Why Quigley Annoys Me

Max Weber urged us to strive toward a “value free” sociology. That did not mean that we had no ethics of values. Neither did it imply that we could be entirely “objective” in studying social action, which included only action that was subjectively meaningful for the actor. In fact, social action was a subset of the subjectively meaningful, including only action that takes others into account and is thereby influenced socially.

Studying social action required that the sociologist adopt a sympathetic understanding—verstehend, allowing the observer to understand how the action was meaningful and how it was influenced socially. For the most part, Weber focused on the relations between organizations (economic and political systems) or institutions (Protestantism and capitalism), always attempting to interpret how the demands of one organization might facilitate or impede the demands of another. He was not inclined to reduce social facts to psychological explanations, but he did provide a model for doing what we now call participant observation research, which is, essentially, what Quigley has done in his analysis of the “New Frontlines of the Labor Movement.”

Quigley cites Weber (p. 201, note 22) and is self-conscious about his lack of “objectivity,” as he moves from sympathetic observer to movement participant (p. 70). In fact, Quigley was a participant in the movement long before he realized it. He and his students in the Health and Human Rights Clinic were advocates and supporters of working class unions and minimum wage campaigns (pp. 8-9), campaigns that are sometimes perceived as conflicting if not contradictory by the activists promoting each (pp. 63-67).

The thing that annoys me is that Quigley is not a trained social science researcher who knows that the major challenge of participant observation research is, first, getting in and, then, getting out. Generally, the easier it is to get in and the more deeply involved the research becomes in the life of his subjects, the harder it is to get out. That is the problem that Quigley faces. William Foote Whyte describes the problem in explaining how he became so involved in the street corner gang activities that he went from being a nonparticipant observer to becoming a non-observing participant. Fortunately, his friends at Harvard helped him to see the problem.

Quigley has the option of retreating into the ivory tower of law. His chapter on “legal problems” (pp. 63-80) is most insightful in this regard. This is the one area where he knows more than his subjects and can find professional support for a critical examination of the problems facing the activists. Since he does not seem to be familiar with the social movements literature, he fails to appreciate the extent to which the Fight for Fifteen strike is actually a “turnout,” which was characteristic of Medieval labor disputes, where journeymen and apprentices from one shop would walk out and attempt to get support from other shops (pp. 66-7). This tactic was local and patronized—essentially, relying on other masters to pressure their master to do the right thing and prevent this nonsense from undermining craft/guild discipline. This seems to be lost on Quigley, who offers little insight into the conflict between union and minimum wage campaigns. He is similarly reduced to taking his respondent’s account at face value in explaining the failure to organize the Hyatt—as opposed to success at the airport and on campus (pp. 156-7; 170-1).

Quigley is similarly at a loss to explain why workers believed, “The union was making things worse, not better.” (p. 145)—a position that he does not elicit from any of his interviewees, but then unanimously approved the union contract (pp. 149-50). What we need here is some context for evaluating the claims of the organizers, who invariably are optimistic about the future and blame strategic errors (p. 157) that will be rectified in future efforts (p. 170).

The objective conditions of labor unions and the working poor in Indiana today is a topic on which I will defer to Harry. Reading Quigley, I am struck by the extent to which it seems that all of the victories and defeats of labor, industrial versus craft unions, gender and race, socialism and communism, protest and partisanship, have led us somehow to the desperate situation in which Wobblies attempted to organize the un-organizable, the migrant farm, timber, and mining workers of the turn-of-the century (19th to 20th). So now we need to organize the largely nonwhite, noncitizen, female service workers by joining them in their struggles (p. 177).

As a strategy, that works for me, but without the anarcho-syndicalist theory and praxis that inspired the Wobblies in the face of brutal repression, can we really express to win this fight today, here and now?