

Scientific Management, the Consumer Interest and the Cold War

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Introduction

In the 1990s a challenge to the orthodox view that Taylorism was an authoritarian and mechanistic approach to management was initiated in the history of management literature. At the core of this challenge is recognition of the support given by the scientific management movement to the democratisation of management activity. Schachter (1989) and Nyland (1989; 1998) have separately documented this contribution, the former by focusing on the Taylorist's commitment to municipal governance and the latter by highlighting the importance scientific managers placed on tripartite forms of management. In this paper we build on this work by exploring the contribution of scientific managers to the management of consumer protection and the consequent assault waged upon them by Cold War ideologues. That the Taylorists were sustained by an active involvement in the consumer field has been documented in the administrative (Schachter, 2002), consumer (Storrs, 2000) and engineering literature (Layton, 1971) but has not been appreciated within management history. Just as knowledge of women's participation as scientific managers has not made its way into management textbooks (Schachter, 2002, 574) the recognition of the Taylorist consumer interest has been similarly ignored.

This paper has two specific aims. First, to examine why Cold War ideologues such as the members of the Dies Special Committee on Un-American Activities and McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee focused on Taylorist consumer theorists / activists. We begin by clarifying the Taylorists' notion of the scientific management of the consumer interest and how this perspective was distinguished from other forms of consumer protection. Beginning with Frederick Winslow Taylor, the paper follows a number of key players in the consumer movement who were self-declared 'card-carrying' members of the Taylor Society in order to develop the association between Taylorist scientific management and consumer protection. We argue that central to explaining this attention was the fact that the Taylorists were both left theorists and activists, and that they pioneered a unique approach to consumer protection that focussed on both the producer and the consumer which continues to be reflected in the contemporary US consumer movement. (Goodwin 1998)

Our second objective is to clarify why the impact of the post-war assault on left-management thought was able to drive this perspective from the management discipline. To provide depth to this analysis we focus on how three individuals responded to the assault by Dies, McCarthy and others. Our purpose is to highlight both the post-war fear engendered even amongst scholar activists who had campaigned for progressive ideas and practices over decades and the associated awareness of the limits of thought that was subsequently deemed acceptable within the field of management. The paper concludes by describing the implications for the discipline of management if we write in the history of the Taylorist construction of the consumer interest that was written out by the Cold War.