COMMON SENSE ETHNOGRAPHY

THE CONTRIBUTION OF RICHARD HARPER TO THE SCIENCES OF DESIGN

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The play in our title points to the twin aspects of Richard Harper's sociological work we think make it distinctive among its peers. There is the curiosity about the ordinary, day-in, day-out normality of most people's working lives, including those in many of the most high-pressured or vaunted occupations in the modern world. In addressing anybody and everybody's world of work sociologically, Richard emphasises the organisation and management of tasks undertaken and challenges faced as the manageably routine things they are turned into by those whose days' work consists in having to deal with them.

The second aspect reflects the tradition in which we think Richard's work rightly has a place: British Cultural Anthropology. This tradition forged an ethnographic practise of down to earth, plain-speaking engagement with the quotidian nature of the cultures they studied. Not for them the liberatory mirages of critical and post-critical ethnography-as-politics nor the phantasmagorical hallucinations of prospectors for digital nativities. And just think how they would have shuddered at what they would have seen as the unprofessional self-indulgence of autoethnographic navel gazing. What we get is what they found: no more and no less. And what riches they were! Richard is steeped in this tradition and, we think, should be rightly proud of his own unique contribution to it.

Of course, when we first got to know Richard, all of this was to come. Then, he was one of two outstanding undergraduates, the other being Baron Boulos (who, alas, was killed in an accident in the summer after his graduation). They were exceptional examples of the kind of student then much more common than of late. They showed an eager enthusiasm for the subject (sociology), a readiness to engage with, question and challenge their teachers on academic rather than administrative grounds whilst at the same time busily exploring the diversity of social science through reading and discussion beyond the bounds of their curriculum.

After graduation, Richard first showed his mettle with a very interesting study in an unlikely setting—auditing work within a group of management consultants. He especially focused on the shaping of assessment practices during audits in client organisations. At the time he was finishing this investigation, we had the good fortune (together with John Hughes at Lancaster) to win a research grant to study the London Air Traffic Control Centre. Given the quality of work Richard was already producing and the promise he clearly had, he was an obvious choice for one of the two research officer posts it provided.

In the LATCC study, Richard was responsible for a significant part of the initial observational study of the controllers who monitored and directed air traffic flow. It was his articulation of the interweaving of the formal and informal, the explicit and the implicit, the institutional rules and the controller's local knowledge which contributed much to Lancaster's ability to get further funding for ATC studies and so go on to develop a significant centre (involving collaboration between the sociology and computing departments there) in the emerging discipline of Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW). CSCW was beginning to provide career opportunities for social science students (sometimes of broadly ethnomethodological inclinations) to engage in interesting research work within academic computer science departments and even in corporate research. Richard blazed a trail in this new development.

CSCW emerged as a research agenda just as computing machinery became more widespread in organisational settings. The basic HCI issues of interface and network design had been tamed (but not solved), and agendas turned towards the challenge of enabling computers to serve the specific purposes of their users more effectively. Successfully developing applications to fit computing functions to their environment of use was (and still

is) deeply problematic. Certainly, possession of programming and other design skills could never themselves guarantee applications would be effective in supporting the production of, say, time-critical financial reporting in actual organisational settings. An understanding of the "domain of application" as a *working environment* was also required. The very title of the new approach, CSCW, signified a cautionary appreciation of the possibilities complemented with reasoned scepticism toward any dreams of thoroughgoing automation of all workplaces. For CSCW, computing was to be considered a support tool for people's work, and the operation of the equipment itself to be something embedded in the skilled practices of its users. It had become clear the development of effective applications was going to require much better understanding of the organised work practices within which distributed and networked devices were to be placed. As a result, research objectives were reshaped to encompass enhancing user's capabilities rather than replacing them. Intuition alone had allowed HCI to give us easy to use tools based on visual metaphors but the potential for networking many machines across and between worksites required a much finer awareness of the ways of organisational working into which such physical and communicative networks were to be implanted.

There were two important (and related) issues which the increasing adoption of 'sociological' ideas in computing research and innovation brought to the fore. First, there was the need for better understanding of the organisation of actual work, giving greater emphasis to the range of requirements the users of technology themselves felt were needed if they were to make effective use of computing resources. Second, there was the requirement to reshape design thinking to allow often qualitative or even intangible requirements to be explicitly incorporated into the development of technologies. Richard's work with the Air Traffic Controllers, the police, the administrators at the IMF, back-room staff in banks and elsewhere made major contributions to both clarifying these issues and making them tractable.

For a significant part of his career, Richard worked corporate research laboratories, first in Xerox and later in Microsoft. In both, his openness to technological ideas as well as his willingness to collaborate across disciplinary divides were to the fore.[1] In these endeavours,

[1] The longest lasting of these collaborations began in Xerox. After Abi joined from Toronto, Bob asked them to share an office. Little did he or anybody else suspect that only a few months later they would

not only was Richard's skill as a field researcher much prized but also his communication skills and ability to simplify complex problems when explaining their features through well chosen and crisply presented examples. This last named was particularly useful on those occasions when senior executives, often with very little technical background, had to be shown round the Lab.

What we hope emerges from all this is that Richard is far from being a sectarian sociologist. Indeed, he is an enthusiast for interdisciplinary working. In the research labs and elsewhere, he was always a congenial and constructive collaborator, contributing to a wide diversity of cross disciplinary projects. Very often this involved sober (but never humourless) re-valuations of the more exaggerated visions usually accompanying innovative technologies. His major corrective to the incautious application of schematic ideas about the nature of individuals and their working and private lives took the form of more fleshed-out and realistic pictures of the practicalities and constraints experienced by those inhabiting the worlds into which new devices and their ancillary consequences might be fitted.

This aspect of his contribution has become more prominent over time. The early study of the International Monetary Fund (which we have already mentioned) as well as other studies such as the explorations of the 'affordances' of paper deliberately raise cautions over the high expectations attached to the ambition for the paperless office. Similar reservations are to be found in his writing on 'the smart house' where he emphasises the relevance of the ordinary demands of domestic life. More recently, his book *Texture* assessed the nature and extent of the supposed problem of 'information overload' in modern society. In like manner, *Choice* sets out the reasons for doubting there is a strong basis in either theoretical ideas or empirical research for the fad of behavioural economics.

The most wide-ranging and perhaps the best of these essays in balanced assessment of technological possibilities and real-world circumstances is Richard's lengthy consideration of the diverse set of contributions made to his edited collection *Trust, Computing and Society*. Here, whilst not denying his own experience and the convictions born of it, we find even handed, calm, clear and steady eyed summations of the claims, ambitions and likely pitfalls

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announce their intention to entwine their lives, thereby giving him the headache of peaceably engineering room moves across the lab yet again in order to comply with the Company's practice of couples not sharing offices!

(technological, organisational, interactional and political) associated with proposals for how that most cruelly abused of concepts, "trust", might or should re-thought. This reflection encompasses efforts to engineer solutions brought forward on the basis of attenuating the actual or purported problems "we" do or will face with the rising tide of interconnected, multi-modal, experientially intrusive digital devices, the envisioned services they could provide and demands they will necessarily make. From what the flyers say, it looks as if *The Shape of Thought* (frustratingly less than a fortnight away at the time of writing) is likely to be an equally measured response, this time to the current AI craze. Yes, there will be change. And yes, some of it will be difficult. But AI will not bring the world as we know it to an end. And neither will it lead us to Nirvana.

Richard is generous spirited, supportive of colleagues and collaborators, independently minded, energetically creative, and intellectually constructive. We doubt retirement will bring an end to his interest in the changing, technologically turbulent world around him nor his curiosity about how we all manage our lives in it. That he has been and still is a field worker by profession testifies to his anthropological bent. Even if he could, he wouldn't want to stop thinking deeply about how the world wags and what he likes and doesn't like about it. No more would he want to cease sharing his opinions in the public presses and among peers and friends over a beer or in more formal places. Rest assured, for Richard retirement will be just another transition not a termination.