



Review: A Classic of Its Time

Reviewed Work(s): *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. by Harry Braverman and Paul M. Sweezy

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Source: *Contemporary Sociology*, May, 1996, Vol. 25, No. 3 (May, 1996), pp. 296-299

Published by: American Sociological Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2077434>

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A Classic of Its Time¹

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Original reviews, *CS* 5:6 (November 1976) by Douglas Dowd and by Dale Tomich. From Dale Tomich's review:

Braverman's decision not to deal with the subjective side of the transformation of work and the reconstitution of the working class is particularly lamentable . . . Despite these limitations, however, the great virtue of Braverman's book is that he puts labor as a living activity at the center of his analysis . . . *Labor and Monopoly Capital* will remain an essential starting point for new research for some time to come.

There are two types of classics: those we remember and those we forget. Those to which we return again and again stand out as sources of continuing inspiration. They are sufficiently profound to endure and sufficiently multivalent and multilayered to sustain new interpretations. Such works are rare. More usual are classics whose impact is singular and therefore more ephemeral. They transform a field but are then absorbed and transcended. Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* is of the latter kind. It brought together and reconfigured both stratification theory and industrial sociology, reverberating into political sociology. But it is no mecca to which we make continual pilgrimage. Its contributions have become conventional wisdom, the field has moved on.

Its charm and appeal lay in its simplicity: Braverman argued that the history of capitalism was marked by the progressive degradation of work, in which management expropriated control from workers through deepening the division of labor, particularly the division between mental and manual labor, what has come to be known as "the deskilling hypothesis." How could such a simple, even unoriginal thesis transform the field of sociology? As is always the case, timing is of

Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century, by **Harry Braverman**. Foreword by Paul M. Sweezy. New York: Monthly Review Press [1974] 1976. 465 pp. \$10.00 paper. ISBN: 0-853-45-370-5.

the essence. *Labor and Monopoly Capital* appeared in 1974 when core areas of sociology, battered by the storms of the 1960s, were atrophying and Marxism was resurgent.

Industrial sociology and stratification theory had entered a double impasse: a *subjectivism* that focused exclusively on responses to given structures and an *ahistoricism* which took those structures as natural and unchanging. Marxism restored structure and history in new theories of development and of the state, and, with Braverman, the renaissance turned to the core of Marx's own work—the labor process and class structure.

Associated with Baran and Sweezy and the group around *Monthly Review*, Braverman used his own experience as a skilled metal worker as a lens to interpret the transformation of the American class structure. He was not an academic and would have written the book irrespective of the resurgence of Marxism, but it was the latter that gave it such a positive reception. Already beleaguered by their association with "structural functionalism," stratification research and the sociology of work were particularly ripe for new beginnings.

The field of stratification emerged in the 1950s from interest in the value consensus underlying occupational hierarchies. Sociologists demonstrated a remarkable convergence in the way people of all advanced capitalist nations ranked the prestige of occupations, and this became the basis of a *transhistorical* scale of socioeconomic status. Stratification research focused on the inter- and intragenerational transmission of occupational status. Mobility studies became

¹ Thanks to Dan Clawson for his helpful suggestions.

the rage, taking as given the existing structure of empty places through which people moved. Here lay the *subjectivist bias*—mobility as *adaptation* to a fixed, agreed-upon order.

Braverman stood stratification theory on its head by focusing exclusively on the supposedly pregiven order, that is, on the occupational structure itself. Capital accumulation leads to deskilling, polarizing mental and manual labor in all spheres of work, white collar as well as blue collar. *A dynamic hierarchy based on work replaced a fixed hierarchy based on status.* Individuals are no longer conceived of as mobile atoms, moving through a socioeconomic space, but are stripped of agency to become “effects” of the positions they hold.

Braverman laid the basis for the resurgence of objectivist theories of class structure—the most celebrated being that which Erik Olin Wright has elaborated over the last 20 years. Where Braverman collapsed ownership into control, Wright separated the two dimensions to reveal a series of “contradictory class locations” that stood between the major three classes—capital, labor, and self-employed. Wright asked “What is middle about the middle class?”—a problem Braverman’s polarization thesis elided. Wright did not build into his class framework any teleology. Indeed, on examining Braverman’s hypothesis he showed that shifts in the sectoral composition of the economy could reverse any tendencies toward deskilling within sectors. The simple polarization thesis does not work. Braverman himself had recognized that the rate of birth of new skilled occupations counteracted, even if it did not overwhelm, progressive deskilling. Herein lay the first task of the research program Braverman initiated—to develop a more refined theory of the labor process to account for the trajectory of class structure.

The shift from status attainment to class structure depended upon a Bravermanic transformation of industrial sociology. As a distinct discipline industrial sociology was born in the famous Western Electric studies, conducted before and during the Depression by Elton Mayo and his colleagues. They examined worker productivity and asked why workers did not conform to managerial expectations—why they “restricted” output. After painstaking investigation they con-

cluded that workers were possessed of an irrational plant culture and therefore could not comprehend managerial economic rationality. Elton Mayo inaugurated the school of human relations research that focused on how best to reshape that culture so as to adapt workers to work. Challenging this view, plant ethnographies found *managerial irrationality*—poor organization of work or badly designed incentive systems—to cause workers to rationally restrict their output.

Whatever their differences, both sides viewed output restriction as a matter of *subjective orientation* rather than irreconcilable interests. Braverman transposed the debate by turning from output restriction to the production of surplus value. He asked: How was capital so successful in extracting effort from workers? Instead of workers adjusting to work, he examined how work was imposed on workers to compel them to deliver just what management needed. In his account, therefore, workers were neither rational nor irrational but, instead, were stripped of all subjectivity. They became objects of labor, appendages of machines, another instrument of production, executors of managerial conceptions.

If industrial sociology suffered from subjectivism, organization theory, which superseded it, revealed in ahistoricism. The interest in output restriction reached its peak during the Second World War and in the 1950s. With economic growth, interest waned, and industrial sociology was absorbed into organization theory, which pursued claims applicable to all organizations, whether firms, hospitals, schools, armies, or prisons. Against this tradition *Labor and Monopoly Capital* restored history and the specificity of capitalism. It popularized the concept of *labor process*, which signified a break with both industrial sociology and organization theory, and a shift to structure and history.

Early studies in the new “labor process” paradigm recapitulated Braverman’s focus on deskilling in the examination of the trajectory of specific occupations. But critical studies quickly emerged to counter Braverman’s reduction of labor control to the expropriation of skill. Edwards, for example, introduced a typology of labor controls that emerged sequentially from the nineteenth century to the present: personal control,

technical control, and, finally, bureaucratic control.

Pluralizing the strategies of control raised questions about Braverman's treatment of managers. For him management was a black box that simply transmitted market pressures into the expropriation of control. Research has moved into the *managerial labor process* to study conflicts between factions and levels of management, or how managers choose labor control strategies or manage one another out of jobs. Another area of elaboration lay in the service sector. In focusing on deskilling, Braverman missed the specificity of the service work—the way managers use customers to control workers.

With every new research program come new challenges. Labor-process theory suffered from an objectivist bias. Andrew Friedman began the necessary corrective work by arguing that deskilling was not always to management's advantage, and in certain high-trust occupations it was better to grant workers "responsible autonomy." As many studies demonstrated, labor control was not only about constraint but also about eliciting consent to managerial goals. The workplace becomes an arena of struggle for shaping subjectivities—it becomes an arena of politics that constructs and mobilizes different identities, not just worker identities but also gender and racial identities, harnessed to managerial interests.

Restoring the subjective moment of work and its regulation creates a conceptual space to study worker opposition to management, something Braverman relegates to the margins of history. Following E. P. Thompson, labor historians set about documenting artisanal struggles against deskilling. Workplace ethnographies documented everyday forms of resistance on the shop floor, from gossip and tea breaks to walkouts and strikes. Rick Fantasia developed this theme most completely, bringing social-movement theory to the workplace. Studies of the labor process in the state sector showed how clients and workers can mobilize together for their common interest.

State socialism provides unexpected corroboration of the importance of work in shaping struggle and at the same time corroborating Braverman's deskilling thesis. Precisely because it is *not* capitalism, deskilling leads to chaos on the shop floor. Endemic

supply uncertainties of the socialist economy called for improvisation and workplace autonomy, *reskilling*, if you will, which in turn gave workers space to create class solidarity. These peculiarities of the socialist labor process underlie the periodic working-class revolts in Eastern Europe from 1956 all the way to 1991.

One can elaborate *Labor and Monopoly Capital* by problematizing assumptions about the objective character of work, the subjectivities of workers, the strategies of managers, the omnipotence of profit. But how does its analysis help us understand class structure today? During the last 20 years we have become ever more conscious of the global dimensions of production. Early studies of the international division of labor gave Braverman's thesis a geographical twist—transnational labor processes were divided between processes of conception concentrated in advanced capitalism and processes of execution concentrated in the labor reservoirs of the periphery. From here it was a short step to the analysis of "commodity chains" in which surplus transfer and appropriation along the chain affects the form of work organization at each node. Increasingly, these nodes are seen not as single firms but as synergistic networks of firms, or "industrial districts." In this view class structure is simultaneously globalized and localized.

Others have taken a more radical tack and argued that Braverman's theory of deskilling marked a period of mass production that has been superseded. A "second industrial divide" ushers in a world of custom-made goods in which demand-side constraints enter production, calling for a labor process of flexible specialization and a multiskilled labor force. Industrial sociology once more resurrects an incipient utopia within capitalism, a "yeoman democracy" that gives pride of place to the holistic, multivalent, fulfilled worker. Here a dose of Bravermania would do no harm.

Braverman helped to redefine sociology by restoring structure and history. Even those who still study mobility are compelled to take into account changes in the occupational structure, while those who study workers cannot ignore the transformation of work. However, *Labor and Monopoly Capital's* absorption into mainstream social science has taken its toll. Its critical moment has

been sacrificed. We have lost sight of "The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century." Braverman's point of departure was the craftworker who obtains fulfillment through the creation of objects first conceived in the imagination. His point of conclusion was the vision of an alternative future, a socialism that would not restore the craftworker but would instead recombine conception and execution at the collective level to forge a classless society based on democratic planning. This double critique from the standpoint of a vanishing past and a utopian future easily disappears in a welter of scientific "explanation." Moreover, the eclipse of materialist critique opens the door to idealism—structure dissolved into a linguistic construction, and history reduced to narrative. Experience becomes discourse, oppression becomes talk about talk.

The domestication of critique and the interpretive turn coincide with the separation of intellectuals from the working class. *Labor and Monopoly Capital* described the eclipse of the *industrial* craftworker, but it could as well have been about the eclipse of the *intellectual* craftworker who unites the academy with the working class, who resists the intense professionalization of the university, who refuses to package the lived experience of workers for scholastic consumption. Once an artisan, now an organic intellectual, Braverman strove to refute his own thesis, to be an exception to his own laws. And here lies Braverman's crowning and lasting achievement: As a product of the unity of mental and manual work, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* proclaimed itself against the very tendencies it so persuasively described.

Geertz's Ambiguous Legacy

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Original review, *CS* 4:6 (November 1975), by Elizabeth Colson:

His anthropology is an art, not a science. To a very large extent therefore his work does not provide a model for other anthropologists or sociologists of lesser talent to follow, since he proceeds from an intuitive grasp of what is important and reaches his conclusion with a flourish that conceals the tedium of the procedures.

Well before *The Interpretation of Cultures* (hereafter, *TIC*) was published, Clifford Geertz had already changed the way we study culture. Indeed, the heart of *TIC* is a collection of beautiful essays, published between 1957 and the mid-1960s, that provided a new theoretical vocabulary for studying culture and a new understanding of what that enterprise involves.

First, Geertz clarified the object of cultural study: not hidden subjectivities or whole ways of life, but publicly available symbols (Keesing 1957). Second, Geertz developed a rich theoretical language for analyzing culture. Beginning with the 1967 "Ethos, World

The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays, by Clifford Geertz. New York: Basic Books [1973] 1993. \$20.00 paper. ISBN: 0-465-09719-7.

View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," and culminating in 1966 with "Religion as a Cultural System," Geertz asked how particular symbols become real for particular groups. (The very different ways symbolic realities become real and the different kinds of realities they create has been a continuing preoccupation, in "Ideology as a Cultural System" and the later "Art as a Cultural System" and "Common Sense as a Cultural System" [collected in Geertz 1983]). Geertz's answer is that "sacred symbols," and especially ritual actions, generate an "ethos"—an emotional tone, a set of feelings, "moods and motivations"—that simultaneously make the religious worldview seem true and make the ethos seem "uniquely realistic" given that kind of a world. This theoretical formulation seems to explain how symbols, or meanings embodied and enacted in symbols, generate