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Dig Where You Stand

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DIG WHERE YOU STAND by Sven Lindqvist

In the mid 60's I was travelling in Latin America investigating multinational companies for my book *The Shadow*.

It struck me then that it was very strange that so little serious independent research had been done about these companies.

You may come across a couple of public relations pamphlets...or one or two books commissioned by a company's directors to celebrate the anniversary of the company.

But where do you find the point of view of those most affected by the activities of the company?

The workers.

The local population.

The inhabitants of the host countries.

Their experiences of the company are never recorded.

When I returned to Sweden I went to the catalogue of the Royal Library in Stockholm and found that the situation was almost the same in my own country.

A hundred years ago we used to say that the history of Sweden is the history of its kings.

This is now considered old-fashioned. But the history of Swedish industry is still thought of as the history of its owners and directors.

Practically every factory history has been written *for them*, by writers *selected by them*, and *paid by them* to produce results that would then be *approved of by them*.

Because my own grandfather had been a cement worker I took a special interest in the cement industry.

I read the histories of 11 different companies, written between 1923 and 1973. The wisdom contained in these books could be summarised in five points:

1. Management has never made a mistake.
2. Management has never been morally at fault.
3. The contribution of the shareholders to the production of cement has been vastly more important than that of the workers.
4. The workers' contribution to the development of the cement industry has been mainly to raise unrealistic demands and to receive benefits from the company.
5. In over a hundred years, nothing has ever happened that might give a cement-worker legitimate cause for pride or anger.

This wisdom seemed to me perhaps a trifle lopsided. I felt pretty sure that these books did not present the whole truth about their subject.

And as I continued my study of company histories I gradually formed the opinion that:

NO AREA OF MODERN HISTORY HAS BEEN MORE DISTORTED BY ONE-SIDED TREATMENT THAN THE HISTORY OF BUSINESS.

So, what could be done about it?

At first, I played with the idea that I myself should write a new version of the history of cement production in Sweden.

But cement, after all, was only one example. There were thousands of other products and hundreds of other big companies.

Even if I spent the rest of my life writing company histories I could hardly hope to cover the ground. This was clearly not a one-man task.

Gradually, another solution presented itself.

In order to explain this I must say a few words about the redefinition of the concept of *culture* that has taken place in Sweden during the last decade or so.

Ten years ago we used to think of 'culture' as something produced by top artists, writers and musicians, and then *distributed* to the mass of the people who *consumed* them.

Today, society instead tries to encourage ordinary people with an interest in the theatre to *take part* in theatrical performance. In the same way we are trying to recognise and encourage other cultural *activities* in the field of music, writing and painting. The emphasis is no longer on the mere *distribution* of culture but rather on active *participation* in the arts.

Now why should this concept of culture as an activity be restricted to the liberal arts?

Why, for example, should historical research be looked upon as something carried out by academic specialists for other academic specialists, or at the very best something whose results can be *distributed* to the general public.

People who have got used to the idea that you can make your own music, your own theatre or your own poems will not find it strange that you can carry out your own investigations. Sometimes, the need for such investigations grew directly out of artistic activities. In the old mining community of *Norberg*, for example, several hundred people gathered together to make a play about the big strike in 1891 for which Norberg is famous.

But how were people dressed in those days? What did their homes look like? How did they talk, how did they eat, how did they work? They found that in order to *play* history, you had to *investigate* history.

Several such combined theatre and investigation projects are at present being carried out in various parts of Sweden, most notably in *Norrköping*, the former centre of the Swedish textile industry.

In other cases the present *economic crisis* created the impulse for historical investigation. This crisis has caused great changes in most of our major industries. Thousands of people have lost their jobs. Whole communities have been threatened by annihilation.

In self-defense these people have turned to their common history. And they have wanted to find out more about it. The small steel community of *Vikmanshyttan* is the best known example. You will hear more about that from Jörgen Burchardt.

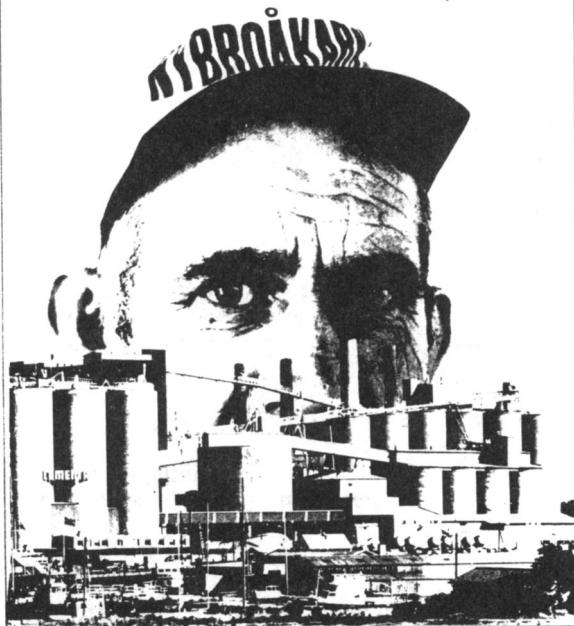
The conclusion I drew from this and other examples was:

**FACTORY HISTORY COULD AND SHOULD BE WRITTEN FROM A FRESH POINT OF VIEW
—BY WORKERS INVESTIGATING THEIR OWN WORKPLACES.**

Sven Lindqvist

Gräv där du står

Hur man utforskar ett jobb



If ordinary people are going to undertake historical research, the history of their own jobs is, I think, a very good place to start.

Because that is where they have their competence. They know their jobs. Their working experience is a platform on which they can stand when they are judging what others are doing—or not doing.

The experts might each be experts in how or her own field, but when they are talking about your job *you* are the expert. That gives you a measure of self-confidence, and a basis for amateurs and professional researchers to meet on equal footing.

But historical research of course has its own techniques and methods with which the amateur would at least need to have a superficial acquaintance. Above all the amateur must know something about the sources of information about the past.

In Sweden—and as far as I know in other countries—there was no guide on how to investigate the history of your own job.

So, instead of writing a new history of the Swedish cement industry I decided to write a handbook which would help *others*, especially the workers

to write these factory histories
in their own neighbourhoods
and their own places of work.

The book is called *Dig Where You Stand: How to do Research on a Job*.

Using the cement industry as an example it describes in a concrete and practical way how to use thirty different sources of information about the history of one's own job.

The book was four years in the making. Since it came out in March last year I have travelled all over Sweden to take part in trade union meetings, in study groups of the Workers Educational Association in public libraries, schools and universities, lecturing on the theme of digging where you stand.

Most of the people at these meetings are very excited by the idea that there is so much information available about the work they are doing.

They are surprised to hear, for example, that the Patent Registry Office has kept a record of every patent granted since the 1890's and that they are free to use the archives of the Patent Office to trace the technical history of the machine they are working with or the product they are making.

They are surprised to hear that Sweden has had a Factory Inspectorate since 1890 and that the annual reports of the Inspectorate are still available, full of concrete and often critical descriptions of particular workplaces and even of particular industrial accidents.

Very few workers know the history of strikes and industrial disputes at their place of work. It comes as a surprise to them to learn that since 1903, these disputes have been recorded by a public office. And that the archives of the Court of Industrial Disputes contain detailed information about all cases brought before the Court since it was set up in 1929.

Most people don't know that they can find out what the owners and directors of their factory used to earn, simply by looking it up in the Swedish Taxation Calendar, which has been published annually since 1912. And that the corresponding wages of workers in their own jobs are just as easily found from the annual wages statistics.

But what do the figures mean? What did people actually buy with these wages?

Most Swedes do not realise that the answers to such questions are to be found in the so-called Household Budget Investigations which have covered almost every branch of industry all over Sweden since 1912. Thousands of working class and lower middle class families were asked to keep detailed accounts of their earnings and expenditure over several months. These accounts still exist and tell us precisely how much coffee labourer Karl Malmkvist and his family at the Degerhamm Cement works could afford to buy in 1933, how much milk, how much kerosene, and what presents they gave each other for Christmas.

Documents such as these are interesting in themselves. But I see them, above all, as an excellent starting point for further investigation.

When young workers in Degerhamm Cement works today read that Anna Malmkvist bought five pennies' worth of TOOTHWAX or 11 pence worth of CARBIDE they ask themselves: What was Toothwax? What was Carbide used for?

The natural thing for them to do is to take the car and drive into town to visit the old age clinic at the hospital where Anna Malmkvist was staying in 1977. She was then already very old and weak. When I asked to interview her she sent word that she didn't remember anything and didn't care to talk. But when young people from the factory came along that was something different. And when they brought with them a copy of that old household account book from 1933, with all those things she had bought for her husband and children so long ago all neatly put down in her own familiar handwriting—well, she couldn't help but be interested.

Toothwax?

Well that was a kind of yellow paste for filling the black holes in your teeth to lessen the pain and to make them look nicer while you were waiting for the district physician to come to the factory every six months to extract black teeth, amongst other things...

And so you get the whole story about the lack of dental care at Degerhamm at a time when the nearest dentist was 50 miles away, out of reach both geographically and financially for people like the Malmkvists.

And you get that story straight from the toothless mouth of one of those who really suffered from it.

Carbide, she will muse. Well it looked like white gravel and we used it for fuel in Karl's bicycle lamp...

And out comes the whole story of how Karl had the bicycle to get to work while she had to walk that distance when she went to the factory with his lunch every day.

And then carry on up the hill to the co-operative store to buy all the things which she then had to carry home without a bicycle—and a very long time it took especially through the snow in winter time, till finally she got home, after dark to the infants she had bound with a piece of rope to the kitchen bench— 'You see I used to rope them to the bench with one pillow at the front and one pillow at the back so that they wouldn't hurt themselves while I was away.'

Documents such as the household book—this is the first point I want to make—CAN BE USED AS KEYS TO UNLOCK THE MEMORY OF OLD PEOPLE.

In my experience, some old people are very taciturn, while those who like to talk generally have a stock of anecdotes that have been told so many times that it is very difficult to get at the truth behind them.

But if you come with a document, like the household book, or a report from the Factory Inspectorate, or a plan of the workplace from the archives of the insurance company, or a

collection of photographs, or something else that captures the interest of the old person, this will awaken their memories and make the interview far more worthwhile for both of you.

My second point is that **MOST DOCUMENTS NEED AN ORAL COMPLEMENT TO TELL THEIR WHOLE STORY.**

This is only natural since most documents have been prepared for purposes other than the historian's.

The household budget investigations were undertaken in order to provide information for the price index. The insurance companies' description of the workplace were meant to form a basis for judging the risk of fire. And so on.

Most documents have limitations because of the way they were drawn up to meet their original purpose. And many of them, like police reports, or the description of strikes or accidents, can be quite misleading because the public authority collecting the information did not know the whole truth or did not both to seek any opinion other than the employer's.

The general reaction of Swedish workers when you tell them about the sources of their own history, is: Why have we not been told of this before?

The short answer to that is, of course, that nobody thought of it.

But then, again, why did nobody think of it? This question takes us very deep into Swedish class society.

One of the reasons is, I believe, that workers' research into the history of their own jobs could be politically embarrassing to many established institutions in Sweden.

History is dangerous.

That was something else that I learnt ten years ago when I was touring Latin America investigating multinational companies. The representatives of these companies spoke willingly enough about present problems and future prospects. But when conversation turned to history they often became uncomfortable.

'We are trying to live down our past', an executive of Bookers told me. Bookers' original capital and Guayana lands were acquired through the slave trade with Africa.

'We are still charged with the sins of the past', said Mr Pilgrim, information officer of Demba, the bauxite company of the same country.

Until the Great War, the land now occupied by Demba belonged to smallholders who had no idea of the riches that the ground contained. It was purchased for a song.

And since the ore thus became the private property of the company, they never paid a cent in royalties to the state for the right to mine the land.

Both these gentlemen thought it very unfair that the sins of the past should be held against them today.

But the **RESULTS** of these sins—the land, the buildings, the machinery, in short the Capital—these they were of course not willing to surrender. The **RESULTS** of the past were sacred private property and must not be touched.

History is important because the **RESULTS** of history are still with us. That was what I learnt in Latin America. History is still paying dividends. History is still conferring power on people. In Sweden as well as in Latin America.

The history of the electrostatic dust collector is a case in point, especially for workers in a dusty trade like cement manufacture.

The principle of the electrostatic dust collector was discovered in Britain in 1884. But nobody paid attention, until politically powerful Californian orange growers managed to obtain a court

order against the Riverside cement works warning that the factory would be shut down if the dust problem was not solved.

Then the problem was solved.

Cotrell constructed an effective electrostatic dust collector which was installed at the Riverside cement works in 1906. It collected around 98 percent of the dust, or roughly 100 tons a day.

About the same time, in 1909, the health hazards of cement dust were, for the first time, statistically proven in the 'Sickness statistics of the Leipzig local sick fund'.

These health hazards, and the methods of preventing them, were both well-known to Swedish cement companies.

But when the first electrostatic dust collector was installed in a Swedish cement factory in 1923 the intention was not to protect the health of the workers or the local population.

The object was to extract potash from the dust. The operation turned out to be unprofitable and the dust collector was pulled down in 1926.

The years went by. It was not until 1940 that a dust collector was installed for health protection purposes in a Swedish cement factory. And it was only in 1969 that dust collectors were installed in all Swedish cement factories, the last one being Hellekis i Västergötland.

By that time the electrostatic dust collector had been in existence for over sixty years. The health hazards had been known for exactly sixty years. Two generations of cement workers had inhaled tons of cement dust. Millions of tons had been spread over the surrounding countryside.

But every year that a company could delay installing a dust collector, it saved a few dollars at the expense of the workers and the neighbours.

The money has not been lost. It is still there. The money saved in waiting sixty years to install dust collectors today forms part of the capital of the Swedish private cement monopoly, EUROOC.

Having come this far in investigating the history of the dust problem Swedish cement workers tend to ask the question:

To whom should that part of the capital of EUROOC belong? Should it belong to the shareholders, who never came near the factory? Or should it belong to us, who suffered the dust and the hazards for sixty years?

Such questions are potentially dangerous. The abstract notion of the relation between Capital and Labour suddenly becomes concrete and tangible, almost touchable and breathable, through historical investigation of the particular circumstances in a particular place of work.

This is especially so for workers in the asbestos cement factories. The dust they inhaled was the most dangerous of all.

These dangers were first discovered in 1907. They were first taken seriously in Britain in the 1930's. They were not acknowledged in Sweden until 1964. And asbestos was still widely used in our country until 1976.

History is important because its results are still with us. This year and next year people will die because of working conditions they suffered from twenty, thirty or even fifty years ago.

Towards the end of the 1960's, people were still dying from cancer caused by asbestos fibres buried in their lungs since the time they worked in the gas-mask factories of the Great War.

A 47-year old woman died from cancer caused by asbestos. At 2-6 years of age, she had been exposed to the dust from the working clothes of her parents who at that time worked in an asbestos factory. A foreman at an asbestos mine sometimes brought pieces of asbestos home for his little daughter to play with. Later in her life, this woman died of mesothelioma. Another little

girl used to come to the asbestos factory with her father's food every day for a year. Sixty years later she died from mesothelioma.

When former asbestos workers gradually discover facts such as these through a combination of interviews and the study of documents, they come to understand that history is still living even in the bodies of those who took part in it.

History is lying in wait till finally it kills them. When you open the dead body you will find history in the form of silvery fibres—the last remnants of the air these people had to breathe in the factories and workers' quarters at the beginning of the century.

And when the votes are counted at the shareholders' meetings that same history is still living—the profits from those days still entitle their owners to power and dividends. Just as the workers' children inherited the asbestos fibres, other children have inherited the company shares.

History is not dead. On the contrary, it is living the good life and running the big companies. And that, in the final analysis, is why workers' investigations of factory history is so necessary.

Sixty years after the conquest of political democracy, the Swedish workers' movement is now bent on the conquest of economic democracy. In this situation, workers' investigations of their own jobs will have a definite political significance.

Those who wield economic power have so far also had control over the research dealing with their companies. They have decided what picture should be painted of themselves. They have decided on the picture of the company.

That's why many workers do not know their own predecessors. They often know nothing of the history still living in the Capital of the company. That history must first be investigated, concretely and locally, by the combined collection of oral and documentary evidence in company after company.

Those who are to conquer the company must first conquer the picture of the company. A new picture must be created, a picture that puts workers and their work in the foreground.

This, I believe, is true not only of Sweden, but of many other countries. My purpose in speaking here today is to try and persuade you that such activities could and should be encouraged. I hope that one of you will soon be writing a *Dig Where You Stand* for the workers of your country.