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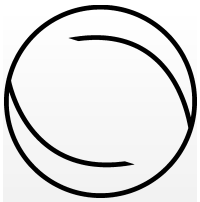

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Abstract

Julian Orr's ethnographic study of copier technicians explores three themes — practices, practitioners, and learning — gathered under the heading of 'work' and situated in geographic spaces — the team's territory — and places. In my reading, the book addresses three central concerns in organizational studies today: moves to (re-)ground theorizing in work practices, drawing on methods suitable for studying what it is that people in organizations actually do; developing practice-based understandings of organizational learning; and attending to the settings — the places and spaces — in which those practices take place.

Keywords: work practices, communities of practitioners, organizational learning, workplaces, organizational space, organizational ethnography

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'Life at work is a staple in our conversation, but we rarely talk about what we really do in the doing of the job. This omission extends to the professional literature on work: … these writings do not focus on what is actually done in accomplishing a given job.'

Julian Orr, *Talking About Machines* (1996: 1)

Even before the publication of *Talking about Machines*, Julian Orr was already thinking and writing about three themes that lie at the heart of the book: work-based practices, what he called 'communities of practitioners', and organizational learning (Orr 1992). I had the occasion to meet him a year after that paper was delivered, at a seminar with the Work Practice and Technology group at Xerox-PARC (Palo Alto Research Center). We have developed a collegial and personal friendship since then, extended most recently to spirited debates over 'space' vs. 'place' terminology in conceptualizing organizational sp/pl/aces. It is hard for me, then, to think of Julian and the book that is the subject of these reflections as 'Orr 1996'; and so I will at times follow the feminist theoretical convention of using both first and last names together when referring to him in this essay.

Julian Orr's ethnographic study of copier technicians explores these three themes — practices, practitioners, and learning — gathered under the heading of 'work'. Even place is already there, although in brief; in three and a half pages, chapter 3 situates the technicians in their territories, the '*geography* of the service triangle' (the chapter title; emphasis added). 'Organizational culture' does not appear as an explicit theme in the book, perhaps because 'culture' was second nature to him, given his disciplinary base in anthropology. He remarks

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on the reason for starting out by spending three weeks attending copier repair school, that he wanted to be conversant in 'technician culture' (Orr 1996: 7) and notes, almost in passing, 'The use of stories to make sense of a situation or the world itself emphasizes their role as part of the interpretive repertoire of culture' (Orr 1996: 12) — and then proceeds with a discussion of Geertz. *Talking about Machines* continues to be one of the few book-length, ethnographic studies of workers, work practices, and workplaces capturing some of the central characteristics of organizational culture as a concept. But direct discussion of organizational or workplace or the technicians' 'culture' is subordinated to the focus on the work itself.

'Talking about machines' is, of course, what the technicians are doing — constituting their world through talk. But Julian Orr is also talking about machines, in ways I will only touch on here in passing. His work is widely read within those epistemic communities concerned with the intersections of technologies and work practices, such as the participatory design community;[1] and, through this book, he is constituting various academic worlds (or trying to) through talk about the human side of an engagement with machines, reminding those who would design such machines and manage their development, sales, and maintenance, that human actions still remain central to their work and that copiers, computers, and other technological devices do not, and cannot, replace human self-perception and social interaction.

From a slightly different theoretical perspective, the book could as well have been called 'talking about work practices', as it concerns particular 'work practices' undertaken by a certain group of employees interacting among themselves, with classes of copier machines, and with machine users, and the emplacement of both practices *and* practitioners 'within' the employing organization. I put the preposition in quotation marks because this is part of the problematic Julian Orr is describing: the technicians largely work outside of the physical confines of their organization, and this creates problems from the perspective of managers of that organization. It is a classic 'street-level bureaucracy' problem (Lipsky 1980: see also Weatherly 1979; Prottas 1979; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003): how to control the behavior of employees who are beyond the visual and physical purview of their immediate superiors, and must be, in order to implement their organizational mandate — their work — successfully. Like the street-level bureaucrats Lipsky and others have studied, the technicians must, among other things, teach 'their' users how to be good customers: 'part of the technicians' mission is teaching the customer how to talk about machines' (Orr 1996: 81). As Orr says: 'The nature of the work and of the requisite knowledge make control difficult; management can neither abstract and control the knowledge nor direct the worker' (1996: 81).

In my reading, then, the central themes of this book engage three matters of concern to organizational studies today: the move to (re-)ground research in what it is that people in organizations actually do — their work practices — and the role of ethnographic methods in producing such studies; the need to develop practice-driven theorizing about 'organizational' learning; and the call to attend to the spaces and places that constitute the settings for those practices, including the ones we call 'learning'.

Methodological Implications: Re-grounding Organizational Studies in Work Practices

First and foremost, it seems to me, Julian Orr's study constitutes a call to (re-) ground organizational theorizing in what it is that people in organizations actually do — that is, in work practices, of whatever sort. One of the characteristics of theorizing about organizations over the last 30–40 years — whether under the heading of 'behavior' or of 'theory' or of various subfields (e.g. development, learning, identity) — is an increasingly yawning chasm between the lived experiences of people at work in workplaces (that is, what they actually do on the job and the concepts they use to talk about those acts) and theories about those experiences developed by scholars, and the theory-driven concepts *they* use to talk about them. It is, if you will, a gap between *practice-driven theorizing*, on the one hand, and *theory-driven theorizing*, on the other.

Explanations for such distancing include developments in statistical science in the 1950s and 1960s; changes, in the 1970s and 1980s, in computer hardware that replaced expensive mainframes and in software that made 'processing' ever larger amounts of numerical data possible, with ever greater speed and ease; the growth of survey research, facilitated by both of these; and the behavioralist 'revolution', which moved social science more firmly into objectivist studies, detached from both workers' and researchers' experiences of the workaday world and away from the more phenomenological and/or hermeneutic study of that world. This combination of developments has supported a theorizing that is, by and large, caught up in its own concepts, removed from the mundane activities, speech, and physical artifacts that people in organizations actually engage.

By contrast, Julian Orr's study is nothing if not phenomenological, rooted in what it is that the technicians observe and experience and do and say as they move through their workaday world. The very concept of 'work practices' is phenomenological: how one 'practices' one's work, one's occupation, one's profession, one's job, focuses analytic attention on that very grounded, lived experience that is phenomenology's orientation. In looking at the technicians' work practices, their values, the orientations ('culture') of their teams and sub-teams as distinct from those of their corporate employer, Julian Orr engages their 'lifeworld', what one might call the basic unit of analysis for phenomenological study.

Not that he presents his analysis through such a philosophical frame. The tension here — the analytic 'puzzle' that animates this work — is grounded in the specifics of everyday organizational life, with 'activities explicitly prescribed in the relationship of employment … [t]here is clearly a disparity between the tasks that they [the technicians] are told to accomplish and the means that are said to be adequate to the task' (Orr 1996: 149). Attending to the activities prescribed explicitly in the terms of employment is the purchase provided by an analytic focus on work *practices* — its engagement with the particular patterns of activity characteristic of work in a particular setting in relationship with the particular features of that setting, its artifacts, habits, and language, and others engaged in similar activities. In Julian Orr's view, other literature on work — and, I would add, on organizations — 'rarely [focuses] at the level of *a* worker, *a* job, and *an* employer. The discussion instead tends to be in terms of jobs and

workers in the aggregate … It [the discussion] is not well grounded in analysis of work practice, so its presumptions and prescriptions of what is to be done are not based on what *is* done and what *needs* to be done, on the reality of the job, the task to be accomplished' (Orr 1996: 150, 151; emphases added). His 'vignettes of work in the field' (the title of chapter 2) provide exactly the antidote to such aggregated abstractions — a groundedness in the fine details of machines and people, talk and act, that constitute the technicians' lived experiences of their work *from their point of view*, in their own terms, rather than in terms of concepts and theorizing driven by a research literature at a remove from those acts and that language.

Seeing work and practices as *situated* in this way requires research methods that can access that situatedness — those that draw on observation, with whatever degree of participation, in generating data. This is why, and how, regrounding theorizing in work practices has methodological implications for organizational studies: participant–observer, ethnographic methods also offer purchase for returning the field to its observational origins, for focusing it again on what it is that people actually do in organizations. These and other 'interpretive' methods (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006) call for fine-grained observational, conversational, and/or documentary detail. They demand that concepts and categories, and theorizing about them, emerge from the experiences and perspectives of those engaged with the daily social realities of work, within physical settings, interacting with and perhaps producing material-cultural items, in interactions with others. It at times appears a lot easier, quicker, and, in some respects, less expensive to run data from an existing database through a statistical package than to spend the long hours doing the kind of work, extended over time, that is requisite for interpretive field research. 'Being there', as Julian Orr was, involved training along with the technicians in order to gain some familiarity with their work and their technical language; following them around their territory, shadowing them as they visited 'their' machines on location in various company settings; observing what they did when interacting with various machine 'users' and how they did it; hanging out with them at lunch time, listening to them talk about particular machines and their identities and special problems, and about their recollections of machine 'histories' and lore; talking to them about why they do things the way they do; studying machine manuals and other topic-relevant documents; writing daily notes on all these encounters and conversations and readings; and analyzing these notes and writing up the analysis in the narrative fashion required by this method. Such approaches are particularly useful analytically in situations characterized by discrepancies between word and deed, such as those enacted in 'disparities' between assigned tasks and the means made available for their achievement.

Talking about Machines is important as an example for organizational studies scholars of how research of this sort might proceed. By contrast with methodologies that search for generalities and universal principles, this kind of research emphasizes the situatedness of knowing: 'actions, or practices, must be understood with reference to the situation of their doing' (Orr 1996: 11). It is an example of interpretive methods (those enacting interpretive philosophical presuppositions — the ontological and epistemological foundations of phenomenological,

hermeneutic, symbolic interactionist, etc. thought), reflecting the so-called interpretive turn in social science that positions substantive meaning and processes of meaning- or sense-making as the focus of research, emphasizing situated 'knowers' (researchers as well as those holding and using, daily and even hourly, local knowledge concerning the research topic) as well as situated 'knowns' (the settings and events that comprise that focus; see, e.g., Rabinow and Sullivan 1979, 1985; Hiley et al. 1991; Jacobson and Jaques 1990).

Julian Orr's analysis of his ethnographically generated data is strongly shaped by an ethnomethodological orientation that focuses in on conversation analysis — or just plain 'talk' — along with the details of what it is that people actually do. It is a narrative of both specific stories told and the contexts and acts of their telling. Being both methodology and method, ethnomethodological conversation analysis sees humans as constituting their social world and their personal identities through the act of telling stories about that world and through the specific stories they tell (see, e.g., Garfinkel 1967). So, as he writes, 'Narrative forms a primary element' of work practices (Orr 1996: 2). The analytic focus on practices is intertwined with the methods most useful for conducting such studies: research topic and research method invoke one another.

Talking about a 're'-turn to practice-based studies, and a 're'-grounding of such research, makes sense because *Talking about Machines* follows in a long line of sociologically, if not anthropologically, informed studies of what people in organizations do (about which there seems to be a generational amnesia in the field). These include the Chicago School and subsequent studies, from the 1930s through the 1960s, of 'professions' — managers (Dalton 1959) and doctors (Becker et al. 1977/1961); more recent studies of police (Manning 1977; Rubinstein 1973; Van Maanen 1973), office workers (Kanter 1977), physicists and other scientists (Dubinskas 1988), fish shop owners (Kondo 1990), Disney World staff (Van Maanen 1991), firefighters (Chetkovich 1997), and bank workers (Rosen 2000); and also the frontline worker studies in the tradition of Lipsky (1980). Considering organizations as networks could put Whyte's (1955/1943) classic study of the 'corner boys' on the list (on this as an organizational study, see Frost et al. 1991: Part IIA). Explicitly including bureaucracies would add studies of forest rangers (Kaufman 1960), bureaucrats (Blau 1963/1953; Crozier 1967; Selznick 1949), and policy-makers (Allison 1971). Ethnographic and participant–observer studies are possible and useful, in other words, in many areas and at many levels of organizational life. For generations who seem to have forgotten (or perhaps never learned) their intellectual ancestry, Orr's study is instructive for its subject matter, for the research processes that it enacts, as well as for the style with which it is written, including, importantly, the integration of theoretical material with ethnographically-generated data.

In addition, the interrelationship between human and machine in work practices as sketched out in the book suggests a conceptual shift in the positioning of machines and the consideration of their role in organizational life. Tech work, competent or otherwise, is a learned skill; and to the extent that some of the information required to practice it is 'unavailable' other than through engagement with the machines, the book has much to say to theorists concerned with

how *organizational* — collective, not individual — knowledge is developed, learned, sustained, shared, and passed on. Moreover, there is a common misperception among some studying human uses of technologies that such usages, especially online ones, must be studied on line — that there is little to be gained from watching people as they interact with their machines.[2] This study gives the lie to such a claim, as it shows that some aspects of human–machine interactions are made visible only through on-site observation.

For instance, according to Orr's analysis, practice-relevant knowledge becomes 'available' only in and through interacting with the machines, through hands-on, trial-and-error doing, supported by the 'wisdom' collected over time by members of the work group, preserved in machine lore, rather than recorded in manuals, and communicated and learned through the oral narration of this lore — through stories and storytelling activities, rather than through writing and studying manuals. We are accustomed to thinking about differences between word and deed with respect to human actors — encapsulated by Chris Argyris and Don Schön (1974) as the distinction between 'espoused theory' and 'theory-in-use'. But here we have machines that 'behave in the real world' in ways that 'are not covered by the official procedures' articulated in written manuals (Orr 1996: 50). Such a view animates these technological artifacts in ways Julian Orr may not have intended when he wrote the book — the implications seem to me a stronger claim about the role of machines than that staked out by Bruno Latour in his 1980s work and discussed here in chapter 7 (Orr 1996: 105 ff.) — but which are the subject of contemporary technology and organizational studies (see, e.g., Orlikowski 2006). The book could be taken, in part, as engaging Langdon Winner's (1986) question, 'Do artifacts have politics?', in an organizational context. These are central questions for the CSCW (Computer-Supported Collaborative Work) and Participatory Design communities of inquiry, which to date have intersected with organizational studies only marginally, but where I see potential for much greater mutual influence and collaboration.

Far from presenting an argument in philosophical terms, Julian Orr's theorizing is grounded in the workaday commonplaces of ethnographic researchers. And so the book itself could be seen as talking about the work practices of researchers as well. In my reading, he underplays this double hermeneutic. In describing situated practice, he writes: 'One [i.e. a technician] constructs representations of the situation' and 'much of situated practice is the piecing together [by the technicians] of an understanding of the situation and of possible courses of action' (Orr 1996: 11). These statements, however, equally well characterize the processes through which interpretive researchers make sense of others' sense-making in the field: we construct representations of the situations we study, piecing together an understanding of what we see, read, and/or are told. Ten years after the publication of the book, ethnographic and other interpretive methods are ever more vocal concerning expectations for explicit reflexivity on the part of the researcher: what was your positionality (personal as well as locational) in this setting; how did that enable you to make sense of the situation — the settings, or events, or acts, or situations being described and analyzed; hinder you from doing so; and/or otherwise shape the settings and people you

were able to access and the information (data, interpretations) you were able to (co-) generate? How, in other words, did you make sense of others making sense?

Interest in ethnographic studies of organizations appears to be surging at this moment in time: an oversubscribed stream at EGOS 2006 on 'ethnographic and other interpretive research methods' (convened by Heidi Dahles, Ritva Engeström, and myself); a conference at the University of Liverpool in September 2006; a relatively new section in the American Anthropological Association; and various manuscripts in progress. I cannot document the direct influence of Julian Orr's book on this trend, but I am certain that many will point to it in coming years as a forerunner.

But more than that: the book holds an interesting position at the intersection of anthropology and organizational studies. Methodologically, it is not unusual that work of this sort would be done by someone trained in an anthropology department (whose original dissertation proposal to do rather traditional fieldwork in Afghanistan was thwarted by political upheavals there). But anthropologists in the USA and elsewhere who choose to study organizations — especially, perhaps, but not only in their home countries — have been marginalized by others in that discipline. They often look, then, to organizational studies for a disciplinary home and for academic legitimation. But organizational studies scholars using ethnographic methods have, for some time, felt marginalized within that field — and they have looked to anthropology for legitimation. The organizational anthropologist, then, is caught, Janus-like, between these two epistemic communities, exiled by the one on substantive grounds, by the other on methodological ones. I suspect that *Talking About Machines* has been caught in such a position — unfortunately, given its potential to contribute much to each field. I am hopeful that increased recognition within organizational studies might lead to at least a partial resolution of this tension.

Organizational Learning and Practitioner Communities

The book's orientation toward grounded studies of work practices speaks specifically to one subfield of organizational studies, organizational learning, and particularly to those trying to theorize 'up' from grounded practices (e.g. the essays in Nicolini et al. 2003; even Schön's initial work in this area, published in 1973, was grounded in field observations, albeit from his consulting practice; see, especially, chapters 5, 6). It focuses on work practices undertaken by a community of practitioners and their shared sense-making (both substantive and procedural). Julian Orr extends the tension between job training and the requirements of on-the-job practices to questions of knowledge and learning: of the technical know-how required to perform the job, what can be codified to pass on to new workers, and how might it be codified? Who possesses that knowledge? And who controls, or can control, it? He observes: '[T]he technicians' job also requires learning *and* preserving *otherwise unavailable* information about the machine' (Orr 1996: 4, emphases added).

The book engages not only what technicians do, but what it means for a technician to be *competent* at doing what he or she does — how one learns to be a

'real technician' (Orr 1996: 98) and to display that mastery. Worker competence and machine exist in a delicate balance: 'If the machines behaved, the technicians could not be technicians' (Orr 1996: 99). A paradox is built into tech practice: the enactment of job competence requires machines to malfunction, yet machine malfunction might be taken to imply worker incompetence — a maintenance or repair job carried out in less than adequate fashion.

For those of us interested in grounded, collective approaches to organizational learning, this work deserves greater attention than it has, I think, received. Note one of Orr's observations: 'The fact that work is commonly done by *a group of workers together* . . . and the usual presence of such a community has not entered into the definition of work' (Orr 1996: 10, emphasis added); and, later, his discussion of the role of the technicians' 'community memory' (Orr 1996: 117). Nor has the book permeated a large segment of the non-collective organizational learning (and 'learning organization') literature. That the knowledge developed by these technicians is routinely not taken into account within the larger corporation is an example of the kind of problem researchers have been trying to theorize concerning transferring or 'translating' knowledge across organizational boundaries or borders (e.g. Bechky 2003; Yanow 2004). Here, too, is an area of study to which the book contributes that is in need of further theorizing.

The analysis of technicians' practices also highlights the role of tacit knowledge in work practices. The technicians master the diagnostic capabilities of kinesthetic information: their feel for the shaft parallels Mary Schmidt's analysis of the bridge engineers' 'feel for the hole' (1993). Both practices rest on knowledge that is not easily rendered representationally because it 'is not immediately tellable' (Orr 1996: 119).

Polanyi's dictum — 'We know much more than we can tell' (1966: 4) — notwithstanding, some theorists argue that reflexivity is the solution to problems of 'tell-ability'. Julian Orr's field data and theorizing are useful here, too, in engaging questions of tacit knowledge and reflective practice (e.g. Schön 1983, 1987, 1991; Lanzara 1991; see also Yanow and Tsoukas 2005), their relationship to mastery or competence, and the ramifications of theorizing about work practices and collective organizational learning for that understanding. For instance, Orr notes, at one point, in passing, while characterizing a conversation between himself and one of the technicians: 'Most of the work has been reduced to practice, and Frank need not concentrate on what he is doing to the exclusion of other thoughts' (Orr 1996: 55) — an observation that fits Dreyfus and Dreyfus's (2005) conception of mastery. Would one want to say that the technicians, sitting at lunch relating machine lore and talking through the problems of the day, are engaged in reflective practice? One of the questions that has long intrigued me is what is gained (and what lost) in moving across terminologies from 'communities of meaning' or of 'interpretation' or 'discourse', to 'communities of practice', or in focusing on 'communities of *practitioners*' or 'occupational communities' rather than 'communities of practice'? Future work could well develop these two themes — the role of reflexivity in work practices and the character of practitioner communities. I would ask the 'collective organizational learning' epistemic community, which has long grounded its theorizing in

practices at work, to consider whether 'organizational learning' as envisioned in our treatments is synonymous with 'work practices' as developed in this book, and suggest that here is an intriguing area for further theorizing.

Spaces and Places

Finally, Julian Orr's book makes a contribution to arguments about the centrality of space and place to analyses of work and organizations. It has been all too common in organizational studies to ignore the physical settings within which work and organizing take place along with the material objects that 'people' that space and help to constitute it.[3] Anthropologically informed research may constitute the one general exception to this blind spot.

Much of Julian Orr's observations concern elements of the 'object' environment within which tech work takes place, and their meanings for the work — for the technicians, for their customers, and for their employing organization. This includes the 'machines as technical objects' (Orr 1996: 4; see, especially, ch. 6), including their toner and the dirt it creates; but he is also not oblivious to other physical artifacts, including the clothes the technicians wear: the suits or jackets, with neckties for men, required by the corporate dress code 'constitute both a claim that the wearer is a modern businessperson and a claim that the machine is sufficiently domesticated that it can be served by one so attired' (Orr 1996: 5).[4] Moreover, as noted at the beginning of the essay, the technicians are emplaced right from the start within their geographic territories. The very first 'vignette' he describes, labeled 'a breakfast meeting', opens with a description, not of the chain restaurant where he goes to meet the technicians, but of Julian Orr himself, sitting at a traffic light, looking at the hills that make the area Silicon Valley, eyeing 'the artistically curved roads with … five lanes in each direction, … all full. They have nice lawns as well and good landscaping', backed by 'large parking lots … [E]very mile is on streets lined with factories much like the ones to which they [the technicians] go and the ones they have just left' (Orr 1996: 15). We get details of 'patrol cars and radar cars', BMWs and motorcycles, fertile soil and truck farms, fruit trees in the past and 'chips, computers, disk drives, and printers' as the current harvest.

The bulk of the text is concerned with the anatomies of the machines, their problems, and the technicians' activities in dealing with these, both through straight observational description and through the vehicle of the technicians' conversations about them, showing their own vocabularies for framing and categorizing those activities (as well as about personal matters, such as day care and holidays; Orr 1996: 36). But Julian Orr's narrative makes it clear that the technicians are emplaced in very specific ways. There is the unnamed restaurant where they customarily eat, have meetings, and use the payphones to check in with Work Support (Orr 1996: 42). This is so regular a place for them that their managers know they can find them there. There is the Parts Drop, where they can hang out and relax 'away from customers and most managers' (Orr 1996: 42). The concept of territory, especially its social connotations, is central to understanding the organization of work — and 'territory'

is located in a taxonomy that includes 'district' and 'area' (Orr 1996: 62) — but I find it rather more conceptual and indefinite than the map-based character of the term would suggest. For the technicians, however, it appears not to be a general term at all: Frank, in the fifth vignette, has trouble locating the place for a service call that is 'not his customer, his account, his machine, it is out of his territory' (Orr 1996: 45); and there is clearly a concept of 'in territory' and 'out of territory' (Orr 1996: 63), along with a spatial-social nesting of responsibilities and worries (Orr 1996: 63). This suggests a clear sense of boundary and the boundedness of work, a theme that Julian Orr has been developing in his recent attention to space and place, but which I find only hinted at in this ethnography.[5]

This attention to space and place is another aspect of lived experience that has been lost in the shift from anthropological, sociological, and political science studies of organizations to more behaviorist-psychological and social-psychological ones. The return to grounded, practice-based studies appears to be bringing with it a re-centering of attention to spatial dimensions of work practices, focusing on the relationship between organizational spaces and human action, the ways in which spatial elements communicate organizational meanings (Yanow 1993, 2000, 2005, 2006), and the use of spatial redesign to influence or intersect with organizational change efforts (see, for example, Iedema et al. (2005) on the ways in which hospital corridors facilitate diagnostic teamwork among medical professionals; Mobach (2005) on privacy issues arising from spatial design in pharmacy shop waiting areas; van Marrewijk (2005) on building designs shaping meanings in the telecom industry; Dale and Burrell (2005) and Weir (2005) on spatial designs shaping management styles; and Yanow (1998) on museum spaces; see also Hernes (2004); Clegg and Kornberger (2006); Kornberger and Clegg (2004). Toward the end of the book, Orr writes: 'The work patterns the social geography of the workers through the distribution of work sites and the allocation of responsibility for particular sites', while also demarcating between insiders and outsiders (1996: 149). Had he had then the fuller appreciation that he has now for the significance of place in human activity and meaning-making, I wonder what more he might have written about the intersections of physical and social geographies. I find it fascinating that we seem, in these various areas of analytic activity, to be attending once again to the social dimensions of technical systems, discovered in the 1940s by the Tavistock researchers in the coal mines.

In closing, I wish to point to the ways in which the book links questions of work practices, communities of practitioners, organizational learning, and organizational change. On the latter, Julian Orr writes, citing the work of Ken Kusterer, that 'working and learning together creates a situation that workers value' (Orr 1996: 153). Here is where the term 'community', in reference to practitioners, affords a sense that others do not, given its connotation (perhaps even denotation) of associational bonds. The organizational change literature anticipates resistance on the part of workers to reorganizational and other changes. Often, however, this response is treated as 'mere' obstructionism — or otherwise dismissed as if workers were old, recalcitrant, and set in their ways:

an individualistic-psychologistic resistance that good management techniques need to, and can, overcome.

A more hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, however, would locate workers' responses in their lifeworld and in the extent to which they have created, and continue to find, meaning in and through that lifeworld, including its expression in organizational structures and other arrangements. Julian Orr offers a most insightful take on this:

> 'This resistance can surprise employers who think of labor as a commodity that can be arranged to suit their ends. The problem for the workers is that this community which they have created was not part of the series of discrete employment agreements by which the employer populated the workplace, nor is the role of the community in doing the work acknowledged.' (Orr 1996: 154)

And he adds: 'The work can only continue free of disruption if the employer can be persuaded to see the community as necessary to accomplishing the work' (Orr 1996: 154).

Here lies, I think, the moral and ethical heart of Julian's work. His is a humanistic approach that seeks to re-ground work and workplace studies in the details of what workers — we — actually do, not out of a methodological impulse alone, but out of an appreciation for those things that make us, all of us, human. This is, in my reading, the most important contribution of his work to organizational studies. It is what is lost in the 'communities of *practice*' discourse, the language of which excises the human actor from those practices, disembodying the activities and distancing them from those who perform them, but gained through the 'communities of *practitioners*' discourse. To close, with his own words:

> 'The significant thing … is that the examination of practice reveals a complexity that cannot be seen from a distance; this complexity constrains how the work can be done and therefore has crucial implications for those making policy about work … Discussions of work that omit this vital aspect of practice lose the point from which anything else that may be described originates.' (Orr 1996: 155–158)

Notes

My thanks to Hari Tsoukas for editorial suggestions on the earlier draft of this essay, and to Julian Orr for ongoing collegial conversations and collaborations.

1 See, e.g., http://www.pdc2006.org/ for recent conference information and http://www.cpsr.org/ for the sponsoring organization (accessed 27 April 2006).
2 My evidence for this statement comes from recent experience (August 2006) where a social scientist studying ICT use made this argument in a plenary address. Given the reactions she received, she is rethinking her claim. I have chosen not to identify her further.
3 I speculate on the reasons for this in Yanow (2006).
4 I long thought that the black and white photograph on the book's front cover was vintage 1950s archival material portraying Eisenhower-era work and workers. I only now, concluding this draft, noticed that the photos are credited to a PARC project, the one on the back cover including Julian, shirted and tied like the other two men.
5 Curiously, the analogy to shepherds and their flock arises with respect to a machine that becomes dislocated from the care of any specific technician (Orr 1996: 95). It is an oddly spatial, 'landed' image — but I imagine it comes more from Julian's non-ethnographic work as a sheep farmer than from the specifics of technician territoriality.

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