
REREADING HARRY BRAVERMAN'S LABOR AND MONOPOLY CAPITAL AFTER TWENTY YEARS

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The idea of sacrificing 6-7 hours at work so that we can enjoy the rest of our day. That, if you'll forgive the expression, is bullsbit. Because it will be this...vacuum in people's lives that will more than ever shape their lives. The more working people's lives are emptied of content...the more the same thing happens to life outside the job and we can already see a complete demonstration of that in modern society.

Harry Braverman, interview, circa 1976

I spend far more time making it look like I do my work well than trying to do it well.

A college student, interview, 1993

Introduction

Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century*, now more than twenty-years old, is a Marxist classic. Published by Monthly Review Press, and with a Forward by Paul Sweezy, the book won the C.W. Mills award from the Society for the Study of Social Problems for its account of the fate of work under capitalist management. *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (hereafter LMC) has become, along with Volume 1 of Marx's *Capital*, essential reading for anyone trying to understand what capitalism does to work and workers.

Extending Marx's analysis of 19th century capitalism, Braverman showed how managers have, throughout the 20th century, progressively eliminated from society jobs that are good for workers in favor of jobs that destroy workers but make profits for capitalists. Specifically, he showed how jobs that once required the worker to conceptualize as well as execute a task have been reorganized into, on the one hand, a mass of jobs requiring little or no conceptualization, and on the other hand, a much smaller number of elite managerial and technical jobs that require little else. The overall decline in society of the number of jobs that require both conceptualization and execution, i.e. skill, or craftsmanship, is what Braverman meant by the "degradation of work."

Braverman wasn't just *writing* about craftsmanship, he *was* a craftsman. For years he had worked in the metal trades, apprenticing as a coppersmith. From his vantage point he could see clearly what was happening to these trades. In a telling passage in the Introduction to LMC he writes:

I had the opportunity of seeing firsthand, during those years, not only the transformation of industrial processes but the manner in which these processes are reorganized; how the worker, systematically robbed of a craft heritage, is given little or nothing to take its place. Like all craftsman, even the most inarticulate, I always resented this, and as I reread these pages, I find in them a sense not only of social outrage, which was intended, but also of personal affront (1974: 6).

Braverman's outrage and anger—which courses like a hot vein throughout the book no matter how hard he tries to sound "objective" and "scientific"—comes from loss. He had something he valued and, though he fought to keep it, watched as it was taken away from him and others like him. Craftsmanship was something he had lived.

For the two of us, craftsmanship was an abstraction because it had largely passed into history for all but a few workers by the

time we came of age. Degraded work, on the other hand, was all too familiar. The unskilled, blue-collar labor market that we faced upon graduating from high school (Cliff in 1971 and Bill in 1975), was a world that had already been strip-mined of skill by the capitalist managers who had, by then, been hard at their own labors for a more than a century. Having herded all the craftsmen under one roof in the 19th century and beat up on them throughout the 20th, by the 1970s the job was pretty well done, and all that was left was some mopping up in those few trades that had proven either too difficult or too unprofitable to destroy.

As the clock ran down on high school, the options, unhappy as they were, became clear to us. The first thing we knew was that we were going to have to go out there and get jobs of one kind or another. The second thing we knew, after listening to grown-ups and working part-time in high school, was that most jobs, to use a phrase from our students, “sucked.” They were either boring, dirty, dangerous, exhausting, illegal, or low-paying, and often they were all of these things at once—and that was when you could find one. What we also knew was that the few jobs that didn’t suck required some serious dues-paying in school. And for the most part, school sucked as badly as most jobs did, though, aside from sports, school wasn’t usually as dangerous. School seemed to be the only way out, the only way to even have a chance of avoiding degraded work. But after twelve years of it we were ready to trade whatever sucked about school for whatever sucked about work—assuming we could find any. I suppose we felt that as long as we were going to be ordered around by someone all day long we might as well at least get paid something for it.

But in the early 1970s, finding any job at all was pretty difficult. As always, it was easier to find the bad ones, and we had our share. We worked construction, pumped gas, and stocked grocery shelves. We cooked food, sold beer, did factory work, went

out on fishing boats, and drove taxi cabs. We tried every bad job we could get and they were all just as bad as we'd hoped they wouldn't be. The better jobs—the ones we knew were out there, but in much shorter supply—the ones that were either interesting, clean, safe, inspiring, legal, high-paying—or if there were indeed a God, all of these things, seemed somehow to be beyond our grasp. What we learned later, of course, was that the better ones—or at least the ones that weren't too boring or too deadly or too low-paying—were beyond our educational credentials.

At the same time we were bouncing around the margins of the blue-collar labor force, we also tried to penetrate the core whenever the phone company, the power company, a defense contractor, a police department, or a government agency was hiring. We queued up with thousands of others to grab one of those low-skilled, but unionized, jobs—those jobs with, as our mom would say, “a steady paycheck and good benefits.” Our cousins, a few years older than us, had managed to get such jobs with the phone company after high school and they seemed to be doing all right. With our dad's help, in fact, Cliff did at one point manage to land a shop floor, mechanic's job with the big defense contractor where he had been working, first as an electrician, and later, an engineer. The job he landed was, by everyone's assessment, a “good job.” Everyone but him, that is. What was good about it was the pay, the overtime, the overtime pay, and, of course, those benefits (keep in mind that at 19 or 20, medical benefits don't count for much and a pension counts for even less than that). But the truth was he was working in a factory, putting screws in airplanes on an assembly line, and just couldn't see doing that for twenty or thirty years. Hell, he was going nuts after a month, and so after a few more months, quit—a sore point between him and our dad to this day.

Bill, somewhat more entrepreneurially inclined, even had a shot at the real dream of every working class guy—owning his own business. An uncle, who had been in the auto glass business for

years, and was petty bourgeois to the core, considered backing Bill in the buy-out of a wholesale beer distributor. But this "deal," like most "deals," eventually fell through. I think we dreamed up a few other Ralph Kramden-like money-making schemes, but these, too, were all a bust.

It is important to note, as well, that all the while we were trying to get a toehold in the world of work, we each were also enrolled in a local community college part-time. This was our hedge against a work world that, as the months went on, began looking pretty bleak. Gradually, we began to change our tune about the relative desirability of paying our dues in school, finally reversing our earlier decision and concluding that whatever it was that sucked about school was better than what sucked about work—or at least the work available to us. Eventually, of course, we figured out as do most working class kids who grope their way into graduate school, that studying work beats doing it, and so we became sociologists. The important point here, however, is that our biographies over the past 20 years are a testimony to the truth of Braverman's thesis. We've spent most of our lives trying to avoid the degraded and degrading jobs that capitalists inevitably create as they reorganize work and life in the interest of accumulating capital.

So, because we have been discussing the meaning of living and working under capitalism for many years, we felt a critical rereading of LMC would be an ideal opportunity for us to both keep our brotherly conversation going, and, with luck, maybe even say something useful to those of you who, like us, continue to be both horrified and fascinated by the demise of the communist specter that haunted Europe and the rise of the capitalist spectacle that has wowed the crowds in America, and is now gone out on a world tour.

Labor and Monopoly Capital Today

To understand how we have approached LMC it is important that you understand what sort of attitude we bring to the text. Like many other sociologists, our conversations over the past few years have tended not to revolve around work, or Marxist theory. We haven't abandoned Marxism, exactly, it is just that there was that point—sometime in the Reagan years we think (at least for us)—when reality went on a holiday. The Reagan presidency proved once and for all that signs could be loosed from their signifiers—that the truth had become, in fact, whatever could be made to appear to be true. A “New World Order” indeed. Living through, as Barbara Ehrenreich calls them “the worst years of our lives,” was enough to bring out the cynicism in the best of us. And so, it's difficult not to snicker when reading Marxist writing from the 1970s. Listen, for example, to Paul Sweezy, *Monthly Review Marxist*, writing in 1974 in the Preface to LMC:

Harry Braverman's book is to be considered an invitation and a challenge to a younger generation of Marxist economists and sociologists to get on with the urgent task of destroying bourgeois ideology and putting in its place an honest picture of the social reality in which we are forced to live (1974: xii).

Ha! Easy for him to say. How quaint, from today's vantage point, and naive, he sounds with this call to arms—or pens, as the case may be. From where we sit, it's alot harder to believe it's possible to destroy bourgeois ideology—or even get anyone to recognize it as such—when bourgeois ideology is the only ideology left; when bourgeois ideology has become our taken-for-granted reality. And how futile it now feels to put in the effort it takes to paint an honest picture of social reality, knowing full well that the most fantastic lies are successfully passed off everyday to millions advertised as honest pictures of social reality. And what's even more amazing is that these millions of people aren't being duped. They know they're being lied to; they just

don't seem to care. They're too exhausted to care. And so, sometimes, are we. Who, exactly, is going to read our honest picture of reality, Paul? The workers?

Hearing this, it won't surprise you to learn that we, like many others, have been influenced by some of what passes for "postmodern theory." And, moreover, we have found in it much of interest and much that to us rings true. What we have found most appealing about it is the extent to which postmodern theory seems to capture and express what seems to be missing in Marxist theory—what it feels like for most of us to live in a "developed" capitalist society. Thus, when Norman Denzin (1991: vii) characterizes postmodernism as a set of emotional experiences defined by nostalgia, resentment, anger, isolation, and anxiety it rings true to us because we have felt these feelings and see them regularly in those around us, and we wonder why we feel this way. And when, drawing on Baudrillard, he writes ". . . that members of the contemporary world are voyeurs adrift on a sea of symbols who know themselves primarily through cinema and television," we understand what he is talking about because we've felt adrift ourselves at times, with no anchor. For example, it is not uncommon in the classroom to find ourselves referring to TV characters and Hollywood movies, desperately trying to find a common reference point with our students, realizing that watching TV and boring each other in the classroom are likely to be the only things we have in common.

Nevertheless, at the same time we find ourselves drawn to some features of postmodern theory we are also troubled by the idealist strain in it that would have us believe that the way we feel today—the postmodern condition if you will—is the result of a culture that is unconnected to the material conditions of life, specifically the conditions under which many of us must work. For example, what struck us upon reading LMC is the extent to which the degradation of work—a social problem deemed important enough that a book about it could win a prize from the

Society for the Study of Social Problems 1974—is rarely mentioned as a social problem today. It is ironic, for example, that while the theme of the 1992 SSSP meetings in Pittsburgh was “Postmodernity as a Social Problem,” there is no mention in the Presidential Address, or anywhere else at those meetings, of the connection between the degradation of work and the social problems thought to be associated with postmodernity. It is as if work, having been degraded and destroyed, could now be forgotten—or more accurately—repressed. Better to not think much about what capitalism has done to work. Better to watch TV, or go to Wal-Mart, or avoid thinking about the degradation of work by writing a postmodern theory that never mentions it.

But while the postmodernists, and most workers of course, want to avoid thinking about work, the Marxists and sociologists who carried on the Braverman legacy seem to want to think about little else. Looking back at twenty years worth of citations to LMC, it is clear that the book has been ghettoized as a narrow treatise in the “sociology of work.” Moreover, the discussion surrounding LMC has tended to devolve into debates about whether or not Braverman’s “hypothesis” about what has happened to work under capitalism was, or is, correct (see our bibliography for some selected examples). Though perhaps of some use in sorting through the details, we think this tendency toward scholasticism has distracted our attention from the more important task of building upon the undeniable truth of Braverman’s central thesis. We think the overall thrust of his thesis about what capitalism does to work in the long run was correct in 1974 and remains so in the 1990s. Yes, workers have, and continue to, resist the degradation of work, and we should acknowledge that resistance and support it whenever we can, but it is foolish we think, at this late date, to deny the fact that as soon as capitalists get their hands on a job, or whenever they create a new one, they pretty much destroy whatever there is that makes it worth doing in the first place. And, struggle as they might, workers on

the whole, and in the long run, don't seem to be able to do much about it.

So, what we have then are two kinds of mutually reinforcing denials. The Marxists don't seem to want to accept what work has become—they want still to believe that something remains in most people's work worth fighting for other than what it can buy for you or signify about you (though few workers would seem to agree)—and the postmodernists don't seem to want to think about work at all. Instead, postmodernism would seem to accept the degradation of work and proceed to build its social theory on acceptance of this fact—which of course also means, in effect, building it on the graves of workers.

We have come to see Harry Braverman as someone whose work both anticipates and transcends these unhappy alternatives. We see LMC as a pioneering materialist reading of late capitalist society and culture. This is a world where the appearance of skill is more important than the ability to be able to do anything skillfully. Braverman was onto this 20 years ago. He is talking here about the various "Quality of Work" programs then becoming popular:

The reforms that are being proposed today are by no means new ones, and have been popular with certain corporations (IBM, for instance) and certain management theorists for a generation. 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 a worker to adjust a machine, change a light bulb, move from one fractional job to another and to have the illusion of making decisions by choosing among fixed alternatives designed by a management which deliberately leaves insignificant matters open to choice. One can best compare this style of management with the marketing strategy followed by those who, having discovered that housewives resent prepared baking mixes and feel guilty when using them, arrange for the removal of the powdered egg and restore to the consumer the thrill of breaking a fresh egg into the mix, thereby creating an "im-

age" of skilled baking, wholesome products, etc. (1974:38-39).

Braverman understood that once work was destroyed and workers degraded it would become extremely important to create the appearance that neither was true in order to maintain the most fundamental illusion upon which our society is based: that capitalism is about human progress rather than human destruction. That sleight of hand continues today as capitalist economists and politicians continue to spout nonsense about how the economy of the future will require highly educated and skilled workers when everyone knows that most jobs are getting dumber and dumber while only a few are high paying and fancy.

Braverman acknowledges the degradation of work as a fact of monopoly capitalism—how could he not: it's his thesis. But, at the same time, he also accepts the continuing importance of work in shaping working people's lives. This is what he means when he says that the vacuum in people's lives will more than ever shape their lives. Braverman, of course, did not trace out the consequences of degraded work on people's lives in *LMC*, and, unfortunately, he did not live long enough to take up that job in another book. We think, however, that had he lived, these are precisely the things it would have made sense for him to do. He would have tried to show how the degradation of work had destroyed not only the opportunities for working people to do meaningful work, he would have also tried to show how this meant the collapse of the working class as an effective source of resistance to the further domination of society and culture by monopoly capital as well. He would have tried to explain that when people are forced to do work that is meaningless to them in order to survive the world they create through their labors will be just as meaningless, and following Lukacs, mysterious.

What reading Braverman in the 1990s has so far done is remind us that the key to understanding what has happened to life in the past twenty years may well lie in understanding what has hap-

pened to work in the past one-hundred years. As a result of the degradation of work, we live now under both the control and the sign of capital, and no amount of Marxian denial is going to change that. The degradation of work and the attendant destruction of the working class is an accomplished fact, not a hypothesis waiting to be tested. At the same time, acknowledging that work, for most workers, offers little opportunity for craftsmanship, self-objectification, or self-understanding doesn't mean we can forget about it—as cultural theorists and postmodernists would seem to want to do.

With Braverman, then, we think it's important for sociologists caught somewhere between Marxism and postmodernism to write what we might call a "materialist postmodernism." Such a sociology would be one that breaks the silence and speaks the unspeakable about how, to paraphrase Braverman from the opening quote, the vacuum in people's lives more than ever *shapes* their lives. Because, when all is said and done, we still have to believe, with Paul Sweezy, and we think, Harry Braverman, that painting honest pictures of social reality is still our business, and in this case that means trying to expose the latest version of the lie that says capitalism is good for workers.

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Bio Notes

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