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Elliott Jaques and Wilfred Brown:
An appreciation of a remarkable partnership

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ELLIOTT JAQUES and WILFRED BROWN

An appreciation of a remarkable partnership

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Author's note: My task here is to explain to devotees of Jaques' work how his 37 year friendship and professional collaboration with Wilfred Brown shaped that work. You can't understand Jaques without a grasp of the Brown element – it was as if their great brains were fused together in their work. I knew them both, having worked for most of the 1970s at the Tavistock Institute in London. But I knew Wilfred Brown the better, having played a deal of golf with him and helped to write a book with him (1). For those who understand these matters, Brown had been a scratch golfer in his youth and was still dangerous in his late 60s. When he was ennobled in 1964 he took the title Lord Brown of Machrihanish (the name of his beloved golf course near his cottage on the Kintyre Peninsula in south west Scotland).

The Partners

Few partnerships in history rival this for fruitfulness. Arguably, the association with Brown was the making of Jaques. Of course, following the tenets of SST, Jaques would have made his mark somehow or other. But the circumstances of immediate post-war Britain provided an almost perfect complementarity of interests, knowledge and access to power on the part of these two men.

There are a few other examples of this kind of partnership between a major thinker and a major player. One is the well-known case of Prof. Russ Ackoff and Herman Wrice in the Mantua ghetto in downtown Philadelphia – a project still active 35 years later. Ackoff described this collaboration in the seminal paper: *A Black Ghetto's Research on a University* (2). Wrice had the concern (he actually lived in the Mantua ghetto) and the street smarts - but Ackoff had the wisdom to see that the University of Pennsylvania itself (not the ghetto) was the proper object of any useful "research". Ackoff also understood the Tavistock Institute approach to "action research", having worked closely for years with Eric Trist – another Tavistock luminary. When such partnerships work well, it generally involves a great thinker gaining access, via a player/collaborator, to a great field of study in the real world of events. This tends to relegate the latter to also-ran intellectual status. Wilfred Brown, in his special way, was just as clever as Jaques and he wrote almost as many arresting books about the work they did together (3). Read on.

The Tavistock Background

The basic facts are well-known. In 1948 the newly-formed Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London had morphed out of the old Tavistock Clinic for Medical

Psychology (set up after World War I to treat and to better understand shell-shock and related traumas). The Institute was meant to bring the remarkable insights gained during World War II into the broader community, but in particular to post-war business and industry. Those insights centred mainly on the nature of effective leadership, managerial selection and teamwork.

The post-War British government supported this development but it was the Rockefeller Foundation that put up the initial grant money for the new Institute in 1946. It was incorporated in 1947 and the great Glacier Metals project, on which Jaques cut his action-research teeth and on which he would work for 17 years, was one of its first projects in 1948. Right from the start the British academic establishment was suspicious of this new pretender to academic respectability – after all, most of its founding staff practised the black arts of psychoanalysis! But Glacier Metal only became a part of the Tavistock's initial programme because of the determination of its remarkable 40-year old chief executive Wilfred Brown.

Over time, this skepticism about the Tavistock on the part of the established academics was paralleled by nervousness on the part of a resurgent British business community. Britain was broke by the end of the War but making money from business wasn't so difficult in the post-war rush for growth – however outmoded your methods. Numerous studies have shown how British business dashed for easy growth without ever revisiting or reforming its worst traditional practices. Marshall Aid money poured into Britain as well as Germany after the War (twice as much as it happens) but nowhere did it lead to the fundamental rethinking that occurred in Germany – especially as to labour relations. (Glacier was an obvious exception - although Brown did have to create an effective R&D capability after the war). Most of the work done by the Tavistock Institute, and especially that done by Jaques and Brown, served simply to remind the business fat cats of the time how far they were falling behind their Continental competitors.

Skepticism and Bullshit

This skepticism on the part of both the academic and the business communities is an important accompaniment to the Jaques/Brown story. Those people around the world who regard the Tavistock canon and such outflows as SST and RO as nothing less than blindingly obvious truths, are generally puzzled that others (the great majority) don't "get it". This is an important phenomenon to understand if we hope ever to spread these important insights more widely. The simple view is that most academics are distrustful of anything other than "hard science" and most businessmen are defensive in the face of any evidence which suggests they have got it all wrong. The Glacier study therefore attacked the establishment on two powerful fronts at once.

For the purposes of this paper, I propose to construct the events of 1948-1985 (the year of Wilfred Brown's death) in the following way – the intellectual alliance of a Canadian and a Scot (together representing clarity of thought and Authority) against the massed ranks of American and English bullshit. (Here I employ the term "bullshit" in the same precise sense as Prof. Harry Frankfurt in his famous Princeton monograph *On Bullshit* (4)). In

this version of history, those in the adjoining dominant cultures of America and England do not tell “lies” about themselves or about the glib consultants they employ, they have simply come to believe in the unrelieved diet of bullshit they have been fed since Mary Parker Follett was overwhelmed by the “human relations school”.

This view of history casts Jaques and Brown as clearly superior intellects, drawn by their off-centre position in the power nexus (not American; not English) to pointing out that the emperor hasn't got any clothes on. Both men were famed for “not suffering fools gladly” and neither bothered much with diplomacy. So they got along fine. Brown was nine years older than Jaques (who was only 31 when the Glacier project began; The seminal *Changing Culture of a Factory* actually arose out of his Harvard PhD on Glacier, submitted in 1951 (5)). By the time Wilfred Brown lay smitten by a stroke, speechless and dying in 1985, with Jaques almost daily at his bedside, the age difference had dissolved into simple friendship.

Thought Leadership

As the Glacier project proceeded, Jaques and Brown increasingly detached themselves from the Tavistock “human relations” and “group relations” movements. It was not that they were unmindful of interpersonal relations or group processes, but rather that they came to understand the higher importance of authority, role clarity, accountability and (Brown's special interest) *power*. Harry S. Truman probably captured the predominant post-war American view of these matters when he said: *a leader is a man (sic) who has the ability to get other people to do what they don't want to do – and like it!* (6) This captures well the pragmatic post-war American view that the key element of leadership is persuasiveness, backed up by sincerity.

In the post-War years, wherever American thinking about management led England meekly followed. When parts of American academia turned against the Glacier/Tavistock view of reality, most of the English management movement followed suit. You go to England for eloquent charm (bullshit, if you insist) but you go to Scotland for strict role clarity and precise accountability. (In Scotland they say: *the only time you need an agreement is when there's a disagreement!* - or, in other words, get it in writing – what the English might regard as “red tape”). It was Jaques' great good fortune to observe that kind of uncompromising Scottish leader at work in Glacier. Brown understood the importance of *formal* arrangements – something the “human relations” and “group relations” schools were retreating from at the time. In the course of time, Jaques became a constitutionalist too, just like the managing director. Jaques had had a deep education but it wasn't broad. Brown, who never went to university at all, taught Jaques history.

In the post-war years, the Tavistock Institute opened up a number of parallel channels of inquiry. In tandem with the Glacier work, other Tavistock founders were establishing the “socio-technical systems” field, notably Emery, Trist and Bamforth (the latter two in the coalmines of northern England) – an attempt to understand how operational imperatives interact with underlying human nature. Ken Rice, who also worked on the Glacier project, shared the worry that too much attention was sometimes paid to group process

and too little to the business itself. In the early days, he argued, the Tavistock team in Glacier “paid too little attention to the manufacture and sale of bearings, and perhaps overmuch to the motives and drives of both managers and workers”. Rice believed that both Jaques and Brown corrected this imbalance in their later writing.

Perhaps the most striking example of the operational imperative/human nature interaction came from another of the Tavistock founders, Isabel Menzies. Her seminal paper: *A Case-Study in the Functioning of Social Systems as a Defence against Anxiety* (7) demonstrated how the organisation and training of nurses was invariably dysfunctional for primary task (patient care) unless the inevitable anxieties posed by the work were managed in a conscious way. Isabel Menzies was, by the way, another no-nonsense Scot.

For Jaques, the formal break with the group relations movement came in 1952 when he quit the Tavistock - leaving behind a few eminent colleagues who felt, rightly or wrongly, that their contribution to the Glacier work had been marginalised. As a founder member of the Institute, Jaques’ departure represented quite a schism in the Tavistock ranks. Not for the last time, Brown paved the way for Jaques’ career development by providing a job at Glacier. By this time, Jaques had already grasped the importance of the time dimension – an early example of his great skill in listening to other people.

It’s likely though that Jaques’ great concern with fairness had something to do with Brown’s influence. Brown was old enough to have witnessed the slum conditions in Glasgow in the post-WWI years and had already formed a political view on the centrality of work and employment in human dignity. Brown hated the idea of unemployment and saw it as the joint responsibility of employers and government to ensure it never took hold. It was enough to make him a lifelong socialist in a somewhat conservative family. The Brown family interests had been severely damaged by the bankruptcy of Clydeside shipbuilders in the 1920s. Brown brought to Jaques a profound understanding of history – and especially political and constitutional history.

Wilfred Brown – the Man

We know what these two warriors shared in common – fierce intellect, a deep-seated and passionate concern for justice (fairness), and a prevailing impatience with any shilly-shallying. This latter characteristic of both men (the impatience) was commonly misinterpreted by others as arrogance. Both of them tended to give other people a hard time if they seemed to be confused or waffling. But what were the key differences, from which they drew their complementarity? It seems Brown was more firmly rooted in secure family and community. Jaques’ family origins are obscure and apparently less ordered and happy. The Browns weren’t rich but they were solid, well-respected and clever.

Wilfred’s father ran an electrical wholesalers and young Wilfred was always technically gifted. Most people at Glacier believed that if he had gone to university he might well have ended up as a distinguished scientist in one field or another. It was certainly important for Glacier to have as managing director a man who understood something of

science and technology, given it was the biggest manufacturer of plain bearings in Europe at the beginning of the study. Glacier had been quite an effective technical firm during the war, partly due to the exploitation of old manufacturing licences, but it desperately needed to become a more sophisticated science-based organisation.

So, although young Wilfred was sent to a minor English public (ie; private) school in Blackpool, there wasn't the money to support university. He went straight to work and ended up in Glacier at the age of 24. He was an enterprising young man and a superb salesman. Also, not irrelevant, he was a "scratch" golfer – no bad thing if the boss and his daughter are mad on the game too. There are times when a Scots heritage is helpful. The short version of the story is that he married the boss's daughter in 1934 and she died in childbirth in the following year. Within a further year, both her parents died also, leaving Wilfred Brown's sister-in-law the major shareholder and the company (which originated in the deep south of the USA) somewhat rudderless in the next three years.

Brown – the Politician and Political Scientist

War was now approaching fast and Glacier, a crucial supplier to the war effort, needed a new chief executive. Technically, Wilfred Brown – still in his 20s - was too young and anyway he was beginning to consider a political career. He had become attracted to the newly-formed Commonwealth political party founded by Sir Richard Acland. Its main aims were common ownership of wealth, a revitalised democracy, equal opportunity, colonial freedom and organisation for world unity. Brown actually stood for Parliament after the War in the seat of Westminster on the Commonwealth Party ticket. (Five years previously, in 1940, Sir Stafford Cripps, one of the main architects of Britain's post-war reconstruction, did his best to persuade Brown that any incoming Labour government would need at least a few socialists running firms in order to offer practical advice to government).

History took a different course and duty called. In 1937 Brown had assumed the chairmanship and chief executive role at Glacier Metal. He was then 29. The demands of wartime production represented a baptism of fire for a brand-new, and very young, CEO. He married Marjorie Skinner (his wife and partner for the next 46 years) in 1939. Right from the start, Brown was determined that the principles of social justice should determine the managerial leadership of the firm. Brown was a passionate believer in democracy in general (hence his interest in the Commonwealth Party) and in "industrial democracy" in particular. He believed passionately that people at work had exactly the same need for political representation of their interests *as employees* as they did in their role as citizens in the body politic.

He also knew that the workers always had the potential *power* to bring the entire system to a halt if they chose – therefore, he reasoned, they must be brought within the constitution in exactly the same way that the lawless English mobs were tamed by the successive Reform Acts of the 19th century. Within fifty years or so, the English mob had become the sober and virtuous late Victorians. Their genes, he argued, had not altered but their interests were now properly represented in the parliament. The problem was

therefore structural. It was Brown's great vision to replicate that process of political inclusion within the firm. That meant Glacier needed to develop a constitution and to replicate the great organs of the state in the firm – a representative legislature to make the laws (the works council), an executive branch to execute policy (management), and an independent judiciary to adjudicate in case of abuse of power (the appeals procedure).

Achieving that goal was not a simple matter. In the Glacier Project Papers (8) Brown confessed (with his customary frankness): *“Between 1939 and 1947, as a chief executive, I had followed the “psychological” mode of thought about organisation. By the end of that period I had managed to get the executive, representative and embryo legislative systems hopelessly confused. The result was a dangerous weakening of the authority of managers and no consequential feelings of freedom or satisfaction on the part of other members of the company”*.

All this taught Brown the central importance of the manager's authority to manage (this was no wishy-washy view of industrial democracy). He scorned the idea that workers want or need to “participate” in decision-making. That, in his view, was the province of the manager and, he believed, most of the workers wished their bosses would get on with it – and competently. But policy formation, especially when it affects the workers' interests, is something workers do need to have a stake in, through some form of representation. Brown's view was you should find out where the realistic power blocs exist, then organise them into the constitutional framework. Otherwise you will always be at their mercy. Brown understood *power*; his quest was to channel it into *authority*. He even persuaded the Glacier managers to form a union to represent their collective interests when it seemed likely their salary differentials with the workers were likely to be eroded.

Brown understood that Britain had largely showed the world how to create the civil institutions of democracy but had failed utterly to install the parallel institutions in the industrial and employment sphere. He knew also that Germany, despite its travails of political democracy since unification, had started to pay attention to industrial democracy in the mid-19th century – at a time when the biggest firms were getting to be as big as *towns*. He knew, for example, that the so-called “Frankfurt Parliament”, born of the revolutionary period 1848-49, had drawn up provisions for local, district and regional works council organisations. The irony is that the professionals who formed the “parliament” thought the British were forging ahead in industrial democracy, based on the example of a few Scots and north of England industrialists and thinkers. Not so.

So, right from the start, Glacier Metal was Wilfred Brown's test-bed for social and political experiment. By the time the Tavistock Institute (partly in the form of Elliott Jaques) arrived on the scene in 1948, Glacier had already become a kind of action research project into social justice. Brown had installed a sophisticated veto-power works council in each of Glacier's six factories as early as 1941 – seven years before the Tavistock team appeared on the scene. Jaques and his Tavistock colleagues were *useful* to Brown's grand scheme.

Social experiments aside, Glacier faced an array of problems after the War ended, including growing competitive pressures in an increasingly international market. The firm desperately needed a proper R&D capability – something Brown set out to fix as a top priority. Even more pressing was the problem of manufacturing licences – government had stepped in to suspend patent protections for the duration of the war effort. After the war, Glacier was sued for damages for the infringement of patent rights in the USA. This was a time of crisis for Glacier's young managing director and it took its toll on him and his young family. It also weakened the firm's financial muscles and accelerated the need to look for a buyer as the inevitable post war rationalisation proceeded.

One outcome of the contact with Jaques was Brown's entry into psychoanalysis – something he found very helpful in dealing with the enormous pressures he faced. Skeptics argue that psychoanalysis is often helpful for those who don't really need it – rarely for those who do. Brown was an enormously creative individual hemmed in by responsibility. His continuous discussions with Jaques no doubt also helped to alleviate the pressures and to humanise the hard-driving Brown. Yet, for all this intensity, there was little development of social relations with the Brown family. Jaques had been hired as Glacier's internal sounding-board, accountable to the main works council. So, in the early days of the Glacier project, true to the tenets of the Tavistock action research model, he kept his social distance while the other members of the Tavistock team such as Harold Bridger and Eric Trist went to the tennis parties at the Brown residence. Later the pattern became Jaques working afternoons at Glacier, having conducted his psychoanalytic practice in the mornings – but always talking and arguing with the boss, usually in a heated way.

As the work proceeded, Brown and Jaques were working out the principles of industrial democracy as they went along. It is impossible to say who the main theoretical ideas came from. Nor is it important. Together, they reinvented the principles of organisation in purposive systems. Some of the big ideas actually came from others. Reputedly, the time-span notion came originally from a Glacier shop steward in the local pub. D. J. (John) Isaac (another Brown contact who Jaques first met in 1961) seems to have developed the early thinking about levels of complexity and capacity and to have translated them to Jaques. The test of a truly creative system is that ideas can come from anywhere once the creative juices are flowing. But there is no doubt that Jaques had a special genius for absorbing it all and converting it into comprehensible models and theories. And of course his reflective role at the heart of Glacier provided him with the perfect vantage point to do this.

It is noteworthy too that Brown (the hard-headed managerial technician) was in pursuit of fundamental principles of human behaviour in formal political systems whilst Jaques (the social scientist) was always in search of the hard science within the social milieu – hence his references to physics in demonstrating the replicability of RO principles. Freud also spent a professional lifetime searching for the hard scientific principles he believed to underpin the practice of psychoanalysis. One might have expected Jaques (the social scientist) and Brown (the “hard” scientist) to have adopted each other's angle on this.

Nothing else shows their remarkable complementarity better than this odd juxtaposition of science and social science.

The Partnership

So it was a great partnership because they complemented each other so well. Brown needed Jaques' deep reflective capacity and Jaques needed Brown's broad historical and political contexting for what was, in effect, a major study in industrial democracy.

Brown continued to provide a context for Jaques' professional development. The Glacier Institute of Management (Brown was a great institution-builder) started in 1961 to train all Glacier's management and works council representatives. Brown immediately involved Jaques in its teaching programme and also co-opted him as an associate lecturer at the local Brunel College of Advanced Technology (where Brown chaired the governing body). When the College became the platform for the new Brunel University, Brown and the Vice Chancellor wanted to create a new integrated School of Social Sciences embracing Psychology, Sociology and Economics (along the lines of Oxford's PPE degree). Jaques was duly installed as its first head of school. He stayed there until 1970. Meanwhile, Brown, institution-building as usual, had become the University's Pro-Chancellor in 1966, shortly after he quit Glacier and was instrumental in making Brunel an all "sandwich" degree university – providing study programmes which intersperse study with periods of real work in industry.

By then he had successfully engineered the sale of Glacier to Associated Engineering, a major UK industrial group. The sale was timely and necessary and Brown hoped that the industrial democracy institutions he and Jaques had created in Glacier would be resilient enough to survive the transfer of ownership. He was disappointed when that proved not to be the case. However, some of the best Glacier managers and labour relations professionals were snapped up by incoming Japanese firms (which knew all about the Glacier study).

Meanwhile, Brown had become a government minister in the Board of Trade (his Life Peerage allowed him into government ministry as a member of the upper chamber – the House of Lords) – where he brought a necessary whiff of businessman's pragmatism to its deliberations. The then Prime Minister Harold Wilson appointed him Chairman of the Docks Modernisation Board, which duly did away with restrictive practices in the workplace by guaranteeing a minimum wage. The new Labour government knew that it needed a practical socialist businessman to steer industrial legislation through the House of Lords.

But Brown did not go quietly into the Upper House. He understood that the iron laws of power and its misuse apply at the national level as well as the enterprise level. His idea was that the House of Lords was an anachronistic institution in the sense that the power blocs it represented (the landed gentry, the clergy and so on) were largely irrelevant in the new world of business competitiveness. The union movement, for example, had no realistic stake in the national decision-making process. This tended to render them

collectively irresponsible. Brown wanted to abolish the House of Lords and replace it with a House of Occupations in order to constitutionalise the main occupational power blocs, thus leaving geographic representation to the House of Commons. Of course, the fine building on the Thames in London would be ideal for this new function.

This radical idea perhaps symbolises Wilfred Brown's greatest bond with Elliott Jaques – their shared passion about *fairness*. Much of Jaques' professional life was devoted to the search for a fair way of rewarding the central activity of human life – productive work. Brown simply took the principle to its logical national level. If work is central to the human experience, then government has a duty to ensure that our deep understanding of what is right and proper is reflected in the national system of rewards. Ever the institution-builder, Wilfred Brown looked for the means of achieving that at the national level through new institutions. Twenty years after his death, British labour unions are increasingly enfeebled and the gap between the rewards of barely-accountable captains of industry and their insecure and underpaid employees continues to grow, latterly under a “socialist” government. Nobody thinks it is fair.

When he finally left government in 1970 (this is a story he told against himself) Wilfred Brown waited for the board membership offers to pour in from big business. But by that time his uncompromising (no bullshit) intellect had made its mark in the boardrooms of London and, of course, in the House of Lords. For the city of London you needed charm (Brown always looked on charm with deep suspicion) and a talent for dissembling. The offers never materialised.

And that is the point. Brown (and the entire Tavistock/Glacier enterprise) was about clarity, precision of concept, formality and the centrality of authority. English business was embarked on a long journey into reassuring bullshit. It would be another twenty years before British business began to attend to some of the fundamentals exposed by Brown and Jaques. We still await a grasp of the principles of industrial democracy in English-dominated business.

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