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Workers and world views

This is an essay about the reasons industrialists create different kinds of factory jobs, about why workers put up with these jobs when they do, and about what they want when they do not. It shows how workers' ideas of self-interest, born of the principles of honor and dignity they bring to the factory, can be transformed by workplace struggles. And it shows how these struggles, colliding or combining with conflicts in the larger society and between nations, can reshape technologies, markets, and factory hierarchies.

The essay is a work of synthesis. It combines into a single framework research on industrial technology, factory workers, industrial organization, and labor movements from roughly 1850 to the present: the age of mass production, standardized goods, specialized machines, and unskilled workers. It concerns mainly France, Great Britain, Italy, the United States, and West Germany. Wherever possible I have tried to corroborate and supplement the available sources by my own interviews with workers, managers, and academics from these countries.

But the essay is also a work of reconstruction, for to unify the research findings, it is necessary to reinterpret them on the basis of methodological assumptions often radically different from the ones on which they were originally constructed. I try to show that most of the diverse and frequently contradictory studies of factory work and factory workers from different countries and periods form a whole if arranged according to new ideas of the relation between workers' consciousness and the division of labor.

Compare the available theories of working-class behavior and industrial conflict with even the most cursory review of the relevant facts, and the need for reassessment is immediately clear. For judged by the theories, blue-collar workers have become unpredictable. In different countries and at different times in the last twenty

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years, peasant immigrants new to industrial work, traditional craftsmen, and technically sophisticated workers with recently defined skills have openly challenged management's authority in the factory. In some countries one or another of these groups is still doing so.¹ No single theory of blue-collar behavior accounts for this variety of opposition; and no theory that predicts the militancy of any one of these groups accounts for other crucial aspects of its behavior: its acquiescence in authority as well as its revolts against that authority, its inability to find allies as well as its willingness to join broad political movements. From the point of view of the existing theories, too much as well as too little is going on in the factories.

Instead of a comprehensive theory there are a series of case studies, each proclaiming the workers of a particular plant at a particular time the heralds of a coming age. Every major change in economic conditions, every important development in the division of labor, has been an occasion to reopen the question of which workers to count as typical of the future. Much investigative energy has therefore produced a line of monographs that are convincing taken one by one but implausible, at least at first glance, taken collectively. Looking back upon the theoretical works of the 1950s and 1960s, we see them standing today like the towers of a medieval Italian city, each firm upon its own ground, imposing from close up, and a little ridiculous in its claim to challenge the others.

Contemporary views of blue-collar workers

The post-World War II economic boom brought forth the theory of the *embourgeoisement* of the working class. According to Ferdynand Zweig's version of this theory,² the riches produced by capitalism were so greatly and so fairly distributed that workers could begin to emulate the consumption habits of the middle class. That they would want to and that the result of this imitation would be their absorption into that class were taken as foregone conclusions. In the end, economic prosperity would make revolution seem as senseless for the workers as it was presumed to be for the middle classes. The everyday evidence for this thesis was so compelling that in his most pessimistic moments even a champion of radical social transformation such as Herbert Marcuse came close to embracing it.³

A variant of the *embourgeoisement* thesis put forward by Robert Blauner predicted the waning of revolutionary consciousness not because of the rise in the standard of living but rather because of changes in the division of labor. Automation, this argument ran, was reversing the trend toward the decomposition of tasks. The

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more workers supervised machines rather than executed the commands of supervisors, the more they would have the archetypical middle-class experience of exercising discretion. The more they had this experience, the more likely they were to discover the community of interests that bound them together with their superiors. Thus, as technology widened the circle of those responsible for maintaining production, the barriers between classes would dissolve. Automation would give workers the chance to satisfy their immaterial desires just as prosperity satisfied their material wants.⁴

Almost as soon as they were formulated, these two versions of the *embourgeoisement* thesis were challenged by opposing interpretations of the facts on which they were based. Against the claim that automation would lead workers to discover their moral affinities with the middle class it could be argued that as workers began to exercise more autonomy at the work place, they would increasingly resent the intervention of their superiors. Having learned the pleasures of exercising discretion, they would become less tolerant of the remaining restrictions on the scope of their responsibility. The solidarity born of this common resentment would be reinforced by the mutual dependence imposed on them by the apparatus of production itself, and the result would be the formation of a new class consciousness. Such, at least, was the theory of the rise of a new working class that Serge Mallet put forward before May 1968.⁵

Against the idea that a rise in the level of the workers' material standard of living would necessarily result in a dissipation of working-class militancy it was argued that workers can be as militant in pursuit of their consumer interests as they were in pursuit of political ends. As the worker comes to accept the putatively middle-class viewpoint that the purpose of life is to provide the highest possible standard of living for one's family, he can convert all the institutionalized and informal forms of workplace solidarity into so many instruments for getting his way with his employer. Unions, instead of forming and expressing class consciousness, become the weapons with which their members get what they want at the bargaining table. Because of the very zeal with which the worker participates in the race for material goods, he can become a threat to the stability of the state. Such, according to John H. Goldthorpe and David Lockwood, might be the unwitting revenge of workers with an instrumental view of their jobs upon the society that had ruined their communities and disrupted their relations with their kin.⁶

Before these debates had been carried to anything like a satisfactory conclusion, all the parties to them were discredited in roughly equal measure by the great strike waves in France, Italy, Great Brit-

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ain, and Germany of the late sixties and early seventies. May 1968 in France, the *autunno caldo* of 1969 in Italy, the strike waves of 1969 and 1973 in West Germany, and the continuing crisis of industrial relations in Great Britain all proved that the working class has not become simply another group in industrial society. But these same events hardly proved any of the variants of the counterclaim that the progress of industrial society was creating a new revolutionary transformation of the state.⁷

Then, before the confusion created by these events had given rise to anything but the most fragmentary theories, the postwar boom came to an end. Accounts of working-class consciousness which presumed increasing prosperity were replaced by those which postulated economic stagnation, if not crisis. Neo-conservatives frightened themselves with images of irascible workers made greedy by a culture of prosperity, and ready to turn on the capitalists if their exorbitant demands were not met.⁸ Leftists saw the working class shocked from its stupor, ready again to recognize that it is exploited and dependent. In these quarters the recession—at least in its early phases—brought a recrudescence of the classical Marxist view that the material situation of the working class leads to forms of discontent that are the precondition for the rise of revolutionary consciousness.⁹ Yet a third reaction was to see the working class as condemned to live out cycles of militancy in which phases of belligerent assertiveness (corresponding to good times) are succeeded by phases of passivity (in bad times)—and nothing fundamental about the structure of society changes.¹⁰

Despite their differences, these theories all share three fundamental assumptions: technological determinism, essentialism, and reductionism. To understand their shortcomings and especially the incapacity of each to make sense of those aspects of experience captured by the others, it is necessary to examine their relation to these foundation stones of so much social science.

Three misleading ideas: technological determinism, essentialism, and reductionism

Technological determinism is the familiar idea that regardless of its political preferences, any society that wants to produce industrial goods must adopt certain structures of organization, patterns of authority, and ways of doing business. These modern institutional forms may correspond to a regime of free enterprise, or to the ideals of the socialist state; but in any case they and no others will prevail if industrial production is successfully organized.¹¹

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The objection to technological determinism is that performance standards can usually be met in several ways. The fit between what needs to be done and how it can be done is seldom as tight as the determinists imagine. We will see, for example, that plants using comparable technologies can divide the necessary work in different ways, and that the same goods can be produced using different technologies. By overstating the connections among products, technologies, and organization, each of the case studies under review drew general conclusions from historical particulars, only to be overturned by succeeding research focusing on different situations.

Essentialism is a species of determinism. It is the claim that what is true for society as a whole is true of each of its parts. The more advanced an industrial society, the more clearly modern forms of organization predominate in each of its parts. As the differences between industrializing societies disappear, each society becomes internally more homogeneous.

The objection to essentialism is that radically different forms of organization, some apparently archaic, others modern, are often interdependent. We will see, for example, that advances in some industries create the preconditions for the survival of backward forms of industrial organization. The regnant theories either neglect this diversity or dismiss whatever seems backward as vestigial, destined to be swept aside by future developments.

Reductionism is the doctrine that experience unambiguously determines thought. Here it amounts to the claim that everyday experience of modern societies by itself determines what people in those societies want of life.¹² We will see in a moment that the reductionists differ in their views of what this experience ultimately teaches; but they are in agreement on its general significance. One lesson of life in industrial society, they argue, is that human wants are not fixed. Rather, they change over time, stimulated by, though always outstripping, society's capacity to satisfy them: The development of technology, for example, produces new goods that awaken new wants, spurring further technological advances, and so on. A companion lesson is that the purpose of social and economic institutions is to satisfy these changing desires. Institutions are no longer considered just or unjust in themselves, but only efficient or inefficient: efficient if they maximize social welfare given existing wants, technological capabilities, and resources; inefficient if they do not.

Combined with determinism, these ideas add up to the characteristic reductionist claim that industrialization means the end of ideology.¹³ Call an ideology a moral conviction that society should produce certain goods (associated, say, with a particular vision of

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community), and/or produce them in a given, politically defined manner (according to plan, with public means of production, in small shops, etc.). Then, if industrialization produces a uniform experience of life and if the experience produces agreement that technology should be efficiently used to satisfy wants, these fixed ideas lose their meaning.

But if the reductionists agree that ideology is meaningless, they disagree about the significance of the pursuit of efficiency. At issue is the definition of efficiency itself. For the producer, efficiency means the least wasteful use of resources and technical capacities; for the consumer, it means the optimal satisfaction of wants. In economics, for example, Marxists take the producer's standpoint and argue that prices are ultimately set by the costs of production; neoclassical economists see the market, and behind it the preferences of the individual consumer, as the ultimate arbiter of value.¹⁴ In sociology, too, there is an analogous division of opinion on how the inhabitants of industrial society understand the idea of efficiency.

Marxist and *marxisant* sociologists like Mallet and Blauner take the position that workers experience work as producers. The assumption is that humankind seeks self-expression in the graceful mastery of nature independent of the product. For this reason production cannot be efficient unless workers actively participate in organizing and controlling it; and it is this participation which colors the workers' view of society. For Blauner, workers supervising automated machinery have the prototypical entrepreneurial experience of exercising discretion and bearing responsibility, which cements their allegiance to an industrial order based on entrepreneurship.¹⁵ Mallet has it that workers who supervise machines experience a new solidarity with one another *against* management, which they eventually see as dedicated to profits, not to the efficient use of machines. But in both cases ideology gives way before the producers' ethos of technical efficiency, even if the result is in one instance capitalism, in the other socialism.¹⁶

Sociologists like Goldthorpe and Zweig who have been influenced by neoclassical economics, on the other hand, argue that workers see themselves as consumers. The claim is that workers define themselves by what they have, not by what they do. The more they have of whatever convention defines as enviable, the more content they are, even if they must let themselves be treated as mute instruments of production at the workplace.

Zweig's argument is that a rise in living standards teaches workers that they have individual wants, and that satisfaction of these wants undermines classes in the sense of institutionally organized, cultur-

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ally homogeneous, and politically self-conscious groups with a definite place in the division of labor.¹⁷ With classes gone, the age of the efficiency-conscious individual begins. Goldthorpe's counterclaim is that traditional class-based institutions, if not self-conscious classes, will continue to exist because the actual, technologically imposed distribution of power in society makes such institutions indispensable to the satisfaction of workers' private wants.¹⁸ The efficiency-minded consumer celebrates another victory, but this time as a collectivist.

The difference between these two variants of the reductionist view can be characterized in a more general way that focuses attention on their inverse limitations. Where the theory of the worker as consumer defines rationality as the choice of means given arbitrary ends, the theory of worker as producer sees reason in the choice of ends—to be a producer—without consideration of means. But because it is impossible in practice to define ends without respect to means and vice versa, the result is a fruitless and contradictory struggle to separate the rational from the irrational in the workers' behavior. Where one school sees the reasonable consumer who cannot say why he consumes what he consumes, the other sees the reasonable producer who has no idea of what to produce or how.

Theories that stress consumption habits, for example, assume that the workers' actual desires are conventionally defined. Thus W. G. Runciman treats groups of workers as collective subjects whose wants are determined in reference to their historical relation to other groups in society.¹⁹ These wants are fixed for long periods. But social, economic, or political changes from time to time disrupt group identities, causing workers to develop new desires.²⁰

One characteristic defect of these theories is their implication that changes in consciousness are arational, if not irrational. Translating to the analysis of group behavior the concept of efficiency they apply to the whole society, these theorists argue that rationality is the efficient use of resources given present wants. When a group's wants are in flux it has no foundation for the calculation of the means appropriate to its ends. Hence change of identity is seen as a hiatus of reason: a succession of unrelated wants that supersede each other capriciously.

Alessandro Pizzorno's theory of the cyclical character of worker militancy illustrates this dilemma well. Pizzorno argues that progress in the division of labor creates new groups of workers whose interests are not represented by the existing system of negotiations between capital and labor. For a group to be recognized as a bargaining partner, however, its leaders must overcome the opposition of the organized interests who benefit from its exclusion. To do this

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the group must coerce recognition by disrupting production. But effective coercion is possible only if the leaders overcome each member's tendency to shift the burden of struggle onto the others in the expectation that they will succeed without him while he benefits from their efforts. The solution to this free-rider problem is to convince workers to think of themselves as agents of a comprehensive social transformation that replaces the old world by an incomparably better one. What present sacrifice is too great compared with the plausible prospect of an incomparably better future? Moreover, by appealing to general interest in radical social change, the new group wins allies to its cause. Once admitted to the negotiations, however, it begins to redefine its interests. Ultimately, it drops its global demands and insists only on the satisfaction of the narrower economic interests shaped by its place in the division of labor and regarded by the bargaining partners as negotiable.

Pizzorno therefore sees workers as always behaving in one of two ways. In the periods of serious conflict associated with the creation of a new bargaining partner, they act selflessly for the common cause. But their solidarity with other workers and social groups is the result of collective enthusiasms, provoked by illusory promises. Only as these enthusiasms evaporate do the workers become reasonable again. After the struggles for recognition have subsided and their bargaining identity is established, they return to the selfish pursuit of sectional interest, the only behavior subject to rational calculation.²¹

A second defect of this kind of reductionist theory is a corollary of the first. Because they cannot see any fundamental, enduring features in the worker's personality, theories of the worker as consumer cannot say why he rejects one identity and arrives at another. Pizzorno, for example, cannot explain the *substance* of the collective identity that emerges from a period of struggle. On the one hand, he argues that the workers' bargaining-table demands reflect their place in the division of labor. But on the other, he argues that they had to forget their particular interests in order to get to the bargaining table in the first place. The result is an account of the origin of workers' demands full of ambiguities that cannot be resolved within the framework of a rigid distinction between periods of struggle and periods of negotiation.

On a superficial level, theories of the worker as producer seem to avoid these defects. The argument is that man the maker, *homo faber*, is dissatisfied with any system of production that does not treat him as such. This unnatural condition is called alienation. Lack of interest in work, resentment against bosses, and feelings of helplessness

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are its principal manifestations. Because they are presently alienated, workers in capitalist societies are in perpetual if often muted opposition to management. The balance of power in the labor market permitting, the opposition becomes overt when the weight of alienation becomes too great.²² If the revolts are crushed by force or repressed more silently by economic blackmail in the labor market, dissatisfaction goes underground again. But at the next opportunity, with new allies and conscious of the errors of the past, the workers revolt against alienation again.

Thus the assumption that workers consider themselves producers implies a continuity in working-class personality of just the sort that theories of the worker as consumer deny. So by positing the worker as a producer it appears possible to see the rationality of his struggles and the coherence of his identity.

Closer examination of theories of alienation, however, reveals defects the inverse of those associated with theories of the worker as consumer, but equally crippling. The tables have simply been turned: Now the worker's militancy is declared rational, his workday self said to be trapped in collective illusions. As in the case of the theory of the worker as consumer, we are told that the patient is really quite sane if we ignore his mad side.

Take the obvious problem of reconciling the view of the permanently resentful worker with the perspicuous fact that most workers assent to management's authority most of the time. One answer advanced by theorists of alienation stresses the role of force: Workers do not protest openly because they fear reprisals. Another invokes the idea of false consciousness: Mised in school and eventually by the press and television, workers learn to ignore or misunderstand the truth of their nature.²³ Both answers suggest that what the worker actually says and does is irrelevant to, not expressive of – even unintelligible in the light of – his essential nature. The alienated worker is comprehensible only in the rare moments when he struggles against alienation.

A related problem is the incapacity of reductionist theories of alienation to give substance to the worker's ambitions as a producer. Because *homo faber* is defined prior to and independently of what he makes, his choice of what to produce appears as arbitrary as the consumer's desire for particular goods. The theories address this difficulty in one of two ways, both of which disguise the problem rather than solving it.

One argument is that there is an immanent logic of technological development that determines what is produced and how. This theme plays a role in Mallet's work; and we will see that it is central

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to the analysis of Heinrich Popitz and Hans Paul Bahrtdt. The objection, developed in Chapter 2, is that technological development is itself shaped by social choices imposed politically or through the market: Think of the way changes in oil prices and growing concern about the environment have forced changes in automobile design.

The second argument meets this objection, but at the price of diluting the theory's implicit claims to explain worker behavior. It is that the clash between the producer and the profit seeker catapults the former into politics. Once he sees that his interests are distinct from those of the capitalists, the worker is drawn to political activity to discover what his interests really are; and political debate, not the logic of technological development, decides what to produce. The difficulty is that the theory of alienation has as little to say about the progress of these debates as it does about the question why workers are sometimes militant, sometimes not. Where the first argument denies that the question of choice arises at all, this one denies that it is answerable with the help of the theory's categories.²⁴

The essay that follows disagrees with these determinist, essentialist, and reductionist theories on almost all the points on which they are in agreement; it frequently agrees with at least one of them on points of analysis where they contradict one another. Where they try to explain away diversity in the division of labor, I attempt to account for its persistence; where they stress the unity between thought and the world, I emphasize the divergence; where they see the end of ideology, I see the constant struggle to impose moral order on the economy; where they see teleology, I see struggle and possibility. The full extent of our agreements and disagreements will become clear as the argument is developed in the body of the text. Here I want to introduce the logic of the analysis and the plan of the work by anticipating as much of the discussion as needed to contrast my major results with central features of the determinist, essentialist, and reductionist theories I have criticized.

Matching workers to jobs

The starting point of any more or less systematic exposition is somewhat arbitrary; I will begin somewhat arbitrarily with a discussion of the structures of the economy. The aim of Chapter 2 is thus to show how the manufacturing techniques pioneered in the nineteenth century and canonized by Henry Ford lead to the creation of radically different kinds of jobs. Building on theories of the dual labor market, I argue that employers facing stable demand for large quantities of standardized products pursue one kind of investment strategy,