CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521319099 - Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry
Charles F. Sabel
Frontmatter
More information

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN
MODERN POLITICAL ECONOMIES

Editors
SUZANNE BERGER, ALBERT O. HIRSCHMAN, AND CHARLES MAIER

Work and politics: the division of labor in industry

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521319099 - Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry
Charles F. Sabel
Frontmatter
More information

OTHER BOOKS IN THIS SERIES

Suzanne D. Berger, editor: *Organizing interests in Western Europe: pluralism, corporatism, and the transformation of politics*

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

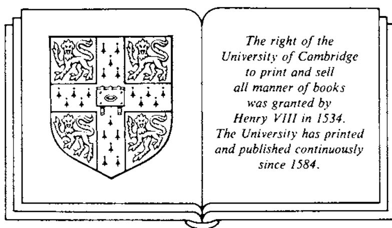
Cambridge University Press
0521319099 - Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry
Charles F. Sabel
Frontmatter
More information

Work and politics

The division of labor in industry

CHARLES F. SABEL

Massachusetts Institute of Technology



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge
London New York New Rochelle
Melbourne Sydney

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1982

First published 1982
First paperback edition 1984

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Sabel, Charles F.

Work and politics

(Cambridge studies in modern political
economies)

Includes index.

1. Labor and laboring classes. 2. Division
of labor. 3. Industrial sociology. 4. Labor
supply. I. Title. II. Series.
HD4904.S23 306′.3 81-18085 AACR2
ISBN 0 521 23002 0 hard covers
ISBN 0 521 31909 9 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521319099 - Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry
Charles F. Sabel
Frontmatter
More information

TO M., R., AND S.

Exemplary friends, teachers by example

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521319099 - Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry
Charles F. Sabel
Frontmatter
More information

Contents

List of tables and figures *page* ix

Preface xi

1. Workers and world views 1

Contemporary views of blue-collar workers 2
Three misleading ideas: technological determinism, essentialism, and reductionism 4
Matching workers to jobs 10
World views and workplace struggles 14
National culture and the division of labor 20
Imitation and autonomy: the historical sources of unity and diversity in industrial society 25

2. The structure of the labor market 31

The rise of Fordism 32
Market structure and industrial structure 34
The political background of technological dualism: a historical perspective 37
The political background of technological dualism: a contemporary perspective 45
The organization of the unstable sector 47
A Bavarian example 49
The organization of production in the stable sector 56

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521319099 - Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry
Charles F. Sabel
Frontmatter
More information

Intermediate skills: the skill cycle and the intellectualization of craft knowledge 59
The division of labor at Renault 71

3. Careers at work 78

The craftsman's ethos and where it can lead him 82
Craftsmen in decline 89
Workers with plant-specific technical skills 92
Unskilled workers 99
The struggle for place 117

4. Interests, conflicts, classes 127

Collective conflicts: restorative or revolutionary? 128
Revolt against the factory: the struggles of the peasant worker 132
Between the powerful and the weak: the dilemma of the would-be craftsman 136
The *autunno caldo* and the *delegati* 145
Craftsmen: revolutionaries or labor aristocrats? 167
Producers and parasites 179
The ambiguities of class and the possibilities of politics 186

5. The end of Fordism? 194

The breakup of mass markets 195
Neo-Fordism 209
High-technology cottage industry: the unity of conception and execution, the abstract and the concrete 220
Politics again 227

Notes 232

Bibliography 272

Index 293

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Tables and figures

Tables

1 Percentage of unskilled and semiskilled workers in West German industry by type of plant *page* 50
2 Percentage of women in West German industry by type of plant 51
3 Factors influencing choice of plant location in West German industry by type of plant 51
4 Forms of plant-site tenure in West German industry by type of plant 52
5 Use of modern technology in West German industry by type of plant 53
6 Length of the planning horizon in West German industrial subsidiaries by turnover 53
7 Composition of the work force in the electronics industry of the Oberpfalz by plant size and type 55
8 Composition of the work force in the clothing industry of the Oberpfalz by plant size and type 56
9 Changes in the skill level of the Renault work force: unskilled and semiskilled workers as a percentage of all blue-collar workers 73
10 Changes in the skill level of the Renault work force by production sector: skilled workers as a percentage of all blue-collar workers 74
11 Skilled workers and machine setters as a percentage of all blue-collar workers at Renault by production unit 75

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521319099 - Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry
Charles F. Sabel
Frontmatter
More information

12 Relation between years spent at present job and skill grade of the hourly workers in selected production units at Renault 76

Figures

1 The stable component of demand 36

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press
0521319099 - Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry
Charles F. Sabel
Frontmatter
More information

Preface

I conceived this book about social transformation with one set of questions in mind and wrote it guided by another. When the ideas set down here first took shape in the mid-1970s, the strike waves of the 1960s in France, Italy, and West Germany were fresh in mind; but so too was the impression that, measured by many of their explicit ambitions, these movements had failed to revolutionize factory labor. Why had millions of normally cautious workers gone into the streets? Why were they back at their jobs? To understand what happened, I decided to find out as much as I could about the structure of industrial jobs and the demands industrial workers make on them. The naïveté of the questions seemed both a reminder of my ignorance of industry and a way to keep an eye turned to the passionate drama of hope, desperation, and power that is played out in any large conflict.

Visiting factories and reading about them, I convinced myself that workers were neither a homogeneous class united in opposition to management nor a mass of individuals eager for their own reasons to cooperate, even in limited ways, with the bosses. Rather, it seemed that in factory after factory in different countries and times the work force was regularly split along skill lines into distinct groups, perpetuating themselves in different ways. Each had a characteristic definition of its prerogatives and ambitions and little comprehension of those of the others. Given the right provocation, furthermore, each group was capable of fighting for its claims and allying with the others to pursue them. Political doctrines were often the language these groups used to express their demands; but what the work groups wanted often corresponded loosely at best to the ideas of the political leaders.

These general ideas, I imagined for a time, explained both the broad pattern of industrial conflict during the nineteenth century

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521319099 - Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry
Charles F. Sabel
Frontmatter
More information

and the apparently contradictory recent events that had initially drawn my attention. The partial overlap between the distinct ends of the different work groups and those of management helped make sense of the alternation of conflict and cooperation on the shop floor. The possibility of alliances between groups sharing a common political vocabulary shed light on those extraordinary moments of mass defiance that occasionally shake our societies. The fragility of those alliances, a consequence of the allies' different aims as well as of the gap between the political symbols and the workers' real demands, seemed in important ways to account for the ease with which the authorities could restore order in the factories by making no more than limited concessions and playing on the workers' divided ambitions. The more I studied the complex web of understanding and misunderstanding that binds work groups to bosses and to each other, the easier it became to see why there could be so much conflict and so little fundamental change in the factories. Almost without knowing it, and certainly with no pleasure at the thought, I came to accept the failure of transformative hopes as a proof that the existing division of labor was a fact and limit of social life.

But as I put these ideas in order, applying them to different industries, countries, and times, I began to feel as though I were building a sand castle in the line of an advancing tide. I was explaining the obstacles to change. Yet as I learned more about the early history of industrial capitalism, it became clear that at certain turning points in the history of mechanized production the division of labor might have gone down a path different from the one it followed. More puzzling still, research on the reorganization of work now under way in many of the most modern factories suggested that in the future the division of labor in some of the rich capitalist countries might take a road intersecting some of these foregone possibilities. And it was clear that social struggles, including shop-floor conflicts, played an important part in determining how work is organized, though not in the way I had implicitly imagined. Change often seemed to come not from direct concessions to straightforward demands, but from management's attempts to regain control over an unruly work force by introducing new machines and forms of industrial organization. Under the right circumstances, I found, the clash of worker strategy and management counterstrategy could lead to transformations that neither foresaw. Whereas my initial question led me to underscore the restraint and partiality of workers' demands, the questions arising from this new perspective led me to underscore their potentially revolutionary character. The division of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521319099 - Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry
Charles F. Sabel
Frontmatter
More information

labor came to seem not a limit to the possibilities of transformation but, looked at over long periods, the result of a complex clash of visions of society backed by economic and political power.

This book, then, is an attempt to weave these concerns together: to show how unpretentious claims for decency defined in various and sometimes conflicting ways can contribute to profound transformations in the structure of society. The example is the factory and blue-collar workers, because some of the most dramatic and consequential conflicts in our society are fought between capitalists and workers and because the division of labor is so often regarded as the cause, not the result, of struggle. But the point is more general. The overarching aim is to explore the relation between our barely articulated ideas of honor and justice – politics in the broadest sense – and their quietly revolutionary effect on the social order.

According to one current fashion, these prefatory remarks should end with a kind of playbill in which are listed those who made any contribution to the production at hand. According to a second fashion, this acknowledgment is a more or less provisional substitute for the author's unwritten *Bildungsroman.* In my book, at least, an acknowledgment is neither. It is, rather, a page from that ledger in which each of us notes those persons who out of love, friendship, or duty have so marked either our lives or our work that it is impossible to think of either without thinking of them as well. Herewith, then, I would like to do publicly what I hope to have done, unmistakably, privately, and acknowledge my debt to these people: Suzanne Berger, Donald L. M. Blackmer, Janis Bolster, Sebastiano Brusco, Vittorio Cappecchi, Abby Collins, Joshua Cohen, Daniel Dexter, Sheila Emerson, Charles Ferguson, David Friedman, Robert A. Gates, Peter Gourevitch, Richard Herding, Gary Herrigel, Helen Hershkoff, Hilary Horton, Carl Kaysen, Susanna Kaysen, Helgard Kramer, Burkhart Lutz, Charles Maier, Donata Meneghelli, Marina Monteroni, Hartmut Neuendorff, Claus Offe, Adele Pesce, Michael Piore, Daniel Raff, George Rosen, Michele Salvati, Maria Pia Seirup, Werner Sengeberger, William Sewell, Jr., Harley Shaiken, David Stark, Frank Stille, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, Maurizio Vannicelli, Peter Weitz, and Jonathan Zeitlin. Different as they are to the world and to me, all are alike in this: Each is possessed of a kind of dignity that makes more plausible the dream of a better world.

Research for parts of Chapters 2, 4, and 5 was funded by a generous grant from the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

Cambridge, Mass.
March 1982

Charles F. Sabel

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org