LABOR AND MONOPOLY CAPITAL FOR THE 1990s: A REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF THE LABOR PROCESS DEBATE

by PETER MEIKSINS

The publication of Harry Braverman’s Labor and Monopoly Capital in 1974 was without question one of the most important intellectual events of the past twenty years.1 On the left, Braverman’s book quickly established itself as obligatory reading and has become one of the most frequently cited contemporary works of Marxist scholarship (rivalled only, perhaps, by E.P. Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class). Moreover, Labor and Monopoly Capital quickly “crossed over” into the academic world, renewing interest in the history and sociology of the workplace and setting the agenda for a whole generation of historians and sociologists of work. Braverman initiated what has come to be known as “the labor process debate,” thereby refocusing the study of the workplace on issues such as the nature of skill and the apparent decline of skilled labor, managerial strategies for controlling workers, and the extent and nature of worker resistance to those strategies.

In spite of this legacy, it is now increasingly fashionable, even on the left, to dismiss Labor and Monopoly Capital as a dead

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end in analyses of contemporary workplaces. Some have coined derisory terms such as "Bravermania" to characterize much of the labor process debate. And even Paul Thompson, one of the leading practitioners of labor process research and the author of a valuable and much-cited book on the labor process, felt that it was appropriate to entitle a recent essay on the debate "Crawling from the Wreckage."

Why the move away from Braverman? In part it reflects criticisms made of Braverman's work since its appearance twenty years ago. Thus, in reflecting on the legacy of Labor and Monopoly Capital, one must assess the extent to which these criticisms have, indeed, hit home, necessitating a revision or even rejection of Braverman's central arguments. However, it is also apparent that the move away from Braverman is partly a reflection of more conservative times, and the general tendency, which cuts across the political spectrum, to abandon political economy for culture, to replace analyses of class and labor with studies of discourse and identity. Some critics of Braverman have effectively come full circle, arriving at a view of workplace relations which prevailed before his book was written. It is therefore time to take another look at Braverman's critique of that earlier view.

**Criticisms of Labor and Monopoly Capital**

Despite the length and complexity of the labor process debate, the critics of Labor and Monopoly Capital have focused on a relatively small number of major "flaws" in Braverman's original work.

(1) The definition of skill.

One of the most notable legacies of the publication of Labor and Monopoly Capital was a renewed interest in the nature of skill at work. Historians, sociologists, and others quickly reacted to Braverman's analysis of craftwork, producing a large number of studies of crafts, the role of skill in the workplace, and the efforts of employers to manage skilled workers. Much of the literature on skill was highly technical
in nature and tended to move the labor process debate away from Braverman’s focus on the nature of capitalism and its effect on the workplace, toward issues such as the measurement of skill. But this discussion did produce two major criticisms of Braverman’s approach to skill which are important for assessing the long-term value of the ideas developed in Labor and Monopoly Capital.

First, a number of authors have asked whether Braverman’s concept of skill is too restrictive. They contend that his view of skill was developed largely in the context of his study of manual labor, with the result that he tended to conceive of skill as purely manual, object-manipulating skill. As the economy has shifted toward services, however, different kinds of workplace skills have become more important. Studies of interactive service work, for example, have identified diffuse interpersonal skills as essential to the work of flight attendants and insurance salespeople (among others). Analyses of managers have similarly argued that different kinds of skills are the basis of labor in the middle management ranks. Not only does Braverman ignore this type of skill, according to these critics, but this neglect causes him to overestimate significantly the degree to which skill has been evacuated from contemporary jobs.

A related point is made by feminist critics, who contend that Braverman and other labor process theorists have produced partial, distorted analyses which are based on male notions of skill. One consequence of this is that the socially constructed character of skill has been neglected. A number of feminists have argued that female skills are largely ignored by labor process theorists and employers alike while male skills are accorded high status. The result is that many largely female jobs requiring high levels of training and ability are routinely and inaccurately designated as unskilled or deskillived. It also obscures the ways in which skill, gender, and power intersect; in some cases “skill” may be as much a way of excluding and/or subordinating female workers as it is an
inherent property of a job or a protection against managerial control.

(2) Romanticizing craftwork.

Braverman has also been taken to task for allegedly "romanticizing" craftwork, of counterpoising a mythical nineteenth-century workplace, dominated by large numbers of autonomous skilled craftworkers, to a twentieth-century workplace populated by deskilled laborers performing degraded, monotonous work. This ignores the reality of nineteenth-century work, which was not exclusively craftwork. Critics add that craftworkers were far from completely autonomous, as employers had developed various means for controlling skilled labor prior to the rise of scientific management. Finally, feminist critics have added that Braverman's portrait of the craftworker neglects the relationship between male craftworkers and the unwaged domestic labor of their wives. It also obscures the role played by socially constructed skills and organized craft unions in excluding women from highly paid work.

(3) The degradation of work.

Perhaps the most hotly contested point in the labor process debate concerns the subtitle of Labor and Monopoly Capital: "The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century." Braverman's book has been widely interpreted as a description of the long-term trend toward the rationalization and simplification of work and of the structural need for capitalism to achieve control over work by separating conception and execution and simplifying jobs. Subsequent participants in the labor process debate have been badly divided over the question of whether this is an accurate representation of twentieth-century capitalism.

Many studies have documented the tendency for capitalism to degrade work. This was particularly true early on in the debate, as the essays in Andrew Zimbalist's collection published by Monthly Review Press indicate. Many analyses of the effects of new, computerized technology on work have tended to characterize them as a continuation of the deskilling process described by Braverman.
However, the claim that there is a long-term trend within capitalism toward the homogenization and deskilling of labor has been called into question. Some have contended that Braverman and other labor process analysts ignore historical evidence of the persistence and survival of craft work, even in the late twentieth century. These critics argue that craftworkers are better able to resist than Braverman thought. Others suggest that any decline in skill levels in traditional blue-collar occupations may be offset by the emergence of new skills in high technology jobs, service jobs, and white-collar jobs. New technologies, while sometimes used in deskilling ways, may also, according to some analysts, have enskilling effects (or at least potential). This kind of criticism has been augmented by macroeconomic studies of the U.S. occupational structure which contend that there is no clear trend toward the decline of skill across the economy as a whole. All in all, these critics paint an alternative portrait of the historical development of skill which suggests that work is not being “degraded” in a simple, linear fashion.  

An alternative critique of Braverman’s analysis of deskilling focuses on his understanding of skill itself. One view is that even “deskilled” jobs on assembly lines and in other forms of degraded work involve considerably more skill and “know-how” than Braverman allows. Others have argued that Braverman adopts a purely individual concept of skill, neglecting the fact that the contemporary labor process makes production into a collective endeavor in which skill is embodied in a complex, collective worker (i.e., a web of interlinked specialized workers within a complex division of labor).  

(4) Scientific management as the logic of capitalism.

One of the most influential critiques of Labor and Monopoly Capitalism builds on these criticisms of the “degradation” thesis. For many critics, Braverman goes too far in equating the techniques of scientific management with capitalism itself. The techniques of work rationalization and control developed by Taylor and his followers, while obviously important to the development of many work environments,
are not present in all workplaces, nor is there evidence that they will be. On the contrary, these critics argue, capitalists have developed a variety of strategies for controlling labor, of which Taylorism is only one, and not necessarily the most effective one.

Thus, Andrew Friedman argues that there are in fact two major types of capitalist control strategy in contemporary workplaces: "direct control" (involving the techniques of scientific management) and "responsible autonomy" (in which workers are allowed substantial levels of autonomy and discretion at work). Friedman does not see a long-term trend to replace the latter with the former; both exist and will continue to do so. Richard Edwards develops a more historicized view of the evolution of the labor process, suggesting that capitalists have developed a sequence of modes of control in response to new forms of worker resistance and new production needs. Simple control (characteristic of small workshops) gave way to technical control (the assembly line), which in turn gave way to bureaucratic control (the elaborate internal labor markets of contemporary corporations); scientific management, for Edwards, is a transitional form of control which emerged as employers were groping for ways to solve the problems of simple control.

More recently, many have pointed to the transformation of organizations as evidence that scientific management techniques are being superseded. Some argue that contemporary forms of work organization (Japanese management techniques, flexible specialization, etc.) as well as new technologies are reversing long-standing trends by empowering workers (at least to an extent). Others have suggested that behind the downsizing of corporations and the expanded use of subcontracting, temporary, and part-time workers is a new form of capitalist control based on markets rather than direct bureaucratic mechanisms. Finally, some have argued that Braverman bases his argument too much on the U.S. case, assuming that all capitalisms are the same. It may be that scientific management has dominated the U.S. workplace, but
this has not been true in other capitalist countries with different histories, economic situations, and class relations.\textsuperscript{16}

(5) The question of subjectivity.

The role of subjectivity in shaping the labor process has been a consistent theme in the critique of \textit{Labor and Monopoly Capital}. Many have pointed to Braverman’s self-imposed focus on “class-in-itself” as opposed to “class-for-itself” and argued that he artificially separates subjectivity from the labor process.\textsuperscript{17} Almost from the beginning, the issue of subjectivity figured prominently in the debate on the labor process; even the mostly enthusiastic contributors to Andrew Zimbalist’s collection of essays noted Braverman’s neglect of working-class resistance to capitalist efforts to control the workforce. Braverman responded to this criticism, but he did not succeed in persuading his critics that he had moved beyond a view of “a virtually inert working class, unable to pose any substantial problems for capital either within production or beyond it.”\textsuperscript{18} To his critics, this represented an erroneous, implicit claim that the working class under monopoly capitalism was not likely to mount effective resistance to capital; it also ignored, they argued, the role that worker resistance played in conditioning, indeed often in effectively blocking, capitalist efforts to control workers.\textsuperscript{19}

Michael Burawoy’s influential work represents a second critique of Braverman’s discussion of worker resistance and the labor process. Burawoy argues that a central element in shaping work relations is “manufacturing consent,” i.e., gaining workers’ agreement to the conditions of production. In \textit{Manufacturing Consent} he develops a view of a labor process shaped by the dialectic of capitalist efforts to direct workers and workers’ desire to resist. The negotiated order that results is the creation of neither alone; rather, it is a kind of uneasy tacit truce worked out between the two parties. Worker resistance, thus, is directly involved in the production of the labor process, yet worker resistance can, to a degree, be accommodated within the structures of capitalist production.\textsuperscript{20}

(6) Too narrow a focus on the shop floor.
Finally, several critics have argued that Braverman’s analysis focuses attention too narrowly on the shop floor. While understanding the dynamics of class conflict and the workings of the capitalist economy must involve analysis of shop floor relations, none of this can be properly understood without consideration of the larger political, economic, and ideological context. Thus, John Kelly argues that Braverman’s focus on the labor process alone contributes to his tendency to overestimate the degree to which capitalists have achieved control of the enterprise. He notes that, in addition to conflict between capital and labor, capitalism is characterized by conflict among capitals, which tends to undermine the kind of stable capitalist order that Braverman’s analysis of the labor process is said to envisage. Michael Burawoy has also moved his earlier critique of Braverman in a related direction. In *The Politics of Production*, he develops the notion of “factory regime,” arguing that the labor process needs to be understood as part of a larger whole, which includes market competition among firms, the reproduction of labor power, and state intervention in the economy. It is this larger whole, not work relations within the factory alone, which shape patterns of conflict and working-class resistance.

*Labor and Monopoly Capital* for the 1990s

Braverman’s critics have raised legitimate objections to parts of his analysis and have proposed important and useful modifications to his original arguments. It is undoubtedly true that Braverman did not offer us the final word on the nature of skill and that he probably exaggerated the historical importance of scientific management. No one could read the feminist contributions to the labor process debate without recognizing that skills are socially constructed and that gender is an important factor in determining what is “skill.” It is probably also true that Braverman did not pay sufficient attention to the ability of workers to resist managerial controls.
and to the role of forces outside the workplace in shaping the labor process and the conflicts within it.

Yet, none of this makes Braverman's arguments wrong or irrelevant to contemporary workplaces. If one avoids the kind of cartoon version of Labor and Monopoly Capital that often appears in discussions of the labor process, and remembers what precisely Braverman said and why he said it, many of these criticisms can be easily reconciled with his basic arguments and intentions. Consider just a few examples from the list of criticisms outlined above. As we saw, critics of Braverman point to the continued existence of autonomous, skilled employment in their rejection of his views on "deskilling." Yet, as Paul Thompson has argued eloquently, even if Braverman and his followers may have exaggerated the extent to which the workforce is being "homogenized," this does not in any way deny the fact that "deskilling remains the major tendential presence within the development of the capitalist labor process." It is the rare worker at any level or in any economic sector who has not experienced some version of this tendency.

Similarly, if one looks carefully at Braverman's attitude toward traditional craftwork, there is a sense in which his alleged romanticization of the craftworker represents a strength rather than a weakness in his analysis. In the introduction to Labor and Monopoly Capital, Braverman acknowledges his affection for craftwork and states his hope that he has avoided a nostalgic view of it. But, he adds,

... my views about work are governed by nostalgia for an age that has not yet come into being, in which, for the worker, the craft satisfaction that arises from conscious and purposeful mastery of the labor process will be combined with the marvels of science and the ingenuity of engineering, an age in which everyone will be able to benefit, in some degree, from this combination. 26

Perhaps Braverman mythologizes the craftworker to a degree. But in so doing, he succeeds in identifying many of the elements that a non-alienating labor process must include (freedom, community, variety, challenge, commitment). 26
Finally, it is often forgotten that one of the stated purposes of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* was to counter the suggestion that Marxism was outdated because it concerned only a shrinking industrial proletariat. Braverman devotes much of his book to an analysis of new jobs in service, clerical, and other non-industrial contexts, arguing that much of this employment could and should be understood as working class. In this sense, it is unfair to accuse Braverman of ignoring either women (since these are largely women’s jobs) or non-industrial forms of work. More importantly, however, Braverman’s insistence that these are mainly “working-class” jobs is an essential corrective to the predominant tendency to emphasize the differences between these jobs and traditional industrial jobs. While there are obvious differences that need to be recognized, Braverman’s accurate observation that most of these jobs are organized on a capitalist basis and are structured by similar relations of control and exploitation helps us to explain why these sectors share the experience of unemployment and insecure employment, attacks on unions, stagnant or declining wages, and corporate “downsizing.” It also helps us to avoid the absurd tendency to conclude that we now live in some sort of post-capitalist, post-industrial utopia in which classes and class conflict have essentially disappeared.

Braverman’s analysis can accommodate the often valuable ideas of his critics regarding subjectivity and resistance, economic change, and the complexity of capital-labor relations, precisely because *Labor and Monopoly Capital* is much more than a book about deskilling. Its central achievement was to restore exploitation, class, and class conflict to their central place in the analysis of work under capitalism. As Sheila Cohen has pointed out, Braverman does not describe “a labor process to nowhere,” but a labor process in which the activity of producing useful goods and services is constantly shaped and reshaped by the need to appropriate surplus labor and to accumulate capital, by the structural relationship between labor and capital.26 The continuous restructuring of the
workplace (whether through deskillling or some other means) is, for Braverman, an inevitable result of capitalists’ need to combat worker resistance, to compete with other capitalists, to maximize profits, to increase productivity, etc. This is the very same point that the most valuable critics of Braverman on some of the issues discussed above have sought to make.

However, not all of the criticisms can or should be accommodated by Braverman’s argument; for, increasingly, those who argue for the need to move beyond Braverman have retreated to arguments reminiscent of the inadequate 1960s-style industrial sociology of which he was so correctly critical. For example, among those who have stressed the need to reintegrate subjectivity into the analysis of work is Graeme Salaman, who suggests the need to stop assuming the class nature of relations at work and adopt, instead, a view in which actors “construct” social relations at work on the basis of a variety of sociological factors. Even Michael Burawoy’s arguments regarding the manufacture of consent insist on the contingent character of relations at work and that class interests are “constructed” on an “ideological terrain.”27 Such arguments bring us very close to an earlier, idealist sociology in which the links between the central structural characteristics of capitalism, the structure of the workplace, and social conflict at work are completely severed, resulting in an imaginary world in which worker and capitalist interests may be harmonized and in which conflict at work may be presented as dysfunctional and avoidable.28

Discussions of contemporary workplace reform have taken a similar turn. It is has become very common for sociologists, economists, and others, even for those on the left, to claim that contemporary workplace reforms represent a fundamental shift in the organization of the capitalist economy. Changes such as those implicit in Japanese-style “lean production” or the type of organization sometimes referred to as flexible specialization are seen as reversing the traditional tendency to deskill and disenfranchise the worker within production. They are seen as genuine attempts, often
based on technical or economic necessity, to empower workers and reduce the social distance between capitalists and employees. 

It may be quite sensible to acknowledge that these new managerial approaches are not identical to scientific management and that capitalism is perhaps more flexible than some of Braverman's original formulations suggest. But, it is quite another thing to treat these as a complete transformation of capitalism, of the structural demand for profit maximization, increased labor productivity, etc. For, as many have noted, these reforms have a dark side (their fragility, their tendency to be manipulative, the links between them and the rise of polarized wage structures, unstable employment, etc.) that remains inexplicable unless we retain Braverman's insistence on the centrality of the exploitative capital-labor relationship to the structuring of work. In the introduction to *Labor and Monopoly Capital* Braverman commented on the efforts at work "reform" operative in the 1960s:

They represent a style of management rather than a genuine change in the position of the worker. They are characterized by a studied pretense of worker "participation," a gracious liberality in allowing the worker to adjust a machine, replace a light bulb, move from one fractional job to another, and to have the illusion of making decisions by choosing among fixed and limited alternatives designed by a management which deliberately leaves insignificant matters open to choice. 

There is a significant lesson in this statement for students of contemporary workplace reform, for it points out quite clearly that there is a difference between changing managerial styles and changing the structural position of the worker within the capitalist order. Braverman made a significant advance on previous analyses, and greatly enriched the study of work, by making this point in 1974. It is rapidly becoming necessary to make that point again, making *Labor and Monopoly Capital* very much a book for our times.
NOTES


7. This argument has obvious implications for discussions of policies such as comparable worth. See Ronnie Steinberg, "The Social Construction of Skill," Work and Occupations 17 (1990): 449-82.

8. See Craig Littler, The Development of the Labor Process in Capitalist Societies (London: Heinemann, 1982), chapter 1, for an example of this kind of critique.

9. See the general works on feminist theory cited above in note 6. See Cynthia Cockburn, Brothers, for a sophisticated statement of the latter point.


17. See pp. 24-25 of Labor and Monopoly Capital for Braverman’s explanation of his limited focus.


19. Graeme Salaman makes an analogous argument regarding Braverman’s view of managers’ subjectivity. He contends that Braverman treats managers as either cyphers or as mechanical implementers of the “logic” of capital. The view that there are multiple managerial strategies for control suggests the need for more attention to managerial subjectivity and their creative reactions to the conditions they encounter. See Graeme Salaman, Working (London: Tavistock, 1986), especially ch. 1.


25. Another excellent book which adopts a similarly rhapsodic tone in its description of traditional skills, and which similarly obliges the reader to think about the links between past and future models of work, is Doug Harper, Working Knowledge (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).


28. Graeme Salaman, Working, ch. 1, especially pp. 25-34; For Braverman's comments on subjectivist analyses of class, see Labor and Monopoly Capital, pp. 28-29.


No good thing has been or can be enjoyed by us without having first cost labor. And inasmuch as most good things are produced by labor, it follows that all such things of right belong to those whose labor has produced them. But it has so happened in all ages of the world, that some have labored, and others have without labor enjoyed a large proportion of the fruits. This is wrong and should not continue. To secure to each laborer the whole product of his labor, or as nearly as possible, is a worthy object of any good government.—Abraham Lincoln