. Managerial hierarchy and authority was much reduced, transformed and less visible, while self-organisation and collective decision making became the central features of determining plant performance.

Following from this, Chapter 5 digs deeper into the ambiguous relationship between power/discipline and freedom/autonomy by focusing on the peer review process that accompanied the Easter Inch factory's teamwork structure. Here, the authors go back to theoretical ideas developed by Foucault and his reflections on confession. Comparing the peer review to practices of confession in Christianity, the chapter illustrates how the conduct of conduct is achieved through a process of self-examination with the goal of self-improvement. In this context, rather than being watched from a central viewpoint as in Foucault's panopticon, the team becomes an “omni-opticon” where workers take it in turn to judge and be judged, thus producing self-governing subjects.

The will to empower has underlined all of the organisational plans developed at Easter Inch in terms of workforce governance. But the dream of what the factory of the future could be like came to an end as the mobile phone industry entered a difficult period and competition became fierce. Chapter 6 charts Motorola's attempts at restructuring the Easter Inch plant in order for it to survive by reverting to labour cost-cutting and flexibility strategies in the form of hiring temporary staff. Suddenly, alongside the established associates, a type of worker was introduced to the factory floor

that did not share the same rights and recognition as the established workforce. Things fell apart when trust between management, associates and temporary workers eroded and Easter Inch was on its way to becoming “just another factory”. It was eventually closed in 2001, marking the end of a remarkable experiment.

The case study presented in this book is a very well-narrated and thoughtful illustration of the work of governmentality; it demonstrates the positive intent behind new forms of workplace governance and organisation, and the will to empower as expressed through Galvin’s corporate philosophy. But it also brings out the tensions and contradictions of such a neo-liberal project, and that raises serious questions about the relationship between autonomy and solidarity. To this end, a governmentality approach, in my view, can be useful to work with, but it also is prone to obscuring the disembedding power of capitalist imperatives in a neo-liberal economy. Are freedom and autonomy really possible in a workplace without some ownership of or control over capital? And what are the implications for collective action, whether in the form of labour unions or otherwise? To address such issues, perhaps more than a Foucauldian governmentality lens is needed. However, it certainly has been valuable to make sense of what has gone on during the experiment of creating the factory of the future.

With this book, McKinlay and Taylor have provided an intriguing – and often fascinating – in-depth case study of new and experimental forms of work organisation in post-Fordist manufacturing systems. It makes for highly recommended reading and will be of interest not only to advanced students and academics in human resource management, organisational sociology, labour geography and cognate social sciences, but also a valuable source of inspiration for labour union activists and human resource management practitioners seeking critical understanding of managing employment relations, the governance of the workplace in late capitalism, and workers’ agency and responses.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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