

04. Labor and Monopoly Capital

Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century is a book about the economics and sociology of work under monopoly capitalism by the political economist Harry Braverman. Building on Monopoly Capital by Paul A. Baran and Paul Sweezy, it was first published in 1974 by Monthly Review Press.

Arguments

Intended as a direct assault on management of blue-collar labor under capitalism, Braverman's book started what came to be called, using Braverman's phraseology, "the labor process debate".[4] This had as its focus a close examination the nature of "skill" and the finding that there was a decline in the use of skilled labor as a result of managerial strategies of workplace control. It also outlined workers' resistance to such managerial strategies.

Specifically, Braverman subjected Frederick Winslow Taylor to intense critique, describing Taylor's strident pronouncements on management's attitudes to workers as the "explicit verbalization of the capitalist mode of production". He argued that, in the present day, the 'successors to Taylor are to be found in engineering and work design, and in top management'.

According to Braverman, Taylorism had not been superseded by more humanistic management methods, such as those of Hugo Münsterberg or Elton Mayo (as most textbooks then argued). Braverman instead argued that these 'practitioners of "human relations" and "industrial psychology"' have supplemented Taylor's influence by forming 'the maintenance crew for the human machinery'.

Braverman argued that knowledge of Taylorism's profound impact on the twentieth century workplace, and management-labor relations, was poor due to a widespread misunderstanding of the historical development of the workplace. Indeed, Braverman's book was written in an accessible fashion precisely to make it easy for workers to comprehend the huge historical and structural changes which had taken place around them.

Many writers have noted the shift in focus of Marxist theory since the late sixties, away from philosophical concerns and towards the more classical preoccupations of an active Marxism. Labour and Monopoly Capital is without doubt a major representative of that trend. It parallels the turn which, since the 'new leftism' of the sixties, a new generation of political activists has been making in recent years towards the working class. In that respect, although Braverman explicitly presents his book as complementary to the project undertaken by Baran and Sweezy in their Monopoly Capital (1966), it in fact represents a substantial break with the latter's theoretical and political framework. For unlike Baran and Sweezy, Braverman is confident of the central revolutionary role of the industrial working class in the struggle to overthrow capitalism; at the same time, he rejects their 'moral' redefinition of the Marxist concept of surplus.

However, Braverman himself of course, who died in 1976 at the tragically early age of fifty-six, does not fall into the 'new generation' alluded to above. On the contrary, not just his age, but also his formation—fourteen years as a skilled metal-worker and active militant in the forties and fifties (he was a prominent member of the Socialist Workers' Party until 1953), followed by almost as long working in the offices of publishing houses—marked him off clearly from it. And this background clearly had a significant influence on his book. But if Braverman's personal experience was an important factor in making him write on the labour-process, he did so nevertheless in the context of the changing conjuncture of Marxist theory. He was aware of this himself, and in the Introduction discusses the stimuli which impelled him to re-open theoretical discussion on this long neglected topic. He argues that the

seemingly exhaustive treatment of the subject in *Capital*, coupled with the more immediate problems presented to Marxism by the events of the early twentieth century, led to a lack of analysis of changes in the labour-process.

This blind spot, according to Braverman, developed into a more serious error in the form of an increasing acceptance by Marxists of the specific form of labour-process developed by capitalism. The tremendous increase in scientific intricacy and productivity of the labour-process in the early part of the century led the Marxists of the Second International to see the modern factory system as an inevitable if perfectible form of its organization. Later, the situation facing the new Soviet state and its need to develop industrial production led the CPSU to borrow from and imitate the most developed examples of the capitalist labour process in order to catch up with the capitalist world in preparation for the building of socialism. Thus 'the ideological effect was felt throughout world Marxism: the technology of capitalism, which Marx had treated with cautious reserve, and the organization and administration of labour, which he had treated with passionate hostility, became relatively acceptable. Now the revolution against capitalism was increasingly conceived as a matter of stripping away from the highly productive mechanism of capitalism certain "excrescences", improving the conditions of work, adding to the factory organization a formal structure of "workers' control", and replacing the capitalist mechanisms of accumulation and distribution with socialist planning.'^{footnote3} However, argues Braverman, the rapid pace of development in the capitalist countries after the Second World War, together with the impact of certain features of the Cuban and Chinese revolutions, has begun to focus new attention on the labour-process.