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Marxist Thought and the Analysis of Work

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Marx was anything but a detached academic observer of the world of work: he was passionately engaged in the struggles of the emergent labor movements within, and against, the new capitalist society in which wage-labor was becoming the dominant form of work. As he famously declared, the task was not only to interpret the world but to change it. The unity of theory and practice was to be a fundamental maxim of all variants of Marxism—of which there were many—and hence intellectual and political controversies were intermingled. The writings by, and about, Marx are voluminous. In a short overview it would be impossible to reference every argument; the reader is advised to seek more detailed information elsewhere (for example, Bottomore and Rubel 1956; Lichtheim 1961; Tucker 1961; Giddens 1971; McLellan 1971; Howard and King 1976). Like most great thinkers of the nineteenth century, he aspired to a comprehensive understanding of all areas of social life. Few sociologists writing about work—at least if their writings are in any way interesting—can have failed to be influenced in some degree by ideas and interpretations derived from Marx. But this chapter does not aspire to offer a comprehensive survey of such influences. Any brief discussion of the relevance of Marx to the analysis of work is bound to be selective.

According to one biographer (Wheen 1999: 5), 'Karl Marx was a philosopher, a historian, an economist, a linguist, a literary critic and a revolutionist'. This catalogue does not include sociology; an earlier analyst (Lefebvre 1968: 22) asserted that 'Marx is not a sociologist', insisting however that 'there is a sociology in Marx'. Marx was a social theorist (had the term social scientist existed in English in his lifetime he might

well have embraced it), but at the same time a political activist, and neither aspect of his achievements (and perhaps his failures) can be understood in isolation from the other.

It is common to speak of 'Marxism'. The label might imply an integrated, consistent, and systematic body of thought. Many of Marx's followers (as well, often, as his detractors) assumed that such an integrated theoretical system existed. Were that the case, it would be easy to outline the implications of Marxist thought for the analysis of work and to identify (according to tastes) its strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately, exploring Marxist thought involves many difficulties. 'Moi, je ne suis pas marxiste,' was the famous and irritated rejoinder by Marx to French admirers towards the end of his life.¹ There is no unambiguous body of thought called Marxism; and most of those who have called themselves Marxists have fashioned a selective vision which has matched their own circumstances and objectives. The meaning of Marxism varies, often markedly, according to time, place, and political affiliation.

Why is this? First, uniquely among social theorists, Marx's theories inspired a mass movement. They became the dominant point of reference for most European social-democratic parties in the late nineteenth century, were firmly embraced by the Russian Bolsheviks, and after the 1917 revolutions were inscribed in the programs of the communist parties created around the world. As different political factions fought for supremacy, so the heritage of Marx became an object of contest. All too often, 'Marxism' became ossified as dogma: an ironical fate for a theorist for whom *criticism*—initially of idealist political philosophy, subsequently of bourgeois political economy—was a driving principle of thought. In the twentieth-century states which tendentiously claimed Marx as their inspiration, to be a heretic at the wrong time and in the wrong place could bring imprisonment or even death—not a risk faced by those with unorthodox interpretations of Durkheim or Weber.

Marx's written output was immense. The 'official' communist publication of an English edition of the collected works of Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels, which commenced in 1975, encompasses fifty volumes (forty-nine of which had appeared when this chapter was written). In the first volume the editors wrote that Marx and Engels 'were the authors of an integrated body of philosophical, economic and social-political views, the ideology of communism...'. This is a travesty of the truth. One may debate whether their writings constituted an ideology

¹ For a critical note on the misuse of this quotation see Draper 1978: 5–11.

(this is partly a question of definition) and, more importantly, whether the orthodox communist parties of the latter twentieth century were recognizably Marxist in their theory or practice. Some have questioned how far Engels (and writers like the 'father of Russian Marxism', Plekhanov)—who in the years after Marx died in 1883 did much to 'systematize' his theories in a manner which suppressed many of their complexities—really worked on the same wavelength. One writer (Bender 1975) has referred to a 'betrayal of Marx' initiated by Engels and continued by Lenin and his successors. A similar argument has been developed more recently by Desai (2002). On the specific issue of the interaction of productive systems, managerial authority, and worker subordination, Avineri (1968: 235–8) has suggested that Engels imposed a form of technological determinism on the much more complex conceptions of Marx himself. In any event, there is a vast literature giving many different interpretations of 'what Marx really meant'.

Born in 1818, Marx lived through an epoch of immense social, economic, and political transformation. After beginning a law degree in Bonn he moved to Berlin and Jena to study philosophy, joining the iconoclastic 'Young Hegelian' circle. In 1843 his political radicalism took him into exile in Paris and Brussels; after returning briefly to Germany he moved again to France, then settled in England in 1849. His intensive studies of political economy in the British Museum ran in parallel with his vehement engagement with the fevered controversies of European revolutionaries, particularly after the formation of the 'First International' in 1864. Three years afterwards the first volume of his magnum opus, *Das Kapital*, was published. A second volume appeared just after Marx died and a third, far from complete, a decade later. It is now clear that this massive enterprise was only the first of six projected studies, which were to encompass not only capital but landed property, wage labor, the state, international trade, and the world market (Nicolaus 1973: 53–5). This was almost certainly an impossible objective; in any case Marx suffered serious illness from the early 1870s and never accomplished more than a fraction of his intellectual ambitions. But he left volumes of unpublished notebooks, a mass of correspondence, many years of newspaper articles, and a range of publications ranging from complex theoretical explorations to heated polemics.

As an activist striving to make sense of revolutionary events, Marx was never static in his theories: whether or not one accepts a dichotomy between a 'young Marx' and an old, there were certainly shifts in perspective which have allowed posterity to erect many different models of

'Marxism'. His analysis evolved and his emphases varied, partly according to the issues addressed, partly according to the nature of immediate political and polemical debates, partly because he was living through such revolutionary times. Some of his most quoted arguments were in works designed to rally mass support, such as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* written with Engels in 1848; for dramatic effect, many of the nuances of analysis which he provided elsewhere were omitted. As a combatant in the internecine struggles of emigré revolutionaries, Marx also presented many of his ideas in letters and pamphlets, typically marked by the enthusiasm (and ill temper) of the moment. More than a century later, it is often impossible to be confident which judgments were hasty and ephemeral, which were more soundly considered.

For the modern social theorist another crucial problem is that Marx's most powerful ideas involved a high level of abstraction. Of his massive intellectual project, what he came closest to completing was his study of the dynamics of the production and exchange of value within capitalism, often conceptualized in terms barely comprehensible to English-speaking empiricists. Hence as Nichols and Beynon have pointed out (1977: viii), 'much of what passes for "theory" (even Marxist theory) fails to connect with the lives that people lead'. To move from this abstract focus to exploring the concrete realities of work (though this too was certainly of key importance for Marx) involves a shift of several gears. Add to this the fact that capitalist manufacturing was still an emergent system when Marx wrote (in Britain, the 'first industrial nation', the small workshop rather than the factory predominated, while the largest single occupational group comprised domestic servants), and the difficulties of applying his ideas to modern times are considerable. Some disciples have argued that all the key elements of the present can be found in germ in Marx's writings, and he was indeed prescient enough to make this notion not wholly ridiculous; but Marx was not a prophet, and when he did act as such he was often wrong. Moreover, his emphasis on class led him to neglect, or underemphasize, other societal features such as gender or ethnicity which sociologists today would surely highlight. Applying his ideas to the world of work in the twenty-first century allows, and requires, considerable scope for imaginative extrapolation. This means in particular that if Marxism is to be set to work by sociologists today, it must be complemented by theories and insights which are not distinctively Marxist. And the question then arises: do such additions sustain, or undermine, what was integral to Marx's analysis? For example (to take a question to which I will return), is the work of Foucault in principle compatible with

Marxism, a potential source of enrichment, or does it negate Marx's fundamental insights? There can be no innocent answer to such a question.

1. Marx at Work

Given the existence of a variety of possible Marxisms, and the imprecise boundaries between what is and is not Marxist thought, any catalogue of the 'key' elements of Marxist theory is bound to be idiosyncratic. Nevertheless the following themes would be widely regarded as of central importance.

First, Marx was a materialist. He contested the view prevailing within early nineteenth-century German philosophy that ideas, beliefs, and moral values possessed a timeless quality and could be viewed as the driving force of history; on the contrary, he insisted, they were the products of circumstance, of time and place. More fundamentally, he argued that people's practical activity in securing their physical existence—producing food and shelter, caring for children—and the social relationships created through such activities, shaped their ideas and understandings. 'Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life,' he wrote with Engels in *The German Ideology*; 'consciousness is from the very beginning a social product'.

In its starkest expression, this materialist perspective took the form of *economic determinism*. Many of his writings were determinist in the sense that they stressed the 'external coercive laws' driving human behavior, in ways which seemed to leave little or no space for deliberate choice and influence. This determinism was economic in that the system of property ownership and the organization of production were seen as the causal force behind 'the social, political, and intellectual life process in general'—a relationship at times expressed in the metaphor of 'base' and 'superstructure'. Occasionally Marx's approach seemed to involve, more narrowly, a kind of *technological determinism*: the 'forces' of production (which included not only physical machinery but also the available repertoire of skills and scientific understanding) shaped the more general 'relations' of production. Famously (or notoriously), Marx wrote in *The Poverty of Philosophy* that 'the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist'.

Often, however, Marx was far more cautious. Economic (or technological) causation was decisive only 'in the final instance' (as Engels later put it); in any given situation, political, legal, and ideological factors could exert their own autonomous influence. Such a cautious formulation

clearly weakens the force of the arguments of some critics that Marx totally neglected the extent to which political institutions or beliefs and values could shape the course of history, but by the same token also weakens the predictive power of the 'materialist conception of history'. Nor did Marx always stress the external coercion of social forces: repeatedly he pointed to the *interaction* between material context and the conscious interventions of social actors. The much quoted opening of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* insists that 'people make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'.

Determinism is qualified in much of Marx's writing by his emphasis on *contradiction*. He insisted that any society—whether local, national, or global—could only be adequately understood as a totality. No area of social life can be properly comprehended in isolation (as is presumed by the creation of demarcated social science disciplines); social phenomena are interrelated, so that work, politics, law, family have to be analyzed in terms of their interconnections. Yet in no way did Marx regard societies as harmoniously integrated systems; on the contrary, institutions inherited from the past could prove 'fetters' inhibiting dynamism elsewhere; while the logic of one set of social relations could be incompatible with those prevailing in another. For example, traditional bonds of hierarchical authority in the political system or the family were completely at odds with the principles of a market society in which buyers and sellers met at least notionally as equals, however unequal in reality their power might be. Indeed the capitalist employer might exert as much, or even more control over the workforce than did the feudal lord; but whereas the latter had often tended to accept some responsibility for the welfare of those subject to his rule, such principles of *noblesse oblige* were less likely to operate in the 'free' labor market where competition drove even well-meaning employers to treat waged workers as disposable resources.

The disjuncture between different institutional elements of nineteenth-century societies was for Marx the key explanation of the revolutionary transformations which preoccupied all social analysts of the time. As the *Communist Manifesto* declared, 'the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. . . . Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. . . . All that is solid melts into air.'

The existence of contradictory forces helped to negate any crude determinism in Marx's analysis: precisely because different social and economic developments pointed in different directions, there was scope for human choice to make a difference in terms of outcomes. It was because Marx identified irresolvable contradictions within the capitalist system which was coming to dominate the world that he predicted its own collapse. Yet here too there was a tension in his analysis: was the transition (perhaps violent) from capitalism to socialism an objective inevitability? At times Marx said precisely this. But in this case, by what logic did Marx endure hardships for much of his life in working for revolution, and why were others subsequently prepared to risk their lives for the cause? Conversely, if the socialist revolution required active mass commitment and skilled political leadership, how could it be considered inevitable? Many (probably most) twentieth-century Marxists were to argue that without effective political intervention by the labor movement (or more specifically, the revolutionary party), capitalist contradictions might lead not to socialism but to new, more barbaric, social and political 'solutions': fascism was one example, and some would see the current brutalities of global capitalism as another. Hence is Marxism really a 'predictive theory' (Edwards 1986; Thompson 1990) whereby analysis of the contradictions of capitalism is inseparable from the scenario of socialist revolution? Undeniably this defines the unity of Marx's own thought and action, at least in many of his works; but there is no logical inconsistency in endorsing much of what Marx wrote as social analyst without embracing Marx as prophet.

2. The Context of Work under 'Modern Industry': Capitalism and Class

A central element in Marxist analysis was the importance of *class*. 'The history of all previously existing society is the history of class struggles,' wrote Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

The distinctive feature of class society in the nineteenth century, in their view, was a weakening of the moral cement which held previous societies

together through a reciprocal web of rights and obligations, and a more overt clash of material interests between workers dependent on their wages for their existence and employers whose own success depended on reducing costs and maximizing profits. The transparency of class antagonism would inevitably bring an increasingly concerted and confident resistance which would result in the creation of a new, socialist (or communist—at that time the terms were often interchangeable) society.

What exactly is meant by class? The word itself derives from the census categories applied in ancient Rome; and classification of social groups according to key common attributes has been familiar ever since. Ownership (or lack) of different types of property was always an important criterion, but in precapitalist societies so also were noneconomic attributes of status. Marx (unlike Weber) assumed that within capitalism, the latter would lose their significance; and also that there would be an increasing polarization between 'two great camps': the bourgeoisie who owned and controlled the means of production, and the proletariat who in order to live were obliged to work for wages; intermediate classes would increasingly be subsumed within the one or the other. However we may note ambiguities in his treatment. Despite the vital role of class in his analysis and in his political interventions, Marx never offered a systematic theory. It is an irony that the incomplete third volume of *Capital*, published more than a decade after his death, ends with a chapter 'On Classes' which breaks off after two pages. Yet here Marx speaks of 'wage-laborers, capitalists and landowners' as the 'three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production': an interesting contrast to his thesis elsewhere of a polarization into two classes. In other of his writings, when discussing the political dynamics of specific countries, he often stressed the distinctive position of such groups as the peasantry or the petty bourgeoisie, and the different interests of financial and industrial capitalists. Perhaps what unites Marx's approach despite such differences is his insistence that class involves a *relationship*. Societies are not simply hierarchically stratified, which is what many sociologists have meant when using the concept of class; it is the conflicts and alliances between different economic groups which give them a social meaning and identity, bridging the 'objective' and 'subjective' dimensions of class structure.²

² There is not space in this chapter to discuss historical approaches to social theory at work; but here one should note two very different applications of Marxist analysis to the early formation of the working class in Britain, both stressing the social relationships involved: Foster (1974) and Thompson (1963).

A crucial difference between Marx's approach to class and that of Weber is his emphasis on production as the primary dynamic of social relationships. This is, no doubt, one consideration which has made Marxism attractive to students of work and employment (and, conversely, has encouraged Marxists to focus on this field of research). As was seen above, an important element in his analysis was the thesis that any specific economic system—or mode of production—was constituted by an interaction between the 'forces of production' (which comprised not only technical hardware but also skills and scientific knowledge) and 'relations of production' (for example, patterns of ownership and the division of labor). Class relations were shaped by—but could in turn redefine—this material-institutional matrix. Most famously, Marx as activist insisted that in creating and oppressing a growing class of propertyless workers—proletarians—capitalism was constructing the force that would destroy it. As the *Communist Manifesto* resolutely declared, 'what the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, is its own gravediggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.' The first volume of *Capital* ends with a similarly ringing prediction of the overthrow of capitalism by 'the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production'. We will return to this core aspect of Marx's work in a later section.³

3. The Fetishism of Commodities

For Marx, a defining characteristic of the capitalist mode of production was the predominance of commodity production. What does this mean? That even though, for Marx, production is the basic process in any economic system, under capitalism its conduct is subordinated to the dynamics of market exchange. In all societies of which historical records exist, markets played some role, initially through barter, subsequently also through the medium of money. But before capitalism, many products

³ As I was completing this chapter I came across a contribution by Gall, who kindly provides a definition of my current position. Readers should be aware that the basis is a one-page handout I prepared for a 20-minute talk. Be that as it may, Gall insists (2003: 318–19) that one of 'three indispensable elements which are missing from Hyman's conceptualization of Marxism' is that 'a social class exists which is the potential "gravedigger" of capitalism'. Let us note that Marx actually wrote not of potential but of inevitability. It is possible to be sceptical of this prophetic core of Marx—and some of the reasons for scepticism are discussed below—while accepting the value and validity of much of the corpus of his work.

were directly consumed by the collective group (extended family, local community) involved in their production, or were directly exchanged for other products (so much flour for so much woollen cloth, for example). Money of course existed from ancient times, but the money economy encompassed only a minor proportion of total productive activity. Capitalism expanded this proportion enormously: market exchange, and market calculation, came to dominate relations of production. And this reversed the causal relationships: previously, a tailor, miller, or blacksmith produced their goods, then took the products to market if there was not an immediate consumer to hand; now, increasingly, the price obtaining in the market determined whether the product would be made at all. And this was also because, under capitalism, the dominant form of production was no longer by independent artisans or farmers who owned their own tools and (in the latter case) land but by wageworkers employed by a capitalist who owned the means of production and whose priority was to achieve a profit on this capital.

Marx distinguished two faces of any product, a distinction fundamental to capitalism. The first was its utility, or use value. This was a quality independent of the economic system: things in every society were made because they were useful (a concept to be understood broadly: art and culture may not be 'useful' in a narrow sense but contribute to human welfare). The second was exchange value (often simply termed value), the price that a product would attain in the market.

While markets, as indicated above, existed in precapitalist societies, production was not normally driven by considerations of the price which a product would fetch as a commodity. But under capitalism, exchange value became more important a factor in driving the economic system than use value. If poor people needed shoes or houses, but could not pay for them, they would not be produced; conversely, luxury commodities with little intrinsic utility would be produced if the rich were willing to pay the price. More than this: increasingly, the measure of any object or activity became its price ticket. From this insight, Marx developed the notion of the 'fetishism of commodities'. A fetish was an object which so-called 'primitive' people constructed and then regarded as a god. For Marx, exactly the same occurred with commodities in capitalist society. A carpenter produces a table, a tailor produces a pair of trousers, but each regards what they produce primarily as the equivalent of the money they will obtain in the market. The social relationship between people with different skills and capacities is turned into a 'fantastic relation between things': so many tables are the equivalent of so many pairs of

trousers, as if their price in the market is a reflection of qualities intrinsic to their existence as tables and as trousers, rather than the outcome of far broader social relations of production and hence cumulatively of the activities of those involved in their production and consumption. The market becomes regarded, not as an institution which is socially created, but as a force independent of human intermediation.

4. The Duality of Labor and the Rediscovery of the Labor Process

Classical political economy confronted a puzzle: how can value expand if all products are exchanged at their value, which is how markets are assumed to operate? Many writers before Marx had identified labor as the creative process which generated what would later be called economic growth; yet if workers were paid the value of their labor, where did profits come from? The solution, Marx argued in Volume 1 of *Capital* (as noted above, the only one he completed), can be grasped only by analyzing the ambiguous character of labor itself. Under capitalism the typical worker is an employee, performing work for an employer and receiving in return a wage or salary. At first sight, what is involved is an exchange (in the 'labor market') between work and wages. Not so, insisted Marx. Rarely is a worker employed to perform a precise set of tasks which can be specified in detail in advance. Rather, what workers sell through the contract of employment is their *ability* to work—as Marx termed it, their 'labor power'—thereby authorizing the employer to set them to work and to assume ownership of whatever they produce.

Marx argued (to simplify a complex story) that the (exchange) value of the commodity which workers sold, their labor power, reflected the socially recognized standard of living for a particular type of worker. The use value of their labor power—the value added by their work to the materials and machinery provided by the employer—was typically greater, perhaps much greater, generating what Marx termed surplus value. Hence the explanation of capitalist expansion was to be found in the 'hidden abode' of production. And just as there was a dualism in the character of labor, so there was in the function of the capitalist employer. On the one hand, the latter performed a productive role in coordinating what became an increasingly complex organization involving the interaction of numerous workers with differentiated tasks and competences; but, on the other, to survive and prosper it was necessary to increase the amount of surplus

which workers produced, in the face of their own resistance. This necessitated a coercive apparatus of supervision and control.

How could employers—competing against each other—maximize the proportion of surplus value in their production? One method was to increase the number of hours worked by employees. But at the time when Marx was writing, this option was being restricted in England both by legislative rules (though these contained many loopholes) and by workers' own collective resistance through trade unions. A second was to cut wages; at times Marx seemed to suggest that 'immiseration', in an absolute sense, was integral to the dynamic of capitalism. But there were many ambiguities in his discussion, and here too he recognized that unions could make wage cutting difficult (and by implication, that expectations of rising subsistence standards could actually lead to *higher* wages). A third was to make labor more productive, either by mechanization or by managerial pressure (or both). A fourth was to displace more skilled, and more expensive labor by less qualified and cheaper workers, partly again through mechanization and partly through the subdivision of tasks (an approach previously identified by Adam Smith).

In volume 1 of *Capital* Marx analyzed what he termed the *labor process*. Workers' productive activity was the way in which their labor power was consumed by the employer in order to create use-values, and at one and the same time a process of creating surplus value (a 'valorization process'), 'which, for the capitalist, has all the charms of something created out of nothing'. Marx explored this process in detail in notes apparently intended to form part of *Capital* but not published until the 1930s (and in English, only in the 1970s). Here, he argued that the development of capitalism displayed a qualitative shift from an initial phase when work organization reflected precapitalist social relations—what Marx termed the 'formal subordination' (or as precise translations of the German rendered it, 'subsumption') of labor—to a process of 'real subordination', or 'capitalist production proper', in which the whole system of production is structured in order to minimize workers' autonomy and discretion and maximize the creation of surplus for the employer.

Labor process analysis exploded into English-language sociology of work in the 1970s with the publication of Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974). Central to Braverman's thesis was the 'degradation' of the labor process: the competitive forces always inherent in capitalism, but combined with the organizational power generated by modern monopoly capitalism, both required and enabled a cheapening of labor by the erosion of the skills which (in an era of 'formal

subordination') made key workers both relatively expensive and relatively autonomous. Twentieth-century capitalism attacked these surviving, essentially precapitalist forms of organization of the labor process. One weapon was mechanization and the division of labor, extolled by Adam Smith as the route to enhanced productivity (and thus surplus); another, closely related, was the 'Babbage principle', named after the early nineteenth-century advocate of the strategy of stripping craft labor of all ancillary tasks which might be adequately accomplished by lower-skilled, and cheaper workers. A twentieth-century approach highlighted by Braverman was the 'scientific management' propagated by F. W. Taylor, who called on employers to separate the design of the labor process ('conception') from its actual performance ('execution') in order to ensure the single most efficient technique and also to eliminate the discretion which enabled workers to determine their own pace and method of work, potentially as a means of resistance to employer authority.

Braverman did not claim to have developed a new theory of work under capitalism; rather, he argued (correctly) that Marx's analysis of the labor process had been largely neglected for much of the twentieth century. His objective was thus to restate this aspect of Marxism, and to set it to work to interpret the dynamics of management-worker relations in a very different economic context and within a very different occupational structure from when Marx wrote. In Britain, his study stimulated intense discussion of the labor process, first among Marxists (e.g. Brighton Labor Process Group 1977), then among sociologists of work more generally. A by-product was the series of annual labor process conferences which commenced in the early 1980s, and the succession of edited volumes which resulted. Some referred disparagingly to 'Bravermania'.⁴

Critical discussion of Braverman's account (among relatively early examples see Littler 1982 and Salaman 1986) focused in particular on two related issues: the inevitability of deskilling and the status of Taylorism as the 'ideal' management approach to labor. In both cases, a consequence was to stimulate extensive empirical research, by Marxists, non-Marxists, and anti-Marxists alike. Such research led in turn to increasing efforts to revise and reformulate labor process analysis in what became frequently a debate with, or often against, both Braverman and Marx (see, notably, Knights and Willmott 1990).

⁴ Today, a Google search for labor process will yield over two million results. Some references are obstetric in content, but most relate to the post-Braverman debate.

The deskilling issue arose in the context of what, in the 1970s, was still very much 'new' technology, or as Braverman termed it, the 'scientific-technical revolution'. In his view, the application to industrial production of computer technology enabled the definitive separation of conception from execution, to a degree impossible in practice when devised in principle by Taylor and his successors. As Braverman added in a concluding chapter, 'A Final Note on Skill', existing trends were confusing: technological change was indeed creating some new skills—though in his view, many of these might prove precarious—but on balance the erosion of many traditional skills was the dominant tendency. Critics argued, first, that Braverman offered an idealized account of traditional craft work, and failed to appreciate the complex character of skill. This was only partly correct: an important element of his argument was that much work traditionally viewed as unskilled in fact required considerable experience and learned capacity, and that occupations of this kind were particularly vulnerable to 'new technology'. The second objection was that the transformation of work in the late twentieth century actually involved, on balance, an 'upskilling' of labor. The strong version of this argument was that in what would today be called the 'knowledge economy', enhanced education and training were more extensively required than in the past. The weaker version was that 'tacit skills' remained important in any kind of labor process: electronics could never displace human discretion, and in some respects the introduction of expensive hardware and software made employers even more dependent on workers' initiative when systems failed.

How should one evaluate this debate? Noon and Blyton (2002: ch. 6) provide a useful overview, and I will not attempt to cover the same ground here. One key issue concerns levels of generalization and abstraction. As Armstrong has insisted (1988: 157), Braverman (like Marx himself) 'regarded the deskilling tendencies of technical change as a system-wide dynamic which could, temporarily and locally, be interrupted or reversed'. Technological innovation inevitably creates a need for new competences which are initially in short supply, as was the case with the invention of the computer, or the typewriter more than half a century earlier; but such competences tend rapidly to become routinized and devalued. Also at issue is the relationship between the notions of, and evidence for, 'deskilling' and 'degradation'. The notion of skill can encompass the range of competences required in a specific occupation; the degree of training and experience necessary for effective performance; the amount of judgment and discretion routinely exercised (with the benchmark provided by 'the

unity of conception and execution'); and the relative scarcity of these capacities. In treating 'craft mastery' as the paradigm of skill, Braverman assumed perhaps too easily that these elements were typically complementary; whereas much subsequent literature has focused on the disjunctures between them.

Much empirical work in the Marxist tradition (see the studies in Pollert 1991) has explored the ambiguities inherent in occupational change since Braverman wrote, but has also endorsed the broad sweep of his argument. Smith and Thompson (1998: 554) summarize the essence of most 'new work systems' as the creation of 'an enlarged number of interchangeable tasks carried out by interchangeable labour'. What recent research has also emphasized is evidence of a contradictory combination of work intensification and new areas of employee responsibility: what in management-speak is 'empowerment' is more accurately described as degradation through stress. This contradiction is perhaps especially evident in service work, which Braverman (like Marx) discussed, but relatively briefly; this large but extremely heterogeneous category of employment has attracted substantial empirical and theoretical scrutiny within the framework of labor process analysis. An important addition to the analytical repertoire is the concept of emotional labor (Hochschild 1979, 1983): the constraints on (typically female) workers, from shop assistants to nurses to airline cabin crew, to sustain a facial expression, form of address, and body language pleasing to the client or customer. Such behavior represents in some respects a distinctive skill, but its enforced production can be viewed more fundamentally as a form of degradation. It is interesting to note that in her initial article on 'emotion work', Hochschild made no reference to Marx and drew primarily on the interactionist social psychology of Goffman; in her subsequent book she commenced with a reference to *Capital* and made Marx's analysis of alienation an important point of reference. This is another indication of the imprecise boundaries between Marxist and non-Marxist sociology.

The debate over Braverman's focus on 'scientific management' connects to that over de-skilling but raises more fundamental issues. In effect, Braverman agreed with Taylor that there was 'one best way' for the employer to organize the labor process in order to maximize surplus value, and this involved the elimination of employee discretion and the imposition of 'scientific' controls over performance. This perspective links directly to the fact that he intentionally made 'no attempt . . . to deal with the modern working class on the level of its consciousness, organization, or activities' (1974: 26-7); and also perhaps to an exaggerated conception of

the disciplining capacity of innovative technology.⁵ Yet if there is no foolproof technological shortcut to the translation of labor power into profitable production, 'real subordination' can never be fully achieved (Cressy and MacInnes 1980); hence 'at some level workers' cooperation, creative and productive powers, and consent must be engaged and mobilized' (Thompson 1990: 101). Put differently, workers' capacity to resist and disrupt cannot be wholly eliminated and therefore requires in addition more subtle countermeasures. Management strategy necessarily involves a *dialectic* between capital and labor: an attempt by employers to impose control while still evoking consent, with both elements of this contradictory set of objectives conditioned by the actual and potential recalcitrance of their employees.

From this understanding—certainly not inconsistent with much that Marx wrote on the contradictory dynamics of capitalism, even if at odds with his (and Braverman's) somewhat unilinear reading of the evolution of the labor process—have stemmed many attempts to explore a diversity of managerial strategies and their evolution over time. An early, binary classification was provided by Friedman (1977) who argued that capitalism tended to divide workers between a comparatively privileged segment enjoying relative job security and a measure of task discretion, benefits dependent on their 'voluntary' compliance with managerial objectives; and a more vulnerable segment subject to oppressive discipline. The 'responsible autonomy' of the former was reinforced by the risk of falling into the latter category, whose insecurity was matched by subjection to the 'direct control' of the employer. This analysis can be seen as a precursor of the notion of the 'flexible firm' proposed by Atkinson (1985).

Other writers in the Marxist tradition have attempted to periodize changes between different modes of labor control. For example, Edwards (1979) suggests (like Braverman) a historical evolution in management strategies, largely on the basis of US experience. In the early phase of industrial capitalism, the typical mode was arbitrary, authoritarian 'simple control'; more sophisticated forms of work organization in the twentieth century resulted in 'technical control', in which the system of production itself (notably, the assembly line) imposed its own disciplines; subsequently, when confronted with the rise of worker collectivism, employers

⁵ In Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx accepted the accuracy of Andrew Ure's remark, with reference to technological innovation in cotton-spinning in the early nineteenth century, that 'when capital enlists science into her service, the refractory hand of labor will always be taught docility'. Yet contrary to the expectations of both Marx and Ure, relatively skilled and highly paid male spinners were not displaced by cheaper female workers when new 'self-acting' machinery was introduced (Lazonick 1979).

introduced a system of partially negotiated 'bureaucratic control'. In a later work of which he was a coauthor (Gordon et al. 1982), there is an ambitious attempt to relate the evolution of forms of labor management to long-wave changes in 'social structures of accumulation'. Much subsequent critique, however, has argued the limitations of such ideal-typical classifications as instruments for analyzing changes over time as well as differentiations both within and between societies. The same criticisms have often been made of Burawoy (1979, 1985), whose work is in some respects nevertheless sophisticated in combining both cross-national and historical analysis. While he also offers a simple distinction—between 'despotic' and 'hegemonic' regimes, and a possible synthesis of the two in an era of intensified global competition—a crucial element in his work is the exploration of the contradictory dynamics of coercion and consent: in his terms, the need for capital simultaneously to secure and to obscure the production of surplus value. We may note, in passing, that some of the studies which have built critically on such contributions have evident affinities with recent 'varieties of capitalism' writings (for example, Hall and Soskice 2001) which focus on the cross-national institutional structuring of a diversity of modes of labor management. As Smith and Thompson have suggested (1998: 563–70), such non-(and often anti-) Marxist approaches can in principle offer a valuable complement to Marxist analysis of the labor process. Such complementarity can be found, for example, in the wide-ranging historical and cross-national study by Tilly and Tilly, who link Marxism to other varieties of interactionist and institutionalist analysis in order to explore 'the triad of compensation, commitment and coercion' in the world of work (1998: 3)

Another development in labor process analysis is less readily compatible. Criticisms of Braverman's neglect of 'subjectivity' coincided with the accelerating impact on English-speaking sociologists of the work of Foucault, and in particular his *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Whether or not Foucault's explorations of the dynamics of power and discipline in prison and workplace should be seen as a negation of Marx, many of those who have applied his work to labor process analysis (for an early example see Knights and Willmott 1989) have explicitly rejected Marxism. There are some potential complementarities, however. Marx wrote of the 'barrack-like discipline' inherent in the new factory system:

[I]n the factory code, the capitalist formulates his autocratic power over his workers like a private legislator. . . . This code is merely the capitalist caricature of the social regulation of the labor process which becomes necessary in co-operation on a large

scale and in the employment in common of instruments of labor, and especially of machinery. The overseer's book of penalties replaces the slave-driver's lash.

Marsden (1999), in his meticulously researched comparison of the theoretical writings of Marx and Foucault, insists not only that the two are compatible but that their analytical complementarities are so strong that each illuminates the complexities of the other. In terms of empirical research, the influential account by Sewell and Wilkinson (1992: 283) of the 'electronic Panopticon' imposing 'surveillance systems using computer-based technology' could in principle be read as a modern elaboration of Marx's analysis.

Typically, however, such approaches mark a sharp break with Marxism in at least four respects. First, they often merely reverse the objective/subjective disjuncture criticized in Braverman: an exaggerated emphasis on linguistic and discursive practices is disconnected from the macrosocial and institutional dynamics in which they are embedded. Second, there is commonly a one-sided focus on the individualization of human subjects, neglecting the degree to which production is necessarily a social and collective process. Third, the production of 'docile bodies' is often treated as unproblematic for modern capitalism: it is assumed that the contradictions inherent in any strategy to maintain both control and consent have now been transcended. Fourth, while the some of the language of labor process analysis may be retained, it is emptied of content: 'any distinctive features of the relations between capital and labor in the workplace or larger political economy are largely set aside' (Smith and Thompson 1998: 563).⁸ This is to reduce the labor process to a decorative label, innocent of theoretical meaning or purchase.

8. Collectivism, Control, and Resistance

'The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Proletarians of all countries, unite!' The ringing conclusion of the *Communist Manifesto* is commonly regarded as the crystallization of Marx's analysis of the world of work, and ever since it has inspired an important

⁸ Kelly (1985: 32) criticized Braverman, and the early literature which followed the publication of *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*, for neglecting the 'full circuit' of capitalist production and reducing capitalism to the labor process alone. This seems unfair to Braverman: he explicitly presented his study (1974: 11) as a corrective to twentieth-century Marxist analysis in which 'the critique of the mode of production gave way to the critique of capitalism as a mode of distribution'. But Kelly's objection clearly applies to most 'labor process' writing of more recent times.

stream of the labor movements which emerged in the following decades. In London he developed close links with many of the more politically advanced leaders of British craft unions, while maintaining relationships with many of the continental socialists involved in the creation of unions elsewhere in Europe; and these culminated in the formation in 1864 of the International Working Men's Association, later known as the 'First International', within which he played a dominant role throughout its turbulent existence (Collins and Abramsky 1965).

Yet somewhat surprisingly, Marx never produced an extended and systematic theoretical analysis of trade unionism and of workers' collective struggles more generally. A Marxist account can indeed be compiled from his numerous writings, and many have attempted to synthesize their insights (Hyman 1971; Kelly 1988); but most of what Marx wrote was colored by the immediate circumstances with which he was concerned, and the tactical polemics in which he was engaged. In consequence, as with so much of his work, many conflicting 'Marxist' theories may be proposed.

Central to Marx's analysis was the principle that capitalism itself organized workers collectively: the division of labor made them interdependent units in a collective production process—a 'collective laborer'; the factory gathered numerous workers together under a single roof; the slums and tenements of the rapidly expanding urban proletariat formed a seething new working-class community. Trade unionism gave this organic collectivity a formal character. Engels, in his *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, had written of the struggles of the early unions of cotton factory workers; and Marx drew on his account in 1847 in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, when he declared that 'large-scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. . . . The maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance—*combination*.'

Though the impetus to combination was economic, Marx largely discounted the economic potential of trade unions. While he did not accept the idea of an 'iron law of wages'—a thesis which is often attributed to him but was actually devised by Lassalle, whom Marx sharply criticized—he felt that capitalist competition imposed constant downwards pressure on workers' pay and conditions, which unions could only partially withstand. Yet the counterpart of unions' relative economic weakness was their potential political force. Engels had been impressed by the outbreak of strikes which, though usually defeated, served 'to nourish the bitter hatred of the workers against the property-holding class. . . . As schools of

war, the Unions are unexcelled.' Marx went on to draw a historical analogy between the combinations among the rising bourgeoisie which led eventually to a successful challenge to the feudal regime, and the emerging combinations of workers. 'That union, to attain which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their miserable highways, required centuries, the modern proletarians, thanks to railways, achieve in a few years.' The revolutionary upsurge across much of Europe in 1848, when the *Communist Manifesto* appeared, was seen as vindicating this analysis.

But the revolutionary wave ebbed, and much of Marx's subsequent writings suggested reasons why trade unionism failed to live up to his early expectations. One, particularly associated with Engels, was the argument that trade unionism primarily encompassed a 'labor aristocracy', relatively secure and advantaged groups of skilled workers, who did not identify their own interests with the working class more generally. Another, which Lenin would later elaborate, was that trade unionism was most firmly established in imperialist nations and that the profits from colonial exploitation allowed some of the benefits to 'trickle down' (as might be said today) to organized workers who underwent a process of 'embourgeoisement'.⁷ A third, also to be developed by Lenin in his theory of 'economism', was that trade unions tended to formulate their demands and to bargain—and on occasion fight—with employers on terrain shaped by the existing capitalist society. In terms used by Marx in 1865, unions were 'fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects'; in contradiction to his earlier prognosis, unions seemed more comfortable fighting economically within than politically against capitalism.

What can a modern student of industrial relations learn from Marx? At a time when union membership and effectiveness are in decline in almost all countries where unions were formerly strong, Allen's proposition (1966: 11) that 'wherever labour is freely bought and sold trade unionism is endemic, universal and permanent' seems less convincing than when he wrote almost four decades ago. Likewise, the falling levels of collective militancy in most countries entail that the thesis of Lane and Roberts (1971), that 'strikes are normal,' requires significant qualification.⁸

⁷ When Engels wrote to Marx in 1858 of an apparent trend in Britain towards the emergence of a 'bourgeois proletariat', this was an exasperated flight of rhetoric in no way consistent with Marxist class theory; a century later, the concept of 'embourgeoisement' was embraced far more seriously by some British sociologists.

⁸ The work of Kelly (1998) is important in offering an analytical model for the explanation of the *contingent* nature of collective resistance. Yet it is interesting that one of his core explanatory variables, the perception of injustice, was central to a previous, and not specifically Marxist historical comparison by Moore (1978).

Nevertheless, Marx retains his relevance in pointing to the omnipresent *potential* of collective resistance, since the employment relationship is inherently conflictual. Edwards (1986) developed the same theme in identifying a 'structured antagonism' between labor and capital. He terms his approach materialist but non-Marxist, and this is correct: not only because he rejects the inevitability of proletarian revolution (which, as suggested earlier, many of those who otherwise follow Marx have disputed), but also because his analysis of conflicting interests in the workplace is not embedded in a broader political economy of class relations. Even so, his emphasis on exploitation as central to the dynamic of capitalist production places him closer to Marx than is the case with a writer like Dahrendorf (1959), who defines 'class conflict' in Weberian terms as an outcome of hierarchical authority relations alone.

From this it follows that worker resistance is rational (Hyman 1989: ch. 5): there is no need for psychoanalysis to explain why workers strike, work to rule, take the odd day off, or disregard management instructions. Traditionally, Marxists have tended to document, analyze, and celebrate the apparent historical advance in the strength and cohesion of collective struggle, exploring the ways in which the point of production constitutes, in the words of Goodrich (1920)—not himself a Marxist—a 'frontier of control' over which workers and employers battled for supremacy.⁹ But in recent decades they have been forced to search for explanations for the *limits* to collective resistance. Four main arguments may be noted, in addition to those indicated above.

First, Marx himself was forced to recognize (in his 1847 lectures on *Wage-Labour and Capital*) that workers *do* have something to lose but their chains; or, to put it differently, though the relationship between capital and labor is exploitative it involves interdependence: 'so long as the wageworker is a wageworker his lot depends upon capital'. Hence workers are bound by 'golden chains'; and if the employment relationship appears precarious—as has been increasingly the case for many employees in recent times—its material advantages may dominate workers' attitudes and actions. As Desai has commented (2002: 65–6), the logic of Marx's own analysis appears to entail that 'if employability depends on high

⁹ As well as examining overt forms of collective action such as the strike, Marxists have also provided valuable analyses of 'hidden forms' of resistance, the term Cohen (1991: ch. 6) uses in his study of African workers. In developed industrial societies, Marxist writers some decades ago analyzed sabotage (Taylor and Walton 1971; Beynon 1973; Dubois 1979). Perhaps surprisingly, this theme seemed for a long time to have disappeared from the concerns of sociologists of work, but it has resurfaced under the guise of 'organizational misbehavior' (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999).

profitability, workers would want to *co-operate* with employers in keeping profits high'.

This connects with a second emphasis, on consciousness and ideology. When Marx began to write, capitalism was a novel social experiment which many believed soon would be reversed. Today, capitalism is hegemonic and alternatives to the capital-labor relationship are remote from popular imagination. Fighting the system thus commonly appears futile (though, significantly, some of the most substantial recent examples of mass resistance have been in the countries of the south and east where capitalism still represents a disruptive innovation). In consequence, conflict and resistance may themselves be self-limiting; a central theme of the work of Burawoy, mentioned above, was how workers' successes in imposing limits to the day-to-day exercise of managerial control could cement their assent to the basic structure of the capitalist employment relationship.

Third, Marxists have developed more sophisticated analyses than those of Marx or Lenin of the role of trade unions themselves in 'manufacturing consent'. At a theoretical level, Zoll (1976) has explored what he terms the 'dual character' of trade unionism: at one and the same time, unions disrupt capitalist exploitation and function as a source of social order which helps stabilize capitalist society.¹⁰ Detailed empirical accounts of this process, leading even militant trade union representatives to recognize limits to the possibility of resistance, were produced in studies in the 1970s by Beynon (1973) of the Ford Halewood car factory and by Nichols and Armstrong (1976) and Nichols and Beynon (1977) of the ICI Severn-side fertilizer factory. These studies, written in a period of trade union advance and near-full employment, still provide a basis for understanding the dynamics of union-management relations in times of recession and union retreat.

Fourth, a major controversy among Marxists for over a century has concerned the role of *leadership*. For Marx and Engels, in many of their writings at least, and for many of their successors (notably Rosa Luxemburg), workers' experience of class oppression would lead more or less spontaneously through a process of collective learning to a struggle against capitalist society. For others, notably Lenin, as indicated above, workers'

¹⁰ Though Zoll draws on the writings of Marx himself to elaborate this analysis, non-Marxists have developed a similar interpretation of trade unionism. A notable example is the work of Mills (1948), a sociologist more influenced by Weber than by Marx, who described unions as 'managers of discontent'. More explicitly Marxist is the analogous (though more abstract) exploration of a dualism in trade union action by Offe and Wessenthal (1985).