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Human Relations on the Waterfront: The Cabo System*

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A few years ago, a weekly magazine featured an article on stevedores and the *cabo* system. The magazine article which was based on a report by the Bureau of Labor Standards described the cabo system as a pernicious system that was responsible for the depletion of the wages of stevedores. The cabo system was more specifically referred to in the same report as a manner of payment of wages wherein a *cabo* or gang leader collects the wages of all his men and does the paying himself. In the process, he gives less than what is due to the worker.

The purpose of this paper is to describe some fundamental structures and functions of the cabo system. The data used in this preliminary report were collected in the course of a year of fieldwork on the waterfront.¹

* Excerpts from a paper read by the author before the Philippine Sociological Society at its September 17, 1967 meeting.

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¹ I do not know if it is accurate to call the technique used participant observation. For one thing, while I was allowed to join the stevedoring work gang as an unskilled stevedore, they never treated me like one. I helped move cargo in the *bodega* (warehouse) when I wanted to, and they never insisted that I work as they did. I was considered more as a *salang-pusa* (a "hanger-on") than a regular stevedore. For this, I got my meals free and they would say I deserved a compensation of five or six pesos, but I never did accept my wages.

The study of an entire system, like the cabo system, is a study of a complex situation. Dr. Robert Weiss defines a complex situation "... as one in which as many of the interrelated phenomena as possible are studied simultaneously, i.e., the situation as a whole is studied rather than a particular element within the situation."²

Weiss delineates two general directions that studies of complex situations usually take: one, toward analysis and the other, toward the identification of system relations. One is analytic, the other holistic.

The debate in scientific circles over the question of which approach is better is a protracted one. The controversy, if we may call it that, has sometimes been expressed in a choice between quantitative and qualitative work; between the formulation of preliminary hypotheses and the adoption of a more exploratory stance; between "reliability, precision, the possibility of prediction and control" on one hand, and "validity, evocativeness, the possibility of sympathetic understanding" on the other.

The task of the investigator employing the analytic approach is to isolate

² Robert Weiss, "Alternative Approaches in the study of Complex Situations," *Human Organization*, 25: 3 (Fall 1966) 198-205.

specific elements or variables, identify the nature of their relationships, and possibly determine the strength and direction of their linkages. This would to a large extent involve quantitative measurement to establish the interrelations among specific variables.

The investigator using the holistic approach sees a complex situation as a system of interrelated elements constituting the situation's underlying structure. His tendency would be to understand and assess phenomena in terms of this system. As Weiss succinctly put it: The holistic investigator ". . . may be less concerned than the analytically oriented investigator with precise specification of the nature of elements, and almost certainly will be less concerned with problems of quantification. His chief interest might be phrased as: Taking it all together, how does the whole thing work?"

Taking it all together, how does the cabo system work, one may now ask. In this particular study of stevedores, it will be noticed that we have more or less adopted the holistic approach. That is why we are interested in identifying and describing the system underlying the structure and organization of a work gang.

The work involved in the work gang studied is stevedoring. Stevedoring is mainly the loading of cargo from the piers to the ship or the unloading of cargo from the ship to the piers or barges as the case may be. Stevedores may be called "casuals," because when there are no ships to work on, they are not paid; and ships do not come everyday.

There is a stevedoring company that gets the contract to load or unload cargo. There is also a stevedoring union which has an agreement with the company that the latter will hire its stevedores from his union and from nowhere else. This collective bargaining agree-

ment between the union and the company also specifies how much the stevedores will receive from the company, what benefits they are entitled to aside from their wages, the manner of payment of wages, and other conditions of employment. One of the provisions of the agreement required that the stevedores were to be divided into gangs consisting of three classes of stevedores, namely, the *cabo*, the *antiguos*, and the *modernos*.

The recognized regular gang therefore is composed of one cabo or gang boss, five *antiguos* and five *modernos*. At one time or another, the *antiguo* had once been a *moderno* himself. In his work as a *moderno*, he gradually acquired a certain degree of skill that entitled him for promotion to *antiguo*. The *moderno* is the relatively unskilled stevedore who works in the hatches of the ship. He is also called the *moderno-bodegero*. He is the lowest in the ranks of stevedores. One may ask at this point who promotes the *moderno* to *antiguo*. Officially, it should be the stevedoring company. In practice, it is really the cabo who determines who is *antiguo* and who is *moderno*. But what about the cabo? Who designates him cabo? Again, because of the provision agreed upon by both the company and the union, it is the prerogative of the company to appoint the cabo or the gangboss. In practice, it is the union that decides who should be cabo.

The sociologist George Homans makes a lucid distinction between what he calls the formal and the informal systems of any group or organization.³ The formal system is tantamount to the blueprint of an organization. It also provides the setting within which another system evolves—the informal system. The recog-

³ George Homans, *The Human Group*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), Ch. 4,5,6.

inition of this difference or distinction between the formal and informal systems serves to underscore the fact that there is a great disparity between what is laid down as official procedure and what is actually practiced. This is mentioned because in our discussion of the cabo system, we will see how the formal and informal systems have functionally blended with each other such that the men continue to serve the goals of the company and of the union while giving satisfaction to their desires, and fulfillment to their goals and motives as individuals and as a group.

In the company payroll, the cabo or gangboss receives ₱17.39 for 11 hours work during the day, i.e., from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. For the same number of hours, the antiguo is entitled to ₱15, the moderno, ₱13.39. Rates in the evening are much higher because all 13 hours are considered overtime work. For 13 hours of work in the evening, the cabo gets ₱27.17, the antiguo, ₱23.37, and the moderno, ₱19.93. Even on company terms, however, the stevedores do not get their wages flat. From the day's wages, the Union collects 5% from each, ₱0.25 each for death relief, ₱1.00 each allotment for the meal they eat aboard the ship. On company terms, the wage distribution appears fair enough. But at the end of the day, when the cabo starts apportioning the pay among the members of his gang, the take-home pay for the stevedores assumes these proportions: Day shift-moderno = ₱9.00, antiguo = ₱11.00, and cabo = ₱50.00 to ₱60.00. Night shift-moderno = ₱13.00, antiguo = ₱18.00, and cabo = ₱90.00 to ₱100.00.

In the collective bargaining agreement, there is a provision that wages are to be paid individually to the workers at the earliest possible time; but *earliest* is not less than three weeks. An individual payment means giving the time sheet to the

cabo who then sells it to the wealthy Chinese loan shark in the neighborhood who cashes it on the spot minus ten per cent of the whole gang's earnings. Deplorable as it may seem to outsiders, this particular feature of the system has its functions. To illustrate, this system is functional to the stevedore because he does not have to wait long enough to realize the fruit of his day's labors and he does not have to go to the company's office to line up for his wages. That would be too inconvenient. It is functional to the company because the wages do not have to be assorted individually as in other offices: no paymaster is needed, paper work is lessened, time and effort expended is minimized. The wages of as many as a thousand stevedores for three weeks is paid to only one person—the loan shark. The union prefers it this way because the 5% share, the ₱1.00 each meal allotment, the ₱0.25 death relief do not have to be collected from each stevedore, but could be collected all at the same time from the loan shark who secures the money from the company. The loan shark relishes this because he realizes 10% in profits within a period of three weeks doing nothing.

Robert K. Merton states the provisional assumption that a structure or system survives because it is functional to its participants.⁴ This, of course, is a problem for investigation, not a conclusion drawn prior to research. With this in mind, would it be unreasonable to explain the persistence of the system we just described by its functions?

If the 5% so-called union dues collected every work day (actually, the stevedores are made to pay ₱0.50 more every month as regular union dues), the cost of one meal (which is ₱1.00, for which they get a cup

⁴ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, (Glencoe: Free Press, 1957), pp. 19-84.

of rice wrapped in newspaper, a slice of fish, and sugared peanut), the 10% for the loan shark who buys the time sheet were the deductions from day's wages, the common stevedore like the *antiguo* and *moderno* would be very happy. But aside from the loan shark, there is another person who is interested in the stevedore's wages—his own gangboss, the *cabo* who took the stevedore in his group. The *cabo* gets from P2.00 to P3.00 from each of his men's wages. The gangboss will still be very unhappy if all he gets is only his own salary and his share of the men's wages. The *cabo* broods when he has a complete set of ten men, eleven including him, within the gang. For it is standard practice in the *stiba* for a *cabo* to have only seven or eight men with him when he goes to work, and then collects the wages for a complete set of eleven men at the end of the day. To stevedores, it is part of tradition to have *pitik*—this is how they call the imaginary workers who get paid. The *cabo*, of course, pockets the wages of the *pitik*.

The company recommends that of the eleven men agreed upon to compose a gang, there should be one *cabo*, five *antiguos*, and five *modernos*. In the *stiba*, however, the word of the gangboss and not of the company is the law. The *cabo* has his own ideas about the composition of his gang. When he says there shall be only two *antiguos*, he will recognize only two *antiguos*, and the rest will all be *modernos*, that is, to be paid as *modernos*. Thus, it is possible that an old stevedore may have worked before with another gang as an *antiguo*, but in his present gang, the *cabo* considers and accordingly pays him only as a *moderno*. Since it is "a take-it-or-leave-it" proposition, no complaints are made. If a stevedore does not take it, the *cabo* designates another stevedore. The fact is that there

are just too many stevedores and too few ships to work on.

The problems of stevedores are human problems. Over the years, stevedores have set up systems by which the problems caused by the relative scarcity of ships could be minimized. The discussion of two of these systems, the *tumbukan* and the *tulog* follows.

The *tumbukan* system operates thus: I am a *cabo* and I have my own *mano*. Because there are just too many *cabos* and very few ships to work on, I cannot work everyday even if I want to. I will have to wait for my turn because the list of *cabos* follows a rotation system. Sometimes, I can make only three or four *labas*, i.e., three or four working days in one month. To augment my earnings, I join another gang or other gangs that are far from me in the list. If I am No. 5 in the list, I may choose No. 40 as *katumbukan* so that there will not be any chance at all that we will be working as *cabos* at the same time. Under this arrangement, he allows me to work in his gang as an *antiguo* with pay agreed upon between the two of us. The pay is normally higher than the average pay of *antiguos*. When it is my turn to work, he works with me under the same arrangement. Under this system, he is virtually a member of my gang, and I am virtually also a member of his. If I give him fifteen pesos everytime he comes along, he gives me the same when I join him.

The *tulog* is sometimes called the *daga*. In colloquial Tagalog, "pamparami lamang siya" (the imaginary worker). The *tulog* does not work. As his title suggests, he is "natutulog" (sleeping). The term *daga* suggests a special kind of *tulog*. He does not sleep, but does not work either. What he actually does is to roam the hatches of the ship looking for any pilferable car-

go. The tulog gets free meals and two or three pesos for his efforts. One may ask why a cabo would not just leave the position of the tulog vacant and thereby increase his pitik to 3 or 4. A scrupulous cabo would never do that. If it cannot be a tulog, then it has to be a real stevedore, but not a pitik. In his own jargon, he says: "Nakakahiya na iyon, hahanapan ako ng trabaho ng kumpanya" (That would be a shame. The company would look for work done).

At this point, one may pose the question as to whether anyone gets disturbed about the cabo who has an incomplete set of men collecting wages for a complete set of men? The stevedoring company is paid by the shipping company on the tonnage basis, i.e., how many tons of cargo were loaded or unloaded? The company does get anxious that the gangs, on account of their incomplete sets of men, might turn out a very low tonnage output. However, the company has not come up with valid evidence to conclude that an incomplete set of men would work more slowly than a complete set.

In recent years, according to the superintendent himself, the company has assumed a tolerant attitude towards this pitik business. To date, there is only one person who seems to be interested in getting a complete set of 11 men. He is the company's assignment manager. However, the superintendent claims that the more the assistant manager counts, the slower the men work. This is to show that the stevedores do not particularly relish the assistant manager's numerical investigations, so much so that of late his visits to the vessels have become less frequent; he has once again relegated the task of counting the men on the sets to the foremen and to the supervisors on whom the responsibility formerly rested.

Do these company men perform their designated jobs to the letter? What is the

nature of their relationship with the stevedores? The foremen and supervisors are permanent employees of the company. They get their monthly salary regardless of whether there are or there are no ships to work on. The foremen and the supervisors are also assigned on the basis of a rotation system. One foreman is assigned for every three gangs. A supervisor is assigned for every two ships. All the present foremen and supervisors of the company, except two foremen, were drawn from the ranks of stevedores. They were supposedly the best cabos during their time. Perhaps, it is not even accurate to say that they "had once been cabos." For even today, they still own manos or gangs.

Many of the cabos who appear as heads of gangs are in fact only the *segundos*, or lieutenants of foremen and supervisors. Under this *segundo* system, these company officials who have retained their rights over the gangs have a share of the gang's collective wages. The system varies on this point. Some foremen and supervisors insist that the pitik belongs to them. Others have been more charitable and they demand only a fixed amount ranging from ₱15.00 to ₱25.00. Other foremen are interested only in the *gana* or wages of the cabo. In this case, the *segundo-cabo* gets the pitik. All this started when the first cabos to be appointed foremen and supervisors did not automatically relegate the position to their righthand men. These gangbosses were so aware of the great demand for the position that they decided to accomplish the transfer of command through bidding, i.e., giving permission to "use" their gangs to those who could afford to pay the highest fee.

Accidents are unavoidable in the stevedoring business. Either the cargo is damaged or a person gets hurt. Either way, it is the responsibility of the foreman and supervisor to report the accident. An ac-

cident is almost always a result of negligence. Stevedores in the piers have a special term for negligence, *buliliaso*. To commit *buliliaso* at work is painful to the stevedore. It pricks his pride and lowers his self-esteem. Above all, it demoralizes him. There are two kinds of accidents in the waterfront: big and small. Big accidents can not be concealed, but which can be minimized by putting the blame on mechanical trouble. Small accidents can be definitely concealed. The concealment or minimization of accidents is effective only in so far as the foremen and supervisors legitimize it. Stevedores, therefore, have seen it fit to maintain a spirit of *pakikisama* with these emissaries of the company. However, *pakikisama* in their own terms is not only spirit; it is also, and above all, a financial matter. There are three kinds of foremen and supervisors, such as those who just sit and wait for the cabo to give them their share, those who insist that they must have the wages of one *pitik*, and those who insist on a fixed share of P3.00 during the day and P5.00 during the night. If the latter arrangement is adopted for the day, each gang gives three pesos. If there are six gangs on board, then the sum of eighteen pesos is equally divided between two foremen and one supervisor.

Despite all these benefits of foremen and supervisors, not too many stevedores are willing to exchange positions with these men. A supervisor once said, "Foremen and supervisors are in a tight position because they must balance their loyalty to their men and to the company. When you get too strict with the men, they will say, '*Hindi ka na marunung makisama ngayon.*' (You cannot get along with people anymore). When you are too lax with them, the company says, 'You are not doing your job well.' The proper balance is: *Pagbig-*

yan mo na ang mga tao kung maliit na bagay lang. Kung hindi rin lang ikalulu-gi ng kumpanya, pabayaang mo na sila. (Give allowances to the 'little' people as long as the company does not lose much.) Because if you get too strict with them, they will do all they can to put you down."

Pakikisama is a vital concept in the waterfront. A cabo once explained, "There are three kinds of workers here in the stiba. First, those who know their jobs *pero hindi marunung makisama*; (but can not get along with others) second, those who do not know their jobs *pero marunung makisama*; (but can get along with others) and third, those who know their jobs very well *at marunung pang makisama*. (and can get along with others). Workers of the last type are the best you can have here. But you cannot have them all the time. When I cannot have them, I prefer those who do not know their jobs *pero marunung makisama*. This is because those who do not know their jobs *pero marunung makisama ay matuturuan pa dahil sa pakikisama. Pero iyong hindi marunung makisama, hindi na matuturuan pa. Walang kuwentang kasama iyon.* (but can get along with others can be more easily handled; those who are skilled but can not get along are more difficult to handle. They are not worth having in the system.)"

It has been the purpose of this paper to identify and describe the features of an employment system that has been operating for so many years in most Philippine harbors. It is possible that something like the system just described exists in foreign ports, but the author has not yet encountered studies done along this area whether in the country or elsewhere.⁵

⁵ It should be stated here that the above discussion should be taken more as preliminary notes than as conclusive statements about the cabo system.