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### Peter Armstrong owns up

Peter Armstrong

Leicester University Management School, United Kingdom

#### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

Received 6 February 2017

Accepted 6 February 2017

Available online xxx

*Keywords:*

Armstrong

Reflections

#### ABSTRACT

This is a piece in a series of articles by ground-breaking researchers who are reflecting on their work. This one is by Peter Armstrong.

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#### 1. Reflection and reflexivity

It is flattering to be invited to reflect on the intentions behind my work and the influences which led to it, but it is also vaguely threatening. In the ordinary way of things, questions such as, 'What made you do it?', 'what did you think you were doing?' are those put to a miscreant child. Essentially one is being asked to confess. Taken in that spirit my first impulse is to look down at my feet and mutter, 'It wasn't my fault. Other people made me do it.'

An extended version of the same excuse might begin with Alvin Gouldner's reflexive sociology. Gouldner (1970: 26) asks the sociologist to see the falsity behind the objectifying stance, to 'cease assuming that there are two distinct breeds of men (sic), subjects and objects, sociologists and laymen, whose behaviour needs to be viewed in different ways'. This entails dropping the claim that sociologists espouse their theories on cognitive and rational grounds whereas those of other people are explicable in terms of social influences. Social theories, professional as well as informal, are massively under-determined by the phenomena which they purport to organize, and this implies that their appeal is mostly at the level of intuition. What we find intuitively convincing in the way of social theory is determined by a range of assumptions as to how the world is contoured and how it works ('permitted worlds'). These are acquired in the course of socialization and are thus deeply sedimented within our characters. Some of them are very general 'background assumptions' such as whether human relationships are fundamentally co-operative or conflictual. Some are more restricted 'domain assumptions' applicable to family, work and so on. All of them are invested with a considerable emotional charge in consequence of which they are highly resistant to change, whether by persuasion or evidence to the contrary. Doing social theory, as Gouldner sees it, is a matter of accounting for social phenomena in terms of 'givens' which are hard-wired into the theorist.

Looking back at my writings of the past 30 years I would say that they have been about management rather than accounting, and that accounting has featured only as it is pertinent to management. Concerning management, my permitted world is evidently one of class division and compulsion, with management the immediate agent of much of the compulsion. Its domain assumptions are that the relationship between manager and managed is fundamentally antagonistic and the division between the two has no necessary correlation with competence either in the organization of, or the substance of, what is managed, a consequence being that management is as likely to obstruct human activity as it is to assist. This disinclination to regard management as part of a benign natural order has upset some of my critics but for me the social

E-mail address: [p.armstrong@le.ac.uk](mailto:p.armstrong@le.ac.uk) (P. Armstrong).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2017.02.001>

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researcher who has never wondered what is the point of a Vice Chancellor or what is accomplished by calling people 'human resources' lacks the capacity to ask the question basic to a critical social science: why are things as they are?

This reflexive approach suggests that the question I have to answer is how did I get like this? To do so I need to begin at the beginning.

## 2. Dreams of flight

I was born the son of an engine driver in a railway town, but some imp of perversity decreed that I would start life as an aeroplane nut. My first memory is of lying in my pram watching Royal Air Force Harvard trainers as they looped and dived in the sky above. This must have been in the early years of the Second World War, 1941 or 42. As a boy I thought that the Supermarine Spitfire was the most beautiful thing in the world and its arch-enemy, the angular Messerschmitt 109E, the most evil.

I found my application form for the RAF in my parents' effects when they died. Somehow, without seeming to do so, my mother had ensured that it was never sent. As a young woman she had been unable to take up the offer of a place at Oxford University because her family needed the wage. She had then worked as a teacher but had been forced to quit when she married my father. Those who have read [Jackson and Marsden's \(1962\)](#) study will recognize the pattern of parenthood which enabled a few working-class children to take advantage of the opportunities opened up by the 1944 Education Act. So it was off to study aeronautical engineering at university for me, equipped with a state scholarship, a Faber–Castell slide-rule and a set of Kern drawing instruments.

By the end of my second year at Bristol University I had grown to detest the authoritarian regime which was supposed to shape the crooked timber of youth into 'gentleman engineers'. Highlights were the public ridicule of a fellow student for his Tyneside accent and my own two expulsions from tutorials, one for not wearing a gown and one for having neglected to shave that morning. There was also a timetable which seemed deliberately designed to isolate us engineering students from the rest of the university – four hours of applied mathematics every morning and four afternoons a week of laboratory work, with never a mention of a real aircraft nor any part of one. In order to provide us with a common identity, we had been provided with a Departmental Anthem, in which we were expected to join the staff on festive occasions:

We are, we are, we are, we are, we are the engineers

We can, we can, we can, we can, demolish forty beers . . .

Even half a century later, I cringe at the recollection. If that was engineering I wanted none of it. I more-or-less dropped out of the course and into the company of a group of dissidents whose etiquette books were Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. You had to produce a certain amount of poetry along these lines, but that wasn't too threatening as the peer-review process was subject to a non-aggression pact. Happy at last, I hardly cared when I nearly failed my degree. How I thought I was going to make a living I cannot now imagine.

I then learnt something about the window of opportunity which had been opened up for working class youth by the 1960s expansion of white collar work and state-supported university education: the window wasn't very wide and it opened only once. Six months later I was back with my tail between my legs, crunching numbers on the electro-mechanical calculators of the Blackburn Aero Engine Company (no computers yet). My way of coping involved a precarious balance between regular attendance at a place of work and the pursuit of authenticity by the pathways of squalor. This last was shaping up quite nicely. So far, I had managed to spend the night in jail with a future director of Liverpool's Everyman Theatre and had learnt that if you are going to sleep in a hostel for the homeless, you should try to avoid the bed next to the latrines.

My next employment was at Berkeley Nuclear Laboratories, one of the three major research establishments run by the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB). Though the appointment as a Research Officer sounded prestigious, the actual job was more like that of a research assistant. I was to run a test rig which had been designed to produce data on metal fatigue under two dimensional stresses and strains. As time went on I began to realise that I had found myself in a difficult situation in that the experimental design was fundamentally flawed.

The problem lay in the assumption that a purely two-dimensional system of stresses and strains can exist in the real world of three dimensions. You can see that this is not so by pulling a rubber band. As the band extends, it gets thinner: the stress may be in one dimension but the deformation is in three. This thinning-out is called the Poisson contraction, and it is well-known in the field. For the people in charge to admit that they had designed and built an expensive test rig around this elementary error would have been embarrassing and their response was typical of the British officer class when faced with complaints from the infantry about their equipment. They assumed – or affected to assume – that I wasn't trying hard enough and refused to listen to 'excuses'. Accordingly I found myself under a great deal of pressure to produce results, no matter that these would have implied that solid steel can inflate and deflate under pressure like a gas.

My first way of coping was that of any small hunted creature: I hid. One of the advantages of laboratory life is that you can always be somewhere else and that is where I took care to be. My second response was to arm myself with a magic shield. I found some papers on the behaviour of engineering materials which were full of arcane symbols arranged in great fortress-like equations. They meant very little at first, but I stuck with them because I found that they frightened away people who meant me harm. And at this low point my fortunes began to turn. The equations began to make sense, and in conversations with a new section-leader, Charles Frederick, I started to think that I could do better.

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