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Manufacturing Consent

It was 1973, the beginning of my second year at the University of Chicago. I was wandering around the bookstore, looking at the titles that had been ordered for different courses. There, much to my astonishment, were a set of books for a course on Marxism – Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*; Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*; Louis Althusser, *For Marx*; Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*. I knew about these books but I had never read them. What were they doing here at the University of Chicago? I decided to find out. I was not the only one. Indeed, it seemed the whole university wanted to squeeze into a small room in Pick Hall where Adam Przeworski was to give a graduate seminar on the "state."

Originally trained in Poland as a sociologist, he took his PhD in political science from Northwestern University. His first job was at the Washington University in St. Louis and he had now just arrived to take up a position in the political science department at Chicago. He came fresh from a sabbatical year in Paris where he had been captivated by the fashionable Marxism – the same French structuralism that had inspired the new historiography of South Africa. He was now interpreting this abstract theorizing through the lens of the great Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. This was the most exhilarating seminar

I would ever take. It was populated by students from different disciplines and from different countries, united by their interest in Marxism. It was led by the brilliant, chain-smoking Polish professor, who thought and spoke with arrowhead clarity, parsimony, and elegance about the stubborn resilience of capitalism. He was in the midst of developing a theory of capitalist democracy, both its limitations and its necessity, which would later bring him much fame (Przeworski 1985).

As the course proceeded it struck me that there were uncanny parallels between the still-influential "structural functionalism" pioneered by Talcott Parsons and this newfangled Marxist "structuralism." They were both concerned with questions of what keeps society going, and what the moral or ideological bases of continuity were. Tired of hearing my remonstrations and, perhaps, a little intrigued by their convergence and therefore all the more interested in their divergence, Adam invited me to teach a course with him on Marxism and functionalism. We would alternate between presentations on the works of Marx and Engels, Althusser and Poulantzas, on the one hand, and the works of Talcott Parsons on the other. Out of this engagement emerged my first attempt at a full-fledged Marxist critique of sociology, which I would take with me into my dissertation. Critique requires one to take the object of criticism very seriously, understanding its inner logic as well as its outer determination.

The so-called Chicago School, known for its ethnographies of urban life, was in remission. There had been a time when Chicago sociology, under the leadership of Everett Hughes and William Foote Whyte (both long since departed), had encouraged participant observation studies of the industrial enterprise. For my dissertation I resolved to return to that lost tradition but with a Marxist lens.

So I went in search of a blue-collar job. That was easier said than done. No one wanted to employ a useless graduate student without industrial skills. But eventually, with the help of a relative, I landed a job in Allis-Chalmers,

the large multinational corporation that produced agricultural and construction equipment, a competitor to John Deere and International Harvester. Headquartered in Milwaukee, the company's engine division was located south of Chicago, in Harvey, Illinois, which is where I began as a machine operator on July 2 of 1974. I worked there for nearly a year, my incompetence endangering the lives of my fellow workers as well as my own. As a middle-class lad I had no experience of blue-collar life, either at work or at home. From the beginning I was impressed by how much skill there was in a supposedly unskilled job; and also by how hard people worked, for no obvious reason. This was the puzzle that defined my study – why did workers work so hard, sweating to make the rates for the job, making a few extra crumbs so that capitalists would make more profit? Indeed, how did even I – skeptical though I was – get absorbed in trying to "make out"? What I observed seemed to rub up against the picture painted by industrial sociology that was obsessed with the opposite question: Why are workers so indolent? Or to put it in more technical language, why do they "restrict output"? Taking the managerial standpoint, sociologists and industrial relations experts had always asked why workers don't work harder, or studied how to get them to work harder … but that didn't tally with what I saw on the shop floor.

Not just experientially, but also theoretically, my question seemed to be the more obvious one. Marxism, after all, has to explain how it is that workers produce more value through their labor than is embodied in their wage. Hitherto Marxists assumed, along with Marx, that it was the economic whip of the market, the fear of being fired, that explained hard work. If not that, then it was the economic incentive that drove workers. These factors were undeniably at play – but at Allis-Chalmers it was quite difficult to be fired and we were guaranteed a minimum wage. Coercion, by itself, could not explain my fellow workers' enthusiasm, their ingenuity, and their devotion to

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hard work. It was especially intriguing because whenever I asked them why they worked so hard, machine operators were dumb-founded, convinced that this was not the case! It was a badge of honor to claim that that they were not collaborating with management, but there they were killing themselves to make the rate.

While I was working at Allis, Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) appeared. A reconstruction and update of Volume 1 of Marx's *Capital*, it became an instant classic, drawing attention to the capitalist labor process. Braverman rewrote the history of the transformation of work based on the principle of deskilling – what he called the separation of conception from execution – that had the double advantage of lowering wages and intensifying managerial control. Bravermania overtook so many of us at the time, but there was a problem. He focused on the "objective" processes of work transformation, not the "subjective" response of workers. Like Marx, he assumed that the coerciveness of the capitalist labor process explained the intensity of work. This seemed decidedly unsatisfactory to me, working at Allis.

Workers faced a stark reality: coming to the plant on time for eight or more hours each day for arduous, repetitive, and intrinsically meaningless work. To make time pass more quickly, to inject meaning into their lives on the shop floor, they turned work into a game called "making out." Making their quotas became a challenge that they pursued through ingenious ways of cutting corners and combining jobs. It was a social game because we were so dependent on the cooperation of an array of auxiliary workers – inspectors, the set-up men, crib attendants, truck drivers. It was also a game against management – or so it appeared. The rules of making out required that you never handed in more than 125 percent of the stipulated managerial norm for each job, although you could bank accumulated work for a rainy day. On difficult jobs we would hand in far less than the 100 percent norm, as if to say to managers they needed to recalibrate the rate. These

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rules were patrolled by fellow workers. At the end of the shift we would announce to one another our triumphs or defeats, eliciting awe or sympathy as the case may be. The game drew us into the labor process, time passed more quickly, and there developed a culture that bound each to the other. We were emotionally invested in making out – a game that had a life of its own, inherited from generation to generation. We accepted the rules and the conditions of production as given, so the game had the effect of not only *securing* surplus for the capitalist but *obscuring* the capitalist conditions – the relations of production – that made it seductive.

To draw people in, games must be possessed of uncertainty, but neither too little nor too much. Too little uncertainty means the challenge has gone; too much uncertainty means the challenge is too great. Apart from the constitution of the labor process as a game, there were other features of the factory that furthered the conditions of making out. Workers were constituted as individuals – industrial citizens with rights and obligations defined by the grievance machinery, established by the union contract. If management violated the terms of the contract, then it could be held accountable by the union. I called this regulatory order the *internal state*.

Workers were also given rights to compete for job vacancies through an open bidding system, with management selecting new incumbents on the basis of their seniority and experience. This "internal labor market" gave workers limited but real autonomy and even the illusion of power, based on leverage vis-à-vis their foremen who, if they wanted to keep them, had to treat operators with kid gloves or they would move off their job to another one. It also gave workers interest in staying at the enterprise, as seniority brought many rewards – both material and symbolic. If they moved to another union shop they'd have to start at the bottom.

There was another game that set the conditions of making out – the contract negotiations between union and

management. This took the form of a class compromise in which higher profits would trickle down in the form of wage increases. The games on the shop floor that got people to work hard could, therefore, deliver long-term benefits for all – expanding production made it possible to coordinate the material interests of workers and capital. In these ways workers were persuaded to devote themselves to produce surplus value for the capitalist – organizing consent to capitalism. The institutions that combined to guarantee consent – labor process as a game, the internal labor market, and the internal state – I called the *hegemonic regime of production*, following the ideas of Antonio Gramsci. But what were the external conditions that made this regime possible?

I was able to tease out the answer due to a strange coincidence: I had landed in the very same factory that had brought fame to one of Chicago's greatest ethnographers. Donald Roy had been a machine operator in that factory – then Buda Company – exactly thirty years earlier, 1944–45. From the start my experiences reminded me of Roy's account of his workplace, analyzed in his published articles. So I turned to his 500-page dissertation, held in Chicago's Regenstein Library (Roy 1952). Even though Roy concealed the identity of his workplace, I knew enough about the history of my plant to realize I had landed in the very same place. No less strange was the similarity in work organization and technology. Apart from a few numerically controlled machines, we were laboring on the same sort of machines as thirty years ago.

My first reaction was panic – what else was there to say? Roy had said it all. His skills as a fieldworker and as an industrial worker put mine to shame. Before coming to graduate school he had been a blue-collar worker most of his adult life – he was as at home on the shop floor as I was at sea there. My second reaction was to use this as an opportunity to attack his theoretical framework as myopic, deriving as it did from the old industrial sociology

that insulated the enterprise from its environment – a hallmark, indeed, of Chicago ethnography in general.

When I calmed down I realized that a more fruitful approach would be to undertake a study of the changes in the labor process over time. I could thereby exploit the chance occurrence of a revisit, but also the common technology and piece-rate system. I could therefore pinpoint changes quite precisely. In Roy's day conflicts between management and workers, often mediated by the time-and-study man searching for jobs with loose rates, were more intense, while those between machine operators and auxiliary or service workers were less pronounced. The rights of workers as well as collective bargaining were less developed than thirty years later. I characterized the change as being along the continuum from despotism to hegemony, a shift in the balance of coercion and consent. I then traced this transition to the external environment: first, to the plant's move from the competitive sector to the monopoly sector with its captive markets and, second, to the rise of state-regulated industrial relations, especially where trade unions were recognized.

It seemed that capitalism had developed a foolproof way of perpetuating itself by absorbing challenges and manufacturing consent. Contrary to Marxist thinking of the time, the disorganization of the working class took place not only in the realm of superstructures, through education, parties, religion, community, and family, but at the very point of production where class consciousness was supposed to congeal. Thinking that this hegemonic regime of production would be the bedrock of stability under advanced capitalism, I looked to the Global South for patterns of destabilization that might give concrete expression to utopian visions.

I did not realize how fragile was the hegemonic regime. I did not anticipate that both market and state were undergoing or about to undergo major transformation. Markets were becoming global; Allis-Chalmers would have to compete with foreign enterprises, a competition it did

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not survive. The state would soon strike up an offensive against labor that would subvert the union movement. Nor did I appreciate how the hegemonic regime had effectively stripped workers of their collective capacity to resist the imposition of new forms of despotism, the mean and lean production of the 1980s, what I would later call *hegemonic despotism*.

I would never have been able to develop this interpretation of my ethnography were it not for the Marxism I had imbibed in Adam's seminar. For, in effect, I had taken Marxist theories of the state, in particular those developed by French structuralism, to the workplace where an "internal state" and "internal labor market" were at work – constituting workers as industrial citizens and organizing a class compromise between capital and labor. In combination these two factors were the conditions for the manufacture of consent. This line of argument was further stimulated by Gramsci's unexplicated remark that in the US "hegemony was born in the factory" (1971: 285). Theory was essential to my interpretation of life on the shop floor – a theory that led me in a very different direction from the industrial sociology of the 1950s, when Roy was writing his dissertation.

As I was later to learn, while I was working away at Allis-Chalmers, Erik Wright was following parallel ideas at Berkeley where he was then a graduate student. Together with other Berkeley students Erik had developed a course on Marxist social science, which he would elaborate and teach on a regular basis for the next forty years. He, too, was opposing mainstream sociology with Marxist analysis. For his dissertation (Wright 1979) he undertook a statistical analysis of survey data to demonstrate the explanatory power of a Marxist theory of class that was rooted in *relations of production*, relations between those who own the means of production and those who don't, that is, between *capitalists* and *workers*. However, he added a third category, "the petty bourgeoisie" – individuals who owned their own means of production but

didn't employ wage laborers (self-employed workers such as shopkeepers, or independent craft workers). This gave him three more categories, intermediary between the three fundamental class positions: *managers* between capitalists and wage-laborers (whether low-level supervisors or high-level heads of department); *semi-autonomous workers* between wage laborers and petty bourgeoisie (teachers, lawyers, doctors, etc.); and *small employers* (between capitalists and petty bourgeoisie). He called these intermediary positions "contradictory class locations." He showed how this innovative Marxist analysis was superior to the sociological models of status attainment that strung occupations on a continuum and to the economic models based on human capital – superior, that is, in its capacity to explain variations in income inequality. This would be the beginning of an enormous research program, developing its own survey instrument that included subjective correlates of class and was fielded in more than a dozen countries across the globe (Wright 1985, 1997).

While Erik was developing his analysis of national class structures based on relations *of* production, I was focused on a micro-analysis of the firm, and in particular on the relations *in* production. Where he worked with national-level data to infer what was happening in production, I moved in the opposite direction, from the micro-processes of production to the macro conditions of their existence.

Erik and I suffered from illusions of grandeur. We aimed to replace sociology – professional sociology – with our new Marxist science. We used the tools of sociology – multivariate statistical analysis and participant observation – against sociology. Our work was definitely not aimed at "publics" beyond sociology, but we naïvely assumed that to transform sociology would have real effects, would in and of itself pose a challenge to capitalism. When I worked at Allis-Chalmers I was not interested in influencing my fellow workers, whether converting them to Marxism or helping them build a stronger union. My goal was to use my experiences on the shop floor as the basis

for a Marxist critique and supersession of sociology. My audience was other sociologists who were similarly disaffected by reigning paradigms, and who saw the potential of a reconstructed Marxism. The infusion of critical thinking – whether Marxism, feminism, or critical race theory – did give professional sociology a new vitality, and pushed it in new directions.