

Labor and Monopoly Capital

The Degradation of Work  
in the Twentieth Century

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In any event, the purpose of this book is the study of the labor processes of capitalist society, and the specific manner in which these are formed by capitalist property relations. I cannot offer here any parallel study of the specific manner in which this structure has been imitated by the hybrid societies of the Soviet bloc. The latter study forms its own and considerably different subject matter, and has enormous interest in its own right. But since this mode of production was created by capitalism and not by Sovietism, where it is only a reflexive, imitative, and one hopes transitional form, it is with capitalism that the study of the labor process must begin.

#### *The "New Working Class"*

The term "working class," properly understood, never precisely delineated a specified body of people, but was rather an expression for an ongoing social process. Nevertheless, to most people's minds it represented for a long time a fairly well-defined part of the population of capitalist countries. But with the coming of broad occupational shifts (which will be described in later chapters), and a growing consciousness of these shifts in recent decades, the term has lost much of its descriptive capacity. I can therefore sympathize with those readers who would want me to begin with a concise and up-to-date definition of the term "working class." Such a definition, if it could easily be managed, would be helpful to the writer as well as the reader, but I cannot help feeling that an attempt to provide it at the outset would result in more confusion than clarification. We are dealing not with the static terms of an algebraic equation, which requires only that quantities be filled in, but with a dynamic process the mark of which is the *transformation* of sectors of the population. The place of many of these sectors in class definition is rather more complex than otherwise, and cannot be attempted until much has been described and the standards of analysis clarified.

To make this a little more concrete: I have no quarrel with the definition of the working class, on the basis of its "relationship to the means of production," as that class which does not own or otherwise have proprietary access to the means of labor, and must sell its labor power to those who do. But in the present situation, when almost all of the population has been placed in this situation so that the definition encompasses occupational strata of the most diverse kinds, it is not the bare definition that is important but its application. I can only say at this point that I hope a reasonable and useful picture of the structure of the working class emerges from this study. If readers will indulge me this far, I think they may see the necessity for this course later in the exposition, as I came to see it in the course of the investigation.\*

For purposes of clarity, however, I should note at the start that although I will be describing the immense changes in the shape of the working class during the past century, I cannot accept the arbitrary conception of a "new working class" that has been developed by some writers during the past decade. According to this conception, the "new working class" embraces those occupations which serve as the repositories for specialized knowledge in production and administration: engineers, technicians, scientists, lower managerial and administrative aides and experts, teachers, etc. Rather than examine the entire working population and learn how it has been altered, which portions have grown and which have

\* "Though extremely precise, [Marx] was not much inclined to define his concepts in set terms. For instance, the present treatise on capitalist production does not contain a formal definition of 'capital'. . . . The fact is that the whole book is his definition." <sup>15</sup> This comment by the translators of the Everyman edition of *Capital* is important, especially as a hint to the beginner in the study of Marxism. It holds true, with all proportions guarded, in the present case as well, if we are to arrive at a "definition" of the working class that will go beyond the elements that most students of this subject already know well.

consciousness, organization, or activities. This is a book about the working class as a class *in itself*, not as a class *for itself*. I realize that to many readers it will appear that I have omitted the most urgent part of the subject matter. There are those who hope to discover, in some quick and simple manner, a replacement for the "blue-collar workers" as an "agency for social change," to use the popular phrases. It is my feeling, to put it bluntly, that this constitutes an attempt to derive the "science before the science," and I have tried to dismiss such preoccupations from my mind on the theory that what is needed first of all is a picture of the working class as it exists, as the shape given to the working population by the capital accumulation process.\*

This self-imposed limitation to the "objective" content of class and the omission of the "subjective" will, I fear, hopelessly compromise this study in the eyes of some of those who float in the conventional stream of social science. For them, by long habit and insistent theory, class does not really exist outside its subjective manifestations. Class, "status," "stratification," and even that favorite hobby horse of recent years which has been taken from Marx without the least understanding of its significance, "alienation" \*\*—all of these

\* These criticisms of both "new working class" theory and of the search for an "agency of social change" are not intended to disparage the useful materials that have been assembled by some of those, Europeans and Americans, who have worked along these lines, and whose work has been helpful to me in the present study. In particular, these writers have drawn attention to the importance of, and to the discontent among, various "professional" strata, and to the special features of ghetto populations, young workers, and women. While my own approach does not proceed by way of such sectoral considerations, the manner in which they fit into the analysis as a whole will, I think, be apparent.

\*\* Alfred Schmidt notes that "Marx gave up using such terms as 'estrangement,' 'alienation,' 'return of man to himself,' as soon as he noticed that they had turned into ideological prattle in the mouths of petty-bourgeois authors, instead of a lever for the empirical study of the world and

declined or stagnated, these analysts have selected one portion of employment as the sole focus of their analysis. What saves this procedure from being completely arbitrary in the eyes of its practitioners is that they use the word *new* in a double sense: it refers to occupations that are new in the sense of having been recently created or enlarged, and also in the sense of their gloss, presumed advancement, and "superiority" to the old.

The results of an investigation based upon such a postulate are contained in advance in the chosen definition. The "new working class" is thus "educated labor," better paid, somewhat privileged, etc. Manual labor, according to this definition, is "old working class," regardless of the actual movement of occupations and the increase of various categories of labor of this sort. So far have these writers been governed by their definition that it has escaped their notice, for example, that the occupations of engineer on the one side and janitor-porter on the other have followed similar growth curves since the start of the century, each beginning at a level between 50,000 and 100,000 (in the United States in 1900), and expanding to about 1.25 million by 1970. Both now rank among the largest occupations in the United States, and both have developed in response to the forces of industrial and commercial growth and urbanization. Why is one to be considered "new working class" and the other not? That this single example is not at all fortuitous will be clear to anyone who makes a study of the long-term occupational trends in the capitalist countries. These trends—from their beginnings, which, if one must choose a starting point for something that is more realistically a continuous process, date back to the last decades of the nineteenth century—indicate that it is the *class as a whole* that must be studied, rather than an arbitrarily chosen part of it. Having so broadened the scope of the investigation, let me hasten to limit it sharply in another way. No attempt will be made to deal with the modern working class on the level of its

are for bourgeois social science artifacts of consciousness and can be studied only as they manifest themselves in the minds of the subject population. At least two generations of academic sociology have so elevated this approach into a dogma that only rarely is the need felt to substantiate it. This dogma calls for the delineation of various layers of stratification by means of questionnaires which enable the respondents to choose their own class, thereby relieving sociologists of the obligation. The results have been extraordinarily variable. For example, in the many polls conducted according to the conceptions of W. Lloyd Warner—by Gallup, by *Fortune* in 1940, etc.—in which the population is classified into “upper,” “middle,” and “lower” classes, and into subgroups of these, vast majorities of up to 90 percent predictably volunteered themselves as the “middle class.” But when Richard Centers varied the questionnaire only to the extent of including the choice “working class,” this suddenly became the majority category by choice of the respondents.<sup>17</sup> Here we see sociologists measuring not popular consciousness but their own. Yet the superiority of the questionnaire as the means for measuring social phenomena remains an article of faith. Michel Crozier, the French sociologist, says in criticism of C. Wright Mills’ *White Collar*:

Unfortunately Mills’s work . . . is not a true research study.

In effect, it is not the feelings of alienation which may actually be suffered by the salesgirl or by the intellectual at an advertising agency that interest Mills, but rather objective alienation of these persons as it might be reconstructed by analyzing the forces which exert pressure on them. This attitude pretends to be more scientific than a poll of opinions, but it is so only in appearance.<sup>18</sup>

On the basis of Mills’ approach, Crozier argues, “social life its transformation.” He adds to this the observation that “Marx’s general abandonment of such terms does not mean that he did not continue to follow theoretically the material conditions designated by them.”<sup>16</sup>

without alienation would in effect be impossible,” because “the individual is always necessarily limited by his place in the social structure.” This is the genteel form of an argument made more bluntly by Robert Blauner when he said: “The average worker is able to make an adjustment to a job which, from the standpoint of an intellectual appears to be the epitome of tedium.”<sup>19</sup> In this line of reasoning we see the recognition on the part of sociology that modern labor processes are indeed degraded; the sociologist shares this foreknowledge with management, with whom he also shares the conviction that this organization of the labor process is “necessary” and “inevitable.” This leaves to sociology the function, which it shares with personnel administration, of assaying not the nature of the work but the degree of adjustment of the worker. Clearly, for industrial sociology the problem does not appear with the degradation of work, but only with overt signs of dissatisfaction on the part of the worker. From this point of view, the only important matter, the only thing worth studying, is not work itself but the reaction of the worker to it, and in that respect sociology makes sense.

It is not my purpose in these comments to deprecate the importance of the study of the state of consciousness of the working class, since it is only through consciousness that a class becomes an actor on the historic stage. Nor do I believe that the feeble results achieved by questionnaire-sociology indicate that the mind of the working class is unknowable, but merely that this particular method of trying to know it is superficial, remote, and mechanistic. Class consciousness is that state of social cohesion reflected in the understanding and activities of a class or a portion of a class. Its absolute expression is a pervasive and durable attitude on the part of a class toward its position in society. Its long-term relative expression is found in the slowly changing traditions, experiences, education, and organization of the class. Its short-term relative expression is a dynamic complex

of moods and sentiments affected by circumstances and changing with them, sometimes, in periods of stress and conflict, almost from day to day. These three expressions of class consciousness are related: changes of mood draw upon and give expression to the underlying reservoir of class attitudes which, while it may be deep below the surface, is never entirely exhausted.

Thus a class cannot exist in society without in some degree manifesting a consciousness of itself as a group with common problems, interests, and prospects—although this manifestation may for long periods be weak, confused, and subject to manipulation by other classes. The interpretation of the opinions, feelings, sentiments, and changing moods of the working class is best accomplished by experienced and well-tuned observers and participants, who know the history of a particular group, are acquainted with its circumstances, background, and relation to other parts of the working class, and form their assessments from intimate contact and detailed information. It is for this reason that the most astute interpreters of the moods of submerged and ordinarily voiceless populations have often been union organizers, agitators, experienced revolutionaries—and police spies. While these have always had among them a percentage of fools, illusionaries, and the otherwise error-prone, at their best such active and interested parties, whose interpretations are enriched by their efforts at practice, convey a solidity, a depth and subtlety of observation, an anticipation of changing moods, and an ability to disentangle the durable from the ephemeral that is entirely absent from the tabulations of sociology. It should be added, however, that where some sociologists have themselves gone to work in factories either as part of their professional training or out of necessity, or where as sometimes happens they have put aside their questionnaires and listened to workers with both ears, they have often established relationships of trust, learned to comprehend the milieu, and written creditable accounts.

### *Job Dissatisfaction in the 1970s*

In the years that have passed since this study was begun, dissatisfaction with work has become what can only be called a "fashionable topic." Almost every major periodical in the United States has featured articles on the "blue-collar blues" or "white-collar woes." Books have been published, commissions set up, conferences organized, experiments conducted. Sociologists have caught the wind in their sails and, reinterpreting their questionnaire statistics, now view with alarm the very percentages of dissatisfied workers which yesterday they found comfortingly small. A Special Task Force selected by the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare has prepared a report under the title *Work in America* which found that "significant numbers of American workers are dissatisfied with the quality of their working lives":

As a result, the productivity of the worker is low—as measured by absenteeism, turnover rates, wildcat strikes, sabotage, poor-quality products, and a reluctance by workers to commit themselves to their work tasks. Moreover, a growing body of research indicates that, as work problems increase, there may be a consequent decline in physical and mental health, family stability, community participation and cohesiveness, and "balanced" sociopolitical attitudes, while there is an increase in drug and alcohol addiction, aggression, and delinquency.

The report deals with what it calls "the effects of work problems on various segments of our society":

Here we find the "blues" of blue-collar workers linked to their job dissatisfactions, as is the disgruntlement of white-collar workers and the growing discontent among managers. Many workers at all occupational levels feel locked-in, their mobility blocked, the opportunity to grow lacking in their jobs, challenge missing from their tasks. Young workers appear to be as committed to the institution of work as their elders have been, but many are rebelling against the anachronistic authoritarian-

ism of the workplace. Minority workers similarly see authoritarian worksettings as evidence that society is falling short of its democratic ideals. Women, who are looking to work as an additional source of identity, are being frustrated by an opportunity structure that confines them to jobs damaging to their self-esteem. Older Americans suffer the ultimate in job dissatisfaction: they are denied meaningful jobs even when they have demonstrable skills and are physically capable of being productive.<sup>20</sup>

Absenteeism and the quit rate, cited as evidence of a "new worker attitude," tend to vary with the availability of jobs and may have partly reflected the decline in unemployment rates at the end of the 1960s. But in the atmosphere of discontent of that period these were interpreted, no doubt with some truth, as an indication of a new resistance to certain forms of work. The automobile plants, and especially their assembly lines, were cited as a prime example, as witness this 1970 report in *Fortune*:

For management, the truly dismaying evidence about new worker attitudes is found in job performance. Absenteeism has risen sharply; in fact it has doubled over the past ten years at General Motors and at Ford, with the sharpest climb in the past year. It has reached the point where an average of 5 percent of G.M.'s hourly workers are missing from work without explanation every day. . . . On some days, notably Fridays and Mondays, the figure goes as high as 10 percent. Tardiness has increased, making it even more difficult to start up the production lines promptly when a shift begins—after the foreman has scrambled around to replace missing workers. Complaints about quality are up sharply. There are more arguments with foremen, more complaints about discipline and overtime, more grievances. There is more turnover. The quit rate at Ford last year was 25.2 percent. . . . Some assembly-line workers are so turned off, managers report with astonishment, that they just walk away in mid-shift and don't even come back to get their pay for the time they have worked.<sup>21</sup>

At the Chrysler Corporation's Jefferson Avenue plant in Detroit, a daily average absentee rate of 6 percent was reported in mid-1971, and an annual average turnover of almost 30 percent. In its 1970 negotiations with the union, Chrysler reported that during 1969 almost half its workers did not complete their first ninety days on the job. In that same year, the Ford assembly plant at Wixom, on the outskirts of Detroit, with an 8 percent quit rate *each month*, had to hire 4,800 new workers in order to maintain a work force of 5,000. For the automobile industry as a whole, the absentee rate doubled in the second half of the 1960s, and turnover doubled as well.\* Only with the increase in unemployment in 1971 and thereafter was the situation stabilized to some degree.<sup>23</sup>

A much-discussed strike in January 1972 at the Lordstown, Ohio, General Motors plant gave the world a glimpse of the conditions in this "most advanced" and "automated" plant in the industry, which General Motors regarded as a pilot plant for the future. At its designed speed, the assembly line at Lordstown turns out 100 Vegas an hour, giving each worker 36 seconds to complete work on each car and get ready for the next car. The immediate issue in the dispute was an increase in the pace of operations the previous October. "What the company is discovering is that workers not only want to go back to the pre-October pace, but many feel that the industry is going to have to do something to change the boring,

\* A number of European reports indicate that this situation was not limited to the United States. For example, a report from Rome said the Fiat Motor Company, Italy's largest private employer with more than 180,000 employees, 147,000 of whom are factory workers, had 21,000 employees missing on a Monday and a daily average absenteeism of 14,000. Throughout the Italian economy, an Italian management association reported, an average of at least 800,000 workers out of a total of nearly 20 million were absent daily. This was attributed to "the increasing disgust of younger people with assembly-line discipline and the recent influx of untrained southern Italians into northern factories." <sup>22</sup>

repetitive nature of the assembly line work or it will continue to have unrest in the plant. An official familiar with the sessions said, 'What they're saying is you've got to do something. I don't know what it is but you've got to do something.'"<sup>24</sup>

Accounts of this kind are not confined to the assembly line, or even to the factory. The Special Task Force report attempts a summary of office trends in the following comments:

The auto industry is the *locus classicus* of dissatisfying work; the assembly-line, its quintessential embodiment. But what is striking is the extent to which the dissatisfaction of the assembly-line and blue-collar worker is mirrored in white-collar and even managerial positions. The office today, where work is segmented and authoritarian, is often a factory. For a growing number of jobs, there is little to distinguish them but the color of the worker's collar: computer keypunch operations and typing pools share much in common with the automobile assembly-line.

Secretaries, clerks, and bureaucrats were once grateful for having been spared the dehumanization of the factory. White-collar jobs were rare; they had a higher status than blue-collar jobs. But today the clerk, and not the operative on the assembly-line, is the typical American worker, and such positions offer little in the way of prestige. . . .

Traditionally, lower-level white-collar jobs in both government and industry were held by high school graduates. Today, an increasing number of these jobs go to those who have attended college. But the demand for higher academic credentials has not increased the prestige, status, pay, or difficulty of the job. For example, the average weekly pay for clerical workers in 1969 was \$105.00 per week, while blue-collar production workers were taking home an average of \$130.00 per week. It is not surprising, then, that the Survey of Working Conditions found much of the greatest work dissatisfaction in the country among young, well-educated workers who were in low-paying, dull, routine, and fractionated clerical positions.

Other signs of discontent among this group include turnover rates as high as 30% annually and a 46% increase in white-collar union membership between 1958 and 1968. . . . These changing attitudes . . . may be affecting the productivity of these workers: a survey conducted by a group of management consultants of a cross section of office employees found that they were producing at only 55% of their potential. Among the reasons cited for this was boredom with repetitive jobs.<sup>25</sup>

The apparent increase in active dissatisfaction has been attributed to a number of causes, some having to do with the characteristics of the workers—younger, more years of schooling, "infected" by the new-generational restlessness—and others having to do with the changing nature of the work itself. One reporter cites the belief that "American industry in some instances may have pushed technology too far by taking the last few bits of skill out of jobs, and that a point of human resistance has been reached." He quotes a job design consultant at Case Western Reserve University, who said with disarming candor: "We may have created too many dumb jobs for the number of dumb people to fill them."<sup>26</sup>

Various remedies and reforms have been proposed, and some have been tested among small groups of workers by corporations with particularly pressing problems. Among these are job enlargement, enrichment, or rotation, work groups or teams, consultation or workers' "participation," group bonuses and profit-sharing, the abandonment of assembly line techniques, the removal of time clocks, and an "I Am" plan (short for "I Am Manager of My Job").

Behind the characteristic faddishness of these approaches it is possible to sense a deep concern, the reason for which is readily apparent. The ruling establishments of Western Europe and the United States, having just passed through a period when they were alarmed and even shaken by an incandescent revolt of student youth and third world nationalism within their own borders, were bound to ask themselves

what would happen if to this were added a rebellion against the conditions of labor in the workplace. The fright occasioned by such a prospect gave rise to a discussion over the "quality of work," the purpose of which was in part to determine whether discontent among workers was at the usual level, endemic to life under capitalism, or whether it was rising threateningly; and in part to encourage reforms in the hope of forestalling such a rise in discontent. But as in almost all discussions of major issues of public policy, this one too has a certain air of hollow unreality, reflecting the gulf between the capitalist as statesman and the capitalist in command of corporate enterprise.

The problem as it presents itself to those managing industry, trade, and finance is very different from the problem as it appears in the academic or journalistic worlds. Management is habituated to carrying on labor processes in a setting of social antagonism and, in fact, has never known it to be otherwise. Corporate managers have neither the hope nor the expectation of altering this situation by a single stroke; rather, they are concerned to ameliorate it only when it interferes with the orderly functioning of their plants, offices, warehouses, and stores. For corporate management this is a problem in costs and controls, not in the "humanization of work." It compels their attention because it manifests itself in absentee, turnover, and productivity levels that do not conform to their calculations and expectations. The solutions they will accept are only those which provide improvements in their labor costs and in their competitive positions domestically and in the world market.

It is interesting to note that although the discussion of job enrichment, job enlargement, and the like began in connection with factory work, most actual applications have taken place in offices (three-quarters of them, according to an estimate by Roy H. Walters, a management consultant and pioneer of "job enrichment").<sup>27</sup> Industrial installations repre-

sent heavy investments in fixed equipment, and industrial processes as they now exist are the product of a long development aimed at reducing labor costs to their minimum. In office and service processes, by contrast, the recently swollen mass of employment has not as yet been subjected to the same extremes of rationalization and mechanization as in the factories, although this is under way. For these reasons, management decisions to reorganize work processes are made more readily and voluntarily in the office and are made in the factory only in situations that offer little choice. Corporate management is convinced that it is chiefly outside the factory that payrolls are "fat," productivity is low, and there is most need for reorganization.

Office rationalization has in part been taking place, in the most recent period, under the banner of job enlargement and the humanization of work. One need only look at reports such as one in the *Wall Street Journal* in the summer of 1972 to get the flavor of this duplicitous campaign: the article is headed "The Quality of Work," but consists almost entirely of a discussion of cost cutting, productivity drives, and staff reductions in banks, insurance companies, and brokerage houses.<sup>28</sup> In a typical case, a bank teller who is idle when the load at the counter is light will be pressed into service handling other routine duties, such as sorting returned checks. The First National Bank of Richmond, Indiana, put such a plan into operation under the guidance of a consulting firm called Science Management Associates, and its "first-year savings alone exceeded the fee by almost 40%." The bank's staff was reduced from 123 to 104, and a number of the remaining workers were cut back to part-time work. The "humanization" aspect was handled by quoting one worker as saying: "There's never a dull moment. It makes the job more interesting."<sup>29</sup>

A number of management consulting firms have taken this sort of "humanization" as their field and are pressing schemes



upon managers. Whatever their phraseology, these consulting organizations have only one function: cutting costs, improving "efficiency," raising productivity. No other language is useful in conversation with management, unless it be with the public relations department.\* These consultants possess, at the moment, a valuable stock in trade in the knowledge that the principle of the division of labor, as it has been applied in many large offices, banks, insurance companies, in retailing and in service industries, has been pursued with such fanaticism that various jobs have been broken into fragments of fragments and can be partially reassembled without injury to the present mode of organizing the work process and at a certain saving of labor costs. The hard-headed manner in which this is being done and the simpleminded manner in which these pathetic "enlargements" from one unvarying routine to two or three are being hailed make an interesting contrast.

Since it focuses attention upon this long-neglected aspect of capitalist society, the current discussion of work cannot help but be useful, no matter how meager its results. But like most such discussions in which a basic characteristic of our society is "discovered," accorded a superficial "analysis," given a facile "solution," and then once more forgotten, this one too has not begun to touch the roots of the matter. We are dealing with one of the fundamentals of capitalist society, and this means that even while slight ameliorations are accepted by corporations, *the structure and mode of functioning of capitalism reproduces the present processes of labor a thousandfold more rapidly, more massively, and more widely.*

The reforms that are being proposed today are by no means

\* Academic sociologists dare not forget it either. The Special Task Force report introduces its chapter on the redesign of jobs by saying: "The burden of this chapter is to show that not only can work be redesigned to make it more satisfying but that significant increases in productivity can also be obtained." 30

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 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. 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 "image" of skilled baking, wholesome products, etc. Peter F. Drucker, one of the early propagandists for job enlargement, wrote in a critique of scientific management in 1954: "It does not follow from the separation of planning and doing in the analysis of work that the planner and the doer should be two different people. It does not follow that the industrial world should be divided into two classes of people; a few who decide what is to be done, design the job, set the pace, rhythm and motions, and order others about; and the many who do what and as they are being told." These are bold words, especially from a management consultant; the proposal for changing the world, however, as it comes to us from Mr. Drucker, is somewhat less bold: ". . . even the lowliest human job should have some planning; only it should be simple planning and there should not be too much of it." 31 Just so did Adam Smith once recommend education for the people in order to prevent their complete deterioration under the division of labor, but, as Marx comments, "prudently, and in homeopathic doses." 32

## Notes

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