HOW TO USE CONTENT ANALYSIS IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

by

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This paper illustrates the use of a content analysis in historical research. The purpose of a content analysis study is to illustrate the ways in which an individual organization participates in the processes of social change.

A business organization is viewed as both a product and a creator of its socio-historical environment. The overlap emphasizes the extent to which which the organization comprises part of the environment as well as the extent to which the environment permeates and constitutes the organization. As individual firms strive to construct more profitable conditions for themselves, they introduce technological, social and organizational innovations that, if they are successful, are adopted by other firms and collectively transform the context in which the firms are situated, and hence their own existence as well. Although intended as resolutions to previously experienced constraints to continued capital accumulation, these innovations also introduce a number of contradictions into the social system that subsequently appear as new impediments that threaten both the reproduction of individual firms and ultimately that of the broader social system as well. These impediments are experienced by individual firms as a fall in the rate of profit and insufficient effective demand in relation to productive capacity, and provide the motive force for a new round of innovations. It is the dynamic and dialectical interplay of impediments to capital accumulation and resolutions of these impediments that describe the processes of social change examined in the study.

An example of these processes is provided by assembly line methods of production. The assembly line was a significant technological innovation and “the best-known symbol of modern mass production” (Chandler, 1977, p. 208). It increased management’s control over the means of production and the work force by providing unambiguous direction as to what operation each worker was to perform next; and by establishing the pace at which the worker was to perform each task (Edwards, 1979, p. 118). On the other hand, the new technology, which represented a structural resolution of increasing labor conflict at the turn-of-the-century, raised that conflict from the individual workplace to the plant-wide level and facilitated the development of industrial unions: “when the line stopped every worker necessarily joined the strike” (ibid). The resolution of this new dimension of labor-management conflict was the post-WWII collective bargaining agreement in which management traded-off higher wages and benefits for the unions’ agreement to accept the sanctity of management rights over pricing and the organization of the work process, bureaucratic grievance procedures that effectively removed disputes from the shop floor and limitations on the right to strike (Sloan, 1964). The inflationary bias inherent in these agreements and the relatively rigid internal plant structures they institutionalized emerged as new impediments to capital accumulation in the 1970s.

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