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BACK TO WORK: SOCIOLOGY AND THE DISCOURSE ON CAPITALIST WORK

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After languishing for nearly a decade, the sociology of work has come into its own again. Recent works in this area offer a radical change from the "conventional" sociology of work which preceded them. Beginning in 1974 with the publication of Harry Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, sociologists concerned with the social organization of the workplace and the labour process have been presented with an array of works. In the United States, William Form's *Blue-Collar Stratification* has revived interest in the relationship between the social and technical organization of work, and Nathan Rosenberg's *Perspectives on Technology* has brought a much needed sense of historical perspective to our understanding of technology and its effects. In Canada, James Rinehart's *The Tyranny of Work* has attempted a critical understanding of the historical and political sociology of work. In the United Kingdom, Nichols's and Beynon's *Living With Capitalism* has reopened debate on the impact of automation on the social organization and personal experience of work in the modern factory. In addition, English-speaking sociologists have been treated to the long overdue translation of crucial works by Serge Mallet.[1]

I

The fate of conventional approaches to the sociology of work is illustrated eloquently by Robert Blauner's *Alienation and Freedom*, an analysis which is both emblematic of sociological orthodoxy and a manifestation of the limitations of that perspective.[2] The success of Blauner's work was self-defeating. The thesis of *Alienation and Freedom* purported to show that although the erstwhile direction of technological change — from craft to machine to assembly-line forms of production — had fostered increasing fragmentation of manual labour and therewith generated an increasing sense of work alienation on the part of the worker, this trend would now undergo something of a reversal as a result of automation. Whereas the increasing mechanization of production, transfer and assembly technologies had given rise to the subdivi-

sion of labour into highly repetitive, unskilled tasks, it was held that automation would reintegrate all these functions into the continuous process machine, transforming the worker's role from manual operation to technical supervision. Automation would engender embourgeoisément, and all its attributes — social association, and so on. Affluence would dissolve the immiseration thesis; automation would overcome alienation.

The very success of Blauner's analysis in the context of conservative, celebrationist sociology did him out of a problem and a subject matter. After Blauner, mainstream sociologists assumed the working class was either embourgeoisé or part of the cultural crowd of the "middle-mass," where classification ceded to social significations. Even for Marxian theorists of labour, the working class was dismissed as a revolutionary subject: it was seen to be incorporated into the dominant ideological order of industrialism and integrated into the consumerist ethic — the "soft-machine" of social control.

Developments in Canadian sociology confirm this trend. Influenced, in part, by the social thought of Harold Innis, Canadian sociology emerged as a viable discipline during the nineteen sixties: an emergence symbolized by the publication of John Porter's *The Vertical Mosaic* in 1965.[3] In *The Vertical Mosaic* Porter documented certain dimensions of social inequality in the Canadian political economy. In doing so he offered an essentially egalitarian critique of what was presumed to be the middle-class Canadian self-image.

The nature of Porter's critique set the tone which prevailed in Canadian sociology for the next decade. In essence, this meant a concern for the study of institutional "elites," for the study of ethnic pluralism and stratification, and for macro political economy. Theoretically, it meant a concern with the perspective of stratification and the analysis of inequality. This was, however, conceived in a *distributive* sense, so that attention focused chiefly upon the allocation of wealth and power rather than upon their production. The hegemony of this essentially Weberian view of inequality precluded analysis of the social organization of work, of the workplace, of the labour process, and so on, as inherent features of the stratification system.

II

Set in this context the publication of a work such as Harry Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital* is an event worthy of note and reflection. Clearly, it serves as a cue to go back to work, to return to the study of the workplace as a central part of our attempt to understand modern society. Equally clearly, the work is something much more than this; the analysis contained in its pages offers a radical break with the kind of sociology of work which preceded it. In this latter respect, the function of *Labour and Monopoly Capital* is not only substantive, it is reflective; it provides us with the motive

and the means to begin to reflect critically upon the kind of assumptions we have traditionally made about the work world, and where those assumptions have and have not taken us.

Braverman restores to a central position the analysis of the alienation of the worker from his labour, an analysis which points to the centrality of alienated labour in the critique of political economy and the class structure of capitalism. This contribution points to a more widespread weakness in the methodology of academic sociology. If we translate Braverman's analysis into more orthodox sociological terms, one of its fundamental assumptions and messages, is that the structure of the workplace and the labour process is an inherent feature of the class structure of modern capitalism. This, in turn, confronts us with the limitations and inadequacies of the reductionist, empiricist models of class and class structure which have predominated, particularly in North American sociology, from the early community studies of the thirties and forties through the "socio-economic status" theories today.

The declining interest in and concern with the structure and process of work activity which occurred during the sixties and early seventies was rooted in the general assumption prevalent at that time, though itself rooted in the basic structure of post-war reconstruction, that traditional problems associated with the social and technological organizations of production were solved or disappearing. The production of high standards of material life was taken for granted as an unproblematic, institutionalized feature of the so-called "mixed economy." What mattered, rather, was distribution and consumption — who had access, and how much access, to structural affluence, and what they did with it. The shift in perspective on the economic order from production to distribution and consumption is clearly evidenced in the creation and manipulation by the state, the corporate sector and the mass media of a new economic entity — the "consumer" — who became simultaneously both the chief beneficiary and main victim of the economic system.

The assumption underlying this shift of focus — that the organization of production was unproblematic — was accepted, paradoxically, even by many of those who assumed a critical perspective and were concerned to reveal and examine the situation of those who continued to be denied access to the mainstream of the post-war economic order. The underlying characteristic of these groups was that they were marginal to the productive system, and therewith to the dominant market mode of allocation. They were groups whose economic situation was derived from their roles as clients of the state welfare system. And as these groups were marginal to the whole productive system (at least from the point of view of active participation as producers/ workers/ productive labour), it followed logically that their interests and conflicts were seen to be framed and articulated as those of consumers located in the political

distribution of goods and services rather than as those of producers located in the divisions of property and labour.

This interpretation was clearly congruent with the general view prevalent in academic sociology that the study of class structure, or more correctly of "social stratification," concerned itself with the distribution of social rewards, which could, in turn, be treated empirically as well as analytically as quite distinct from their production. This view was derived from the differentiation and reification of production, distribution and consumption as separate economic functions whose operation gave rise to the formation of quite autonomous clusters of social relations. The conception of classes (or "socio-economic" strata) as distributive phenomena therefore departed radically from the Marxian assumption that these three "functions" are merely separate "moments" in the same historical process of production and reproduction which could not be grasped intellectually, or intelligibly, apart from their interrelationships in the emergent totality.[4] By accepting the assumptions of an essentially uncritical academic sociology, those who concerned themselves with the poor and the deprived tended to restrict the scope of their analyses. They focused on the mechanisms which countervailed the distributive interests of these groups, and did not extend their analysis to the manner in which the political economy initially necessitates, to a degree, the exclusion of these groups from the productive/reproductive process as a whole. Just as the assumptions adopted by Fabian politics imposed limitations on its advocates' ability to call for and effect radical social transformations and therewith predisposed them to reformism, so too the assumptions of Fabian sociology constrained its ability to carry analysis further and therewith predisposed it to a reformist critique of distributive inequalities.

The theoretical implications of the distributive view of class not only precluded analysis of the workplace as a dimension of the class structure, but also resulted in an emasculated view of the role of property in the "stratification" system. Property came to be viewed, not as a basis upon which the whole productive process of industrial capitalism rested, but rather as just another means, alongside income and salaries earned from employment, for appropriating personal and familial wealth. Academic sociology lost sight of the fact that property predominates over labour both productively and distributively to the extent that under the capitalist mode of production it is the uses to which those who own and control productive property put it which calls forth the demand for particular types of labour, and duly shapes the division of labour (the occupational structure), and the market allocation of rewards.[5] Indeed, it became fashionable to regard property as increasingly less important than and increasingly subordinate to labour on the grounds that the proportion of national wealth accruing to property in forms such as rents, interest and dividends was seen to be decreasing in relation to the proportion

accruing to labour in the form of income and salaries. The failure to consider the productive process as a whole helped obscure the nature of the relationship between property and labour. Classes, moreover, were not only reduced to the status of distributive phenomena, but were also redefined as "artificially constructed" groups or aggregates by (and presumably for) the professional observer.[6] In this way classes were viewed as aggregates sharing common resources and opportunities ("life-chances"), a view which enabled some sociologists to diversify the bases of class formation and thereby equate classes with racial and ethnic groups, gender groups, age groups, educational groups and so on.[7] What all this conceptual manoeuvering amounted to was an essentially empiricist reconstruction of class in which the theory of class was replaced by its measurement.

Just as the bases of class formation became diversified by this reduction of class to a purely distributive category, so too class conflict became at first reinterpreted and relocated, and subsequently "déclassé" altogether. The traditional (and not exclusively Marxist) conception that class conflict resided in the conflict between capital and labour, management and worker, over the conditions and product of the labour process, was relocated in the conflict between service agency and consuming client over the allocation of the state budget. As this occurred, the forms and dimensions of "class" conflict multiplied, thereby facilitating its eventual "déclassément." Even class conflict in the workplace was not immune; it became redefined as "industrial conflict" and was seen firstly to be institutionally differentiated and separated from all the other (equally differentiated and separated) conflicts on the campuses, in the prisons, in the welfare agencies, and secondly to be withering away in proportion and intensity owing to the successful institutionalization of conflict-expression and resolution through such procedures as collective bargaining.[8]

In this context, then, *Labour and Monopoly Capital* shows that the separation of industrial and occupational sociology from the study of "social stratification," now embedded in the bureaucratic division of intellectual labour in professional sociology, is in many ways a distorting one. By elaborating on the relationships among capital, technology, skill levels and the labour process, Braverman has clearly demonstrated that these two "sub-disciplines" are not separate areas of study, that the study of work organization is tied intrinsically to the analysis of class structure and political economy, that the distribution of work alienation is precisely one aspect of the whole structure of class inequalities, in short that the analysis of the marketplace is incomplete without a complementary analysis of the workplace.

This is particularly important in the North American context where this separation is most evident. In the European tradition industrial and stratifi-

cation sociology have been more closely bound together, and the analysis of work organization has been more strongly influenced by the perspective of class theory. The works of Touraine, Mallet, Goldthorpe, Lockwood and Mann provide examples of research which have used models of class which take account of the social relations of the workplace as a salient feature of the class system.[9] In North American sociology, on the other hand, these theoretical and conceptual linkages have been rare; and those works which have endeavoured to recognize and address them — works such as Sennett's and Cobb's *The Hidden Injuries of Class* or Andrew Levison's *The Working-Class Majority* — have tended to be overwhelmed by the flood of more empiricist-statistical researches or else have been confined in their influence to a smaller constituency of readers.[10]

There is a second and twofold methodological significance to *Labour and Monopoly Capital.* The book not only speaks to the deficiencies of conventional sociology, it also exposes the principal weakness in Braverman's own line of argument. As such it reveals a contradiction in the Marxist analysis of the labour process in particular and of capitalism in general.

By adopting a methodology which is both critical and historical Braverman has been able to depict the workplace and the labour process of modern capitalism in a way which sharply conflicts with the image that has filtered through from the early social psychological studies. Braverman's Marxism has caused him to focus upon the degrading, fragmenting consequences for human labour wrought by the various forms of capitalist rationalization — the mechanization, "manualization," "scientific" management and subdivision of labour — and therewith has thrown into sharp relief the conservative implications of conventional workplace sociology. By seeming to show that workers typically find the ways to accommodate themselves to the routinization and alienation of their work, by implying that the aggregate level of psychological alienation is relatively constant over time and thus an "inherent" feature of the human condition, and by attributing causal determinacy to reified abstractions such as technological development and bureaucratic complexity, the latter has served, wittingly or not, to legitimate the structure of capitalist work, and to displace its problematic features onto the ability of the individual worker to cope with life in a world that is assumed to be beyond his material and intellectual control.

In a manner which is reminiscent of Marx's critique of classical political economy for universalizing actions and sentiments which were properly thought of as historically specific, Braverman's analysis contains a critique of conventional workplace sociology for having taken for granted the very feature of the workplace and the labour process it should have sought to isolate and explain. By focusing its "analytic" largely upon the subjective experience of work the latter has created the impression that the structural

determination of work is a "natural" and by implication necessary and inevitable part of the autonomous logic of modernization. In contrast Braverman, tying the organization of the workplace and the labour process to the encompassing political economy and particularly to the forms and contradictions of corporate capital accumulation, has re-emphasized the social and historical contingency of both the structure and the experience of work.

III

It does not follow from this that the earlier sociologies of work are fully invalid. Rather, what it points to is the fact that as these studies interpreted their findings and established their conclusions without much concern for historical perspective, they were subject to interpretive bias and distortion. Nor does this assessment of Braverman's work invalidate the social psychology of work as a useful, in fact necessary, form of enquiry. What it does suggest is that the purpose of this should be to examine and explore the perennially problematic relationship between actors and structures, between our subjective experience of the world and the effects upon it of the objective constraints created by living amidst other people.

Yet on this score, *Labour and Monopoly Capital* itself begins to fall short. Regardless of the author's intentions, the principal weakness of the analysis is the absence of any systematic attempt to look into the ways in which the structure of the workplace and the labour process is reproduced in the subjective consciousness and experience of working on the part of the worker. This is ironic in that Braverman fails to adopt a sufficiently dialectical view of the worker-in-the-workplace or to examine the ways in which the structure of work may be negated in the individual's understanding of it and himself.

The reading of the history of the labour process contained in *Labour and Monopoly Capital* is essentially linear. The structure of work under capitalism is seen, more or less, as a continuous process in which labour is progressively degraded. The process of degradation, in turn, is one aspect of the general evolution of the capitalism of production and of the incessant "need" to accumulate capital. And the process of capital accumulation takes a linear form, *viz.*, increasing centralization, increasing concentration and monopolization and increasing imbalance between capital and wage labour. In this way, the process of the degradation of labour is one facet of the process of capital accumulation in which power becomes increasingly concentrated in the hands of the propertied.

This means, however, that Braverman reduces major changes in the workplace and the labour process to so many forms of the central process of degradation. Thus, for example, when discussing the role of technology on the labour process, particularly in the case of the impact of automation,

Braverman argues that it serves eventually to increase the subdivision of labour, to facilitate managerial control of the worker, and generally to render the job more routine for the worker. Similarly, when dealing with the growth of technical, professional, service and white-collar workers, Braverman maintains that the changes are largely cosmetic since these "new" workers are simply new forms of wage labour.

While there is truth to much of Braverman's critique on these and other matters, his analysis at times becomes forced, as he tailors fact to fit theory. On the matter of automation, for example, Braverman relies chiefly for support upon the empirical work of James Bright (a rather surprising source of documentation given his institutional and research association with the Harvard School of Business).[11] Yet Bright's work is only one of a host of studies concerning the structural and experiential implications of automation. Similarly in the matter of changes in the composition of the labour force, Braverman underestimates the importance of the growth of technical and "new" professional forms of labour; these cannot be dismissed casually as new forms of wage labour, at least insofar as the self-image of these workers is concerned.

The root of the central problem of which these examples are only symptoms resides in Braverman's failure to develop a social psychology of the workplace and the labour process which will complement the structural perspective he adopts. This critique is not merely addressed to the sophistry of conventional "bourgeois" sociology; the social psychology of the workplace must form an integral, necessary part of the Marxist analysis of modern capitalism. By not connecting his analysis of the objective alienation of the worker from his labour to a theory of the subjective alienation of the worker under modern capitalism, Braverman may provide us with an indictment of modern capitalism, but he offers no moment of transcendence. We are left with the immiseration thesis and with the orthodox assumption that this will lead to an emancipatory ideology.

This weakness can be usefully illuminated by comparing Braverman's analysis to that of Serge Mallet.[12] In his *Essays on the New Working-Class*, particularly in the essay entitled "Industrial Labour," Mallet gives us a theory of the labour process under capitalism that consists of three stages of development. Each of these stages is defined in terms of the relationship among the division of labour, the prevailing mode of technology and the typical form of collective labour organization as manifested in the historically predominant type of union structure and ideology. Mallet regards the relationship among these three elements in a more reciprocal and interactive way than does Braverman.

The methodological contrast between the two approaches is clearly illustrated in Mallet's discussion of the third, and most recent, stage of develop-

ment in which the worker is undergoing the transition from machine operative to monitor-technician. This transition is more than cosmetic; automation is seen to have a restructuring effect upon the division of labour, and therewith upon the experience of work and upon the predominant form of unionism. For Mallet, the semi-skilled worker of the machine age gave rise to "industrial unionism" and an economistic ideology; the technician-monitor of the automated age will give rise increasingly to "enterprise unionism" and the replacement of economism with an ideology focusing upon the need and right of the worker to exercise control over the various levels of the production process.

Mallet envisages a workplace torn by contradiction; as technician, the worker is invested with responsibility; as proletarian, the worker remains trapped within the call of wage labour. The coexistence of these two contradictory processes — the creation of "educated" proletarians — will render the opaque nature of the wage form more socially transparent in the political consciousness of the "new" working class. The contradiction of the capitalist labour process thus resides in the partial enrichment of the worker's labour!

Unlike Braverman, Mallet connects the evolution of the structure of work to its reproduction in the consciousness of the worker. And equally, the success of Mallet's interrogation in clarifying the radical implications of new modes of alienation points up the historical regression of Braverman's analysis — its repetition of categories of nineteenth-century industrial sociology.

Braverman makes it quite clear in the opening pages of *Labour and Monopoly Capital* that the ensuing discussion is not designed to explore the subjective dimensions of the labour process: "This is a book about the working class as a class in itself, not as a class for itself."[13] Disclaimers such as this, however, are only acceptable insofar as they do not contravene the assumptions and premises of the theory one adopts, and in Braverman's case the disclaimer does contravene the theory. While he recognizes that his focus entails a "self-imposed limitation," the point is that it is a limitation of greater consequence than he seems to suppose. It not only "compromises" the analysis for "those who float in the conventional stream of social science," it also, and indeed more importantly, compromises those whose theorizing is ostensibly directed towards effecting social change. As such, the distinction between the working class as a "class in itself" and as a "class for itself" is a problematical assertion. Is not, after all, the former a point of departure from which the latter arises?

Nonetheless, the debt to Braverman remains. The absence of a social psychology of the labour process and its relationship to the dialectic of capitalism indicates the inadequacy of those models that posit the relationship between structures and actors in mechanistic and deterministic fashion. With

Braverman, we can acknowledge that while men do indeed make their own history, some make it more clearly and more fully than others. We can recognize that the "tradition of all the dead generations" does indeed weigh "like a nightmare" upon some of the living more than on others. To emphasize the need for a social psychology of the capitalist labour process in no way precludes our analysis of its structure in terms of a political sociology and political economy.

Conclusion

The emphasis devoted in the preceding discussion to *Alienation and Freedom* and to *Labour and Monopoly Capital* should not be misconstrued. It would be convenient to attribute the declining interest in work to the former and the renewed interest in work to the latter. It would also be quite misleading. Both works are more properly viewed as symptomatic of developments in the organization of social thought and changes in the wider social order. To regard a work of analysis as symptomatic of wider developments is not however, to belittle its importance. *Alienation and Freedom* represents the apogee of a social psychology of work that assured us that disenchantment was destined to wither away with the advance of new technology.

Set against this background, any revival of interest in the social organization of work would not only have to abandon the assumptions of the earlier social psychologies, but do so by confronting critically their shortcomings and limitations. The importance of *Labour and Monopoly Capital* is precisely that it gives us the cue, and to some extent the means, to begin to carry out this task. At the same time, it is a work whose problematic features may lead to self-exhaustion of the analysis it attempts to establish. By failing to come to grips with the social psychology of the labour process Braverman comes close to abandoning the radical distinctiveness of a theoretically informed praxis.

Intellectual history may thus be poised to repeat itself. For Blauner an exhaustion of topic derived from an "optimism of the intelligence"; for Braverman it may well come from a "pessimism of the will."

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Notes

1. H. Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974; W. Form, *Blue-Collar Stratification*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; N. Rosenberg, *Perspectives on Technology*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976; J. Rinehart, *The Tyranny of Work*, Don Mills: Longmans, 1975; T. Nichols and H. Beynon, *Living with Capitalism: Class Relations in the Factory*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977; Serge Mallet, *Essays on the New Working Class*, trans. and ed. by D. Howard and D. Savage, St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975.

2. R. Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964; H. Braverman, *op. cit.*

3. J. Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965.

4. Cf. K. Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. by M. Nicolaus, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973. *Viz.*:

> The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange, and consumption are identical, but that they all form members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production predominates not only over itself . . . but over the other moments as well . . . . A definite production thus determines a definite consumption, distribution and exchange as well as *definite relations between these different moments.* . . . Mutual interaction takes place between the different moments. This is the case with every organic whole. (Pp. 99-100, original emphases)

5. Cf. C. Anderson, *The Political Economy of Social Class*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974.

6. Cf. J. Porter.

7. The most ambitious attempt along these lines can be found in G. Lensin, *Power and Privilege*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966.

8. Cf. R. Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959.

9. A. Touraine, *La Conscience Ouvrière*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966; *The Post-Industrial Society*, New York: Random House, 1971; S. Mallet, *La Nouvelle Classe Ouvrière*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1963; *Essays on the New Working-Class*, St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975; J. Goldthorpe and D. Lockwood, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969; D. Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, London: Unwin, 1959; M. Mann, *Workers on the Move*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973; *Consciousness and Action Among the Western Working-Class*, London: MacMillan, 1973.

10. R. Sennet and J. Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, New York: Vintage Books, 1973; A. Levison, *The Working-Class Majority*, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1975.

11. J. Bright, *Automation and Management*, Boston: Harvard University School of Business Administration, 1958.

12. Mallet, *op. cit.*

13. Braverman, p. 27.