

BETWEEN MARXIST ORTHODOXY AND CRITICAL THEORY:
COMMENTS ON BRAVERMAN'S LABOR AND MONOPOLY CAPITAL

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One of the remarkable features of Harry Braverman's Labor and Monopoly Capital has been its appeal to a wide range of different groups. It is used for courses in universities at both graduate and undergraduate level and in a variety of departments. It is used in community colleges, in trade union schools, in all sorts of study groups among workers and professionals. It is clearly destined to emerge as one of the giants of the Marxist tradition. But it will not be confined to this tradition, since it has caught the imagination of non-Marxists as much as of Marxists. Not surprisingly, therefore, Labor and Monopoly Capital can be read in many different ways, and today I want to place it in the context of Marxist debate.

It is curious to note that widely divergent forms of Marxism have embraced Labor and Monopoly Capital as a pillar in their own tradition. In this book they have all found confirmation of their own position. In part this may reflect the fact that Labor and Monopoly Capital is one of the first attempts to rewrite volume one of Capital in the light of a century of development in both Marxism and capitalism. However, an equally important reason for its appeal among divergent Marxisms lies in its combination of themes from orthodox Marxism with themes from critical theory. Thus Paul Sweezy - a relatively orthodox Marxist - can write that in terms of theory there is very little that is new in this book, while critical theorists have embraced it as a major theoretical contribution in the tradition of Lukacs, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and others. In this talk I propose to argue, like critical theorists, that the novelty of Labor and Monopoly Capital lies in

ALTERNATE ROUTES

harnessing their ideas to the understanding of monopoly capitalism through the examination of the labor process. But I shall also argue that this novelty is the very feature that poses an obstacle to Braverman's understanding of the nature of monopoly capitalism.

What is this critical component in Braverman? The subtitle of the book - "the degradation of work in the twentieth century" - indicates a critique in the obvious sense of the negative connotation of "degradation." But it involves another element, namely the notion of an alternative to the nature of work as we know it today. This refers not merely to an alternative in the past but more significantly to an alternative for the future. To critique, then, is to seek out the unrealized potential in the present and to point to the gap between what is and what could be. Critique declares that what exists is not natural, inevitable or necessary but the product of very definite conditions which are not themselves immutable. Thus, Braverman attributes the degradation of work and the commodification of life in general to the domination of capital. It is not only that work under monopoly capitalism becomes fractionalized into meaningless tasks but market forces invade all arenas of life turning relations among people into relations among things. Even the family is "stripped for action in order to survive in the market society."

In the remainder of this talk I shall argue that this critical component in Braverman's analysis, while offering an appealing and plausible description of monopoly capitalism, only expresses rather than reveals the forces at work in an advanced capitalist society. First, his critique tends to interfere with the understanding of control characteristic of the capitalist labor process. Second, it allows him to leave out of his analysis the political and ideological aspects of work. Third, the form of critique allows him to ignore

different forms of struggles as forces shaping the labor process. Fourth, his conception of the capitalist totality prevents him from understanding how it reproduces itself. Fifth, his point of critique leads him to portray socialism as a reversion to the past. Sixth, and finally, Braverman misses the specificity of the conditions of which Labor and Monopoly Capital is a product, namely the specificity of monopoly capitalism in the United States. In all these respects, I shall argue, Braverman's analysis is limited by his critique but let me stress it is not critique per se but the particular critique which Braverman adopts that poses as an obstacle to the understanding of monopoly capitalism.

1. Capitalist Control

To engage in critique is to evaluate and this involves the adoption of a standpoint, that is a point of critique. There was a time when Marxists were unanimous in taking the standpoint of the proletariat. The position and interests of the proletariat provided a unique basis for understanding the capitalist totality. This optimism has lapsed as the working class of the advanced capitalist society has appeared to lose the revolutionary potential it may have had and as it has become involved in various forms of reactionary politics. Critical theory has been left equivocating over its standpoint. In contrast to this studied skepticism Braverman makes his point of critique unambiguously clear. It is the craft worker. Moreover, it is not the craft worker dislocated from any historical context but the craft worker of early capitalism that Braverman takes as a point of departure. With the rise of monopoly capitalism skill is expropriated from the craft worker and placed in the hands of the agents of capital. Mental and manual labor are systematically divided or more precisely, as Braverman puts it, there is a systematic separation of

ALTERNATE ROUTES

conception and execution. Braverman constitutes this development as the organizing principle of the labor process and social structure of monopoly capitalism. The separation of conception and execution is identified as the control peculiar to the capitalist labor process in general.

However, one cannot get at what is fundamental to the capitalist labor process or capitalist control by looking at variations within capitalism as Braverman does. What is fundamental to capitalist control is what all forms of capitalist control share and this can only be understood by contrast to forms of control under non-capitalist modes of production. There are a number of possibilities. One could examine the labor process under some pre-capitalist mode of production or pre-capitalist modes of production in general or one could draw upon notions of "control" or absence of control under socialism. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, our notions of socialism tend to be vague and too restricted by what we don't like about capitalism to be of much use as an analytical tool. Rather I prefer to turn to the feudal mode of production and to begin from a conventional understanding of its labor process. While there is no time to enter into details here, by adopting feudalism as a point of departure the significant feature of capitalist control becomes the simultaneous obscuring and securing of surplus. Whereas under feudalism surplus is pumped out of the direct producers through rent, is transparent and therefore has to be legitimated, under capitalism the existence of that surplus is obscured and this poses the problem of ensuring its existence.

Only when one has posed the question of capitalist control in such a general way can one return to the issue of the relationship of the separation of conception and execution to the capitalist labor process. We can ask, for example, about the limits on the separation

of conception and execution. Thus, one might argue that if this separation is pushed too far then the securing of surplus becomes problematical, whereas if it is not pushed far enough the obscuring of surplus becomes problematical. In addition, the precise limits on the separation of conception and execution will themselves depend on certain historical conditions, revolving around the level of political and ideological as well as economic struggles.

My first point, then, is that in taking the particular standpoint of the craft worker, Braverman mistakes what is but a particular expression of the capitalist labor process for its essence.

2. The Political and Ideological Aspects of the Labor Process

In his concern for critique Braverman quite deliberately restricts his analysis to the objective aspects of the labor process. The elimination of subjectivity is part and parcel of his critical analysis. Under capitalism we lose control over the labor process, indeed over our lives in general and history is made behind our backs according to the imperatives of capital accumulation. But Braverman not only speaks of control in this negative sense. He also speaks of it in the positive sense of extracting surplus labor time, compelling or persuading people to work hard enough to produce not merely the equivalent of their wage but in addition a surplus which can then be realized by the capitalist as profit. Such control, however, presupposes the existence of a minimal consent to capitalist relations and this can be only understood through the study of the "subjective" components of the labor process, or what I shall call its ideological and political aspects. In other words, the very objective Braverman sets for himself to explain the generation of surplus under capitalism - is incompatible with a critique that restricts the analysis of work to its "objective" component.

ALTERNATE ROUTES

What, then, are the political and ideological dimensions of the labor process? Again I cannot enter into details now, suffice to say that the political dimension refers to maintenance or reproduction of what I call the relations in production, that is the immediate production relations or the relations at the point of production among workers, supervisors, etc. on the shop floor. The ideological dimension refers to the production of experience, in particular the experience of the relations in production, how workers experience their position in the productive process and how their interests emerge out of the organization of work. In other words, the study of the political and ideological aspects of the labor process allows us to understand how surplus is produced through the organization of struggles and consent at the point of production.

It is precisely in this area that industrial sociology sheds light on the labor process and the experience it produces. Yet, Braverman dismisses this excellent body of literature because it concerns itself with subjective responses to work, with modes of adaptation to the objectifying features of industrial labor. He rejects industrial sociology, therefore, because it illuminates the very processes which are crucial to the understanding of capitalist control. For it is in the attempt to cope with, to compensate for the inherent deprivation in capitalist work that laborers generate a world of their own which shapes the ideological effects of work, which explains how workers submit to or resist the separation of conception and execution on the one hand and consent to the production of surplus on the other. To dismiss industrial sociology, as Braverman does in the name of his critique, is to miss the fact that it not only conceals but also expresses an underlying reality. It is for Marxists to appropriate the "rational kernel" of sociology by placing it in a Marxist framework.

3. Struggles and Competition

It is not only that Braverman gives short shrift to day to day adaptation but he also allows little room for the types of struggle which shape the movement of capital. Instead capital flows from one arena to the next with its own inexorable logic and similarly the separation of conception and execution invades all aspects of social life. Resistance is reduced to a mere friction - a derivative and ineffectual response which does not affect the direction or pace of change. Insofar as Braverman does point to a motor of this movement, it is the unilateral power of the capitalist class. This would appear to rest on three assumptions. First, it presumes that the capitalist class identifies its interests as lying in the separation of conception and execution. Second, it presumes that the capitalist class or its agents have the power to implement those interests, that is they have the power to enforce the separation of conception and execution against resistance from other classes. Third, it presumes that the separation of conception and execution as a mode of "control" is actually in the interest of all or at least some of the fractions of the capitalist class. I find all three assumptions to be problematical. Historically, there have been occasions when capitalists have not identified their interests as lying in the separation of conception and execution; they have not always had the power to expropriate skill and there have been times when such expropriation was at odds with their interests, when it created more trouble than it was worth.

An alternative approach would be to look upon changes in the labor process as the outcomes of struggles between capital and labor on the one hand and competition among capitalists on the other. It is the particular constellation of struggle and competition that shapes managerial strategies and leads to the introduction of new forms of

ALTERNATE ROUTES

control in the labor process. It is only in this way that we can begin to explain why Taylorism or mechanization are introduced in different places at different times. Moreover, such changes have had the effect of reorganizing struggle and competition and hence to further changes in the labor process. At the same time one should not make the mistake of regarding the managerial class or managerial group within a single firm as a monolithic entity. It is itself composed of different levels (shop floor, middle and top management) as well as different fractions (departments) which compete with each other with immediate effects on the organization of work.

In avoiding the study of changing patterns of competition and struggle Braverman has difficulty in developing an adequate notion of the periodization of the capitalist labor process. What he offers is the coincidence of the emergence of monopoly capitalism, Taylorism and the scientific-technical revolution. However, it is by no means clear that they all occurred at once. Rather it has to be posed as a question for historical research as to when Taylorism and mechanization appeared and where and how their timing related to the rise of the large corporation. To do this it is also necessary to have an adequate picture of the labor process prior to the rise of the large corporation, that is the labor process under competitive capitalism. At best Braverman presents a false comparison between monopoly capitalism as characterized by the systematic separation of conception and execution and competitive capitalism as the lost paradise of craft autonomy. Obviously neither picture is adequate even as an approximation.

The transition from competitive to monopoly capitalism refers to the emergence of the "monopoly" sector of the large corporations. What was the nature of the labor process during this transitional phase and to what extent was the labor process itself responsible for the

capital and so on, that Offe, Habermas, O'Connor, Mandel, Castells and others find the sources of various crises. While this is no place to enter into a discussion of their studies, it is important to note that it is in the analysis of the conditions of existence of capitalism, how it persists, how it is at all possible that Braverman offers nothing and thereby gives the impression of the permanence of capitalism.

The alternative to Braverman's expressive totality is to examine how the different parts of a social formation are functionally inter-related to ensure its continuity over time. Moreover, in pursuing such a "reproduction" analysis one can also explore the reproduction of contradictions that are inherent in the social formation. One is led to view parts not merely as expressions of a single dominant principle but, in addition, as possessing a certain coherence and logic of their own. However, just as Braverman's critique, as reflected in the expressive totality, is by itself inadequate so the reproduction analysis of the structured totality is equally unsatisfactory in that it disguises itself in some neutral garb without posing the problem and potential of socialism.

5. Socialism

So what shall we mean by socialism? Braverman's notion of socialism stems from his point of critique and therefore involves the reunification of conception and execution. Although he vehemently denies it, his critique taken as it is from within capitalism leads in the direction of the resurrection of his lost paradise of the craft worker. Perhaps it might have been more useful if Braverman had distinguished between the reunification of conception and execution at the individual level - job control - and at the collective level. The latter notion is more compatible with the idea of society in which history is made consciously through a genuine collective organization

ALTERNATE ROUTES

of production, distribution and consumption.

Braverman's somewhat limited vision of socialism is linked to his notion of technology as neutral. It is in connection with the role of forces of production in the development of capitalism and the transition to socialism that Braverman rejects critical theory at its most powerful and embraces orthodoxy at its weakest. Although there are places which suggest the opposite, he tends to argue that there is nothing inherent in capitalist technology and machines which prevents the realization of socialism. To the contrary, with a few exceptions such as the assembly line, advanced capitalist machines can be harnessed to relations of production under socialism. Capitalist relations of production make themselves in the factory not through the imperatives of machine technology but through the organization of relations around machines. This view is at odds with a stream of thought associated with critical theory, that capitalist machines themselves embody capitalist relations of production; they themselves carry with them technical imperatives incompatible with the notion of emancipatory work. Thus, for Marcuse socialism must inaugurate its own technology and machinery and not import that which is most advanced under capitalism.

Having said that, then we can no longer assert that the major contradiction and developmental tendency of capitalism rests in the expansion of the forces of production. To the contrary under such view the forces of production rather than undermining the relations of production, reinforce those relations. In Marxist literature this is now a common place observation.

6. The Specificity of Capitalism in the United States

Labor and Monopoly Capital is a product of a particular time and place. It reflects the very real power of capital in the United States during the third quarter of the twentieth century. But this domination

of capital is not something to be taken as given but, as I have already suggested, its presuppositions should themselves become the object of study. Indeed, the more powerful that domination appears to be, the more important it is to unmask it, to reveal its premises and to place it in its political and economic context. In other words we must examine the specificity of capitalism in the United States - its origins, development and reproduction - rather than projecting its attributes as the attributes of the capitalist mode of production in general. There are a number of conventional explanations for the distinctive strength of capital in the United States. The supposed absence of a feudal mode of production also meant the absence of what Gramsci referred to as viscous sedimentations that might resist capitalist hegemony. The corporate liberal thesis argues for the existence of an enlightened bourgeoisie, constituted during the Progressive Era, which cemented the dominant classes and organized the incorporation of the working classes. Other theories focus on the open frontier or the successive waves of immigrants that divided the working class into antagonistic ethnic and racial segments thus facilitating the domination of capital.

Here I want to suggest an alternative approach which might be of more use in understanding the specificity of the labor process in the United States. The critical factor, I would suggest, in shaping the development of the labor process in different capitalist social formations is the relative timing of unionization and mechanization. In contrast to the United States, where mechanization preceded large scale unionization, in Britain mechanization could only proceed in the face of powerful resistance presented by an already organized working class. Indeed, to this day workers on the shop floor are more militant and exercise a greater control over the labor process than

ALTERNATE ROUTES

their counterparts in the United States who never built a strong trade union movement to resist mechanization. In exploring the relative timing of unionization and mechanization one is examining the specific constellation of competition and struggle as it shapes the development of the labor process. In this way one can begin to explain variations in the labor process over time both within and between different countries. Rather than attributing variations to positions on a continuum of becoming or to some spiritual lag we explore the very real political and economic forces that determine variations in the labor process and in this way gain a sense of the limits of the possible and the conditions for the transcendence of capitalism.