

Craftsmanship and Skill: Mayo, Gender and the Rise of Psychological Justice

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It was my interest in class consciousness,” Harry Braverman (1998/1974) wrote, “which led to my taking up the entire study in the first place” (p. 313). Provided as a response to critiques of *Labor and Monopoly Capital (LMC)*, Braverman stressed the importance of seeing class consciousness at the heart of his thesis around the degradation of work.¹ Indeed, his groundbreaking analysis of the separation of conception and execution—extended from assembly lines to clerical work—was raised as the basis to suggest the leveling of classed labor experiences. Alienation, produced through capitalism’s inexorable need to consolidate monopoly power by devaluing and breaking down the human productive capacities, constituted for Braverman the worst of capital and the grounds of revolutionary consciousness. It is within capitalism’s dehumanizing tendencies that the sense of “unbounded cynicism and revulsion” would be seeded amongst workers, laying the basis for class struggle (Braverman, 1998/1974, p. 104).

How then might Braverman respond to a contradiction in our present, where deskilling continues to happen along with an intensified attachment to work? It is striking that the discursive surge of

work unhappiness in the 2020s—exemplified by the “Great Resignation,” “bullshit jobs,” and “quiet quitting” (Graeber, 2018; Newport, 2023)—are raised alongside an ever more relentless call for workers to find happiness within work. Workers are asked to seek their passions (Lipkin, 2023); workplaces are implored to champion “mental health” (Brand, 2023) and fight the “loneliness epidemic” (Staglin, 2023).

This essay situates these contradictory circumstances within a development that occurred during and since the publication of *LMC*: the substitution of psychological justice for structural justice. We can begin this discussion with two terms frequently used in *LMC*: “skill” and “craftsmanship.” Though often deployed interchangeably, craftsmanship is idealized in *LMC* as a sign of what skills-respecting work can do. Not only was craftsmanship positioned as a practice that combined conception and execution, but it was also described as an organization of work that provided the worker autonomy (Staples & Staples, 2000). Citing David Landes (1969), Braverman (1998/1974) writes of the limited means employers had in forcing craft workers to increase their output in early industrial capitalism. “The domestic weaver or craftsman was master of his time, starting and stopping when he desired” (Landes, 1969, p. 58 quoted in Braverman, 1998/1974, p. 44)

1 Braverman is responding to a special issue of *Monthly Review* (1976, vol. 28, no. 3) which he titled as “Two Comments.” His response was reprinted in the later edition of *LMC*.

Craftsmanship—which Gerard Hanlon (2016) describes as an “inalienable property of the craft worker”—was marshaled as resistance and moral superiority, challenging even the “right of capitalists to earn money from a business in which they had no skill and of which they had no knowledge” (pp. 57–8).

In this sense, craftsmanship was backgrounded in *LMC* as the ethic most deeply threatened by the Taylorist organization of work and technologies. Braverman (1998/1974) consistently wrote of how the concept of “skill” has become so degraded “that today the worker is considered to possess a ‘skill’ if his or her job requires a few days’ or weeks’ training” (p. 307). In this, Braverman was also referencing his own experience: he was involved in metalwork for fourteen years and apprenticed in copper smithing for four years. The transition of “craftsmanship” to the concept of “skill” in modern industry took on personal meaning for Braverman since it involved erasing the years spent perfecting a craft. Craftsmanship, Clifford and William Staples (2000) observe, was “something he [Braverman] valued and... it was taken away from him and others like him” (p. 228).

This is not to claim that Braverman was nostalgic for some gilded, premodern past. Though he admits that he may “have been influenced by a sentimental attachment to the outworn conditions of now archaic modes of labor,” he maintained that he “tried not to let any of my conclusions flow from such a romanticism” (Braverman, 1998/1974, p. 4). Regardless, craftsmanship was core to Braverman’s critique of deskilling. “Braverman’s point of departure,” John Bellamy Foster (1999) notes, “was the craftworker who obtains fulfillment through the creation of objects first conceived in the imagination” (p. 14). This figure was core to the class struggle involved in the labor process which scientific management sought to break down.

While the literature around skills has substantially developed since the publication of *LMC* (for summary, see Iskander, 2021; Shields, 1995; Stein, 2016), what remains less elaborated is how the image of craftspersons has shaped not only the deskilling thesis but also how the “problem” of skill came to be defined. In defining craftsmanship, Michael Schwalbe (2010) suggests that “craft entails not only the acquisition of deep knowledge and skill but

also a transformative dialogue between thinking and doing, a dialogue driven by the problem-finding and problem-solving inherent in complex, variable work” (p. 109). Here, Schwalbe (2010) emphasizes that craftsmanship cannot be reduced to conception and execution: craftsmanship speaks of a certain mindfulness to activity that responds to a basic psychological need of the *homo faber*.

Richard Sennett (2009) also made this argument in *The Craftsman*, expressing that the routine of craft “draws on childhood experience of play” which grounds an “enduring, basic human impulse”: “the desire to do a job well for its own sake” (p. 9). Even when raised today in neo-craft occupations—like in modern, elevated versions of bartending, barbering, and butchering—craftsmanship is still used to suggest an ideal of work that combines the coordination of mind, body, and material (Ocejo, 2017).

The elaboration of craftsmanship reveals that *LMC* cannot simply be relegated to a technical reading of the deskilling thesis (Shields, 1995). Indeed, Braverman’s pre-emptive denial of romanticism is problematic, not because it renders *LMC*’s thesis any less true but because it precludes an analysis of how the romanticism of craftsmanship could advance *LMC*’s political purpose. Sentimentality is core to cultural life and a powerful force for collective action (Campbell, 2018; Streeter, 2010). And so, while *LMC* is unwavering in its critique of skill and work; the backgrounding of craftsmanship is what lends the text its emotional appeal—for what is suggested with the degradation of work is a kind of progressive human impairment (Staples & Staples, 2000).

Indeed, this association would not be out of place in the context in which *LMC* was published. From Hannah Arendt (1998/1958) (with her separation of *homo laborans* and the *homo faber*) to Norbert Wiener (1989/1950) (who likened assembly line workers to ants, “stupid and unlearning”), to Abraham Maslow (1970) (who positioned self-actualization as apex of human needs), the core harm of industry was widely described to be the dehumanizing, intellectual stupefaction of workers.

In the following, I expand on the circumstances and challenges of craftsmanship. After 1970, the romantic allure of craftsmanship was co-opted by

business leaders, facilitating the deskilling of workers while preventing the “unbounded cynicism and revulsion” essential to class struggle (Braverman, 1998/1974, p. 104). The new organizational ethos reframed worker dissatisfaction not because of capitalist exploitation but as a product of misguided company policies. In this reframing, organizations invoked the loss of the craftsman ideal. However, this interpretation distorts Braverman’s understanding of craftsmanship: for him, craftsmanship was not merely about feeling or doing; it was a vital resource in the struggle against capital.

Still, the recovery of the political potential cannot solely depend on a simple shift in the understanding of craftsmanship. At its foundation, the craftsmanship ideal is gendered and raced. It is modeled after the labor of the European white male artisan and was designed to exclude women and non-whites, relegating them to roles as unskilled housewives, domestics, pieceworkers, and indentured or enslaved laborers (Applebaum, 1992; Fraser 2022; Lowe, 2015).

A critical analysis of craftsmanship thus reminds us of two things: first, that feeling and doing needs to be connected back as a struggle against capital, and second, that the logic of skill embedded in “craftsmanship” has historically been used to differentiate populations for political ends. These two aspects are entwined, as unequal definitions of skill are often used to create internal divisions among the working-class and to legitimate the exploitation of those without racial and gender privilege. Only with these considerations in mind can a more emancipatory vision of craftsmanship be developed.

Psychological Justice after Mayo

In *LMC*, Braverman responded to the prevailing mood of the 1970s by equating Elton Mayo’s human relations to Taylorism. If “Taylorism dominates the world of production,” he reasons, then “the practitioners of ‘human relations’ and ‘industrial psychology’ are the maintenance crew for the human machinery.” (Braverman, 1998/1974, p. 60). This association of Mayoism—to a placating drug meant to grease the revulsion of workplace degradation—was echoed by numerous contemporaries (Turner, 2013). For example, a couple of years before *LMC*, countercul-

ture writer Theodore Roszak (1969) had described the middle class as “cheerful robots” (p. 34), extending sociologist Charles Wright Mills (1953) critique that the middle classes are a conformist population that sold “smiles and kindly gestures” (p. xvii). Writing then, however, Braverman and his contemporaries had difficulty comprehending Mayo’s significance. In fact, what is most critical about Mayo is not his success but his failure, for it is with Mayo’s failure that management innovated towards inducing more “authentic” attachments to work.

Born in Australia in 1880 and migrating to the United States in 1922, George Elton Mayo is often credited as the progenitor of the “human relations” movement—an organizational practice aimed at fostering harmonious industrial relations through the therapeutic engagement between supervisors and workers (Carey, 1967). In human relations, supervisors were positioned and trained as quasi-therapists, personnels most equipped to address the emotional maladies and maladjustments of workers. This workplace therapy, Richard Gillespie (1993) points out, represented Mayo’s method of grappling with the broader issue of industrial anomie. “Professions and business” were perceived by Mayo as the “true source of social growth and development,” a vehicle through which workers could attain purpose and identity (p. 98). Thus, human relations in the workplace were not simply a means to resolve industrial discord but a therapeutic intervention designed to mend the psychological fractures evident in the worker’s domestic and social spheres.

The criticisms that emerged in the 1970s took aim at what was perceived as the fundamental falsehood of Mayo’s approach: his emphasis on conformist social relations. Critics contended that human relations imposed a collective pressure on individuals, transforming the pursuit of workplace harmony into a demand for unthinking conformity. But this critique failed to address the foundational assumption underpinning human relations: the expectation that people ought to find work fulfilling under capitalist structure. With this, industrial psychologists could critique the practice of human relations while simultaneously reinforcing its underlying ideology—that work under capitalism should be a locus of self-realization.

Take, for instance, business theorist Chris Argyris's (1957) argument in *Personality and Organization*. In the book, he conjures a hypothetical assembly line worker, Dick, who is said to be "frustrated" with his job. Under the human relations framework, this frustration must be suppressed, so if Dick chooses to stay in the factory "he must create new self-pressures to overcome the ones caused by his own desire to leave and to remain healthy" (p. 90). Argyris continues:

One way for Dick to defend himself is to reduce the psychological importance of the work situation. He may say (unconsciously) in effect, "To hell with it; I am not going to permit myself to become involved. Why should I pressurize myself to leave and to stay? Why should all this mean so much to me? I'll do just enough to get by. I'll block up my need for self-actualization until I get out of work. Then I will live! (Argyris, 1957, p. 90)

Argyris suggests that these circumstances would lead Dick to adapt by becoming "contented"—a word widely used by consultants in the period to describe a conforming employee who is on time and obedient but has otherwise stopped being engaged in their work.

Argyris's argument demonstrates a significant cultural shift. By the mid-twentieth century, Mayoism itself was opposed by management, and that discourse would only intensify as management sought to present themselves as being more enlightened than industrial leaders in the past (Frank, 1997). For example, anticipating and echoing the critique launched by Mills, Roszak, and Braverman, Thomas Spates (1960) writes in *Human Values Where People Work* that Mayoism had promulgated a false form of happiness amongst workers. "You can visualize a 'happy' employee," he wrote, "He's just happy. In fact, he is so happy with things as they are that he does not want to alter either the pace or the conditions of work" (p. 185).

Happiness as contentment, and contentment as apathy—this line of association spoke of how management theorists had also bemoaned the spiritual loss of craftsmanship, naming it as the ownership and desire that workers should have towards work. Ironically, and in complete reversal from Mayo, Spates (1960) would call the "unhappy" and "aggressive"

employee as the good worker: this is the employee "pressing for change, improvements, innovations, better ways to get the job done" (p. 185).

What is crucial to grasp is the profound confluence in the diagnosis of degraded work (Hong, 2022). Activists and academics on the Left coincided with managerial consultants and industrial leaders to see the eclipse of craftwork as a loss, not only of skill but of something fundamentally human. These views would create alarm in American public culture. As Harold L. Sheppard and Neal Q. Herrick (1972) note, "white collar woes" and "blue collar blues" would have become "a major area of societal concern" necessitating the attention of governments by the early 1970s (p. xiii).

These cultural shifts were so significant that President Richard Nixon commissioned a Work in America taskforce in 1972. The report released at the end of the year affirmed public sentiment, framing the degradation of work as a crisis for the self-esteem of American workers. "When work becomes merely automatic behavior, instead of being *homo faber*, the worker is *animal laborans*," the report states, associating Arendt's description of the slavish decline of human to animal to the workers of the period (O'Toole et al, 1973, p. 4). From there, many, including political activists like Studs Terkel, would describe the consequences of this degradation. His bestseller *Working* exemplified the alienation of workers through health ailments, accidents, mental erosion, and social breakdown of relationships (Terkel, 1972).

Notice, however, how the personalization of deskilling tends to be abstracted from class conflict, the exploitation of labor, and the general capitalist organization of production. Though identified as culprits of the degradation of work, the culpability of employers and capitalists was presented as benign ignorance rather than active maleficence (Hong, 2022). Further, this issue is raised as one addressable by management through the redesign of jobs. Thus, ideas such as Theory Y management promulgated by Douglas McGregor (1960), as well as terms like job "enlargement," "enrichment," and "recognition" started to permeate management circles as benevolent cures (The Conference Board, 1971).

Presenting evidence of the diagnosis of degradation but substituting structural justice for

psychological justice, managers after the 1970s were able to distill the “loss” of craftsmanship to a fractured self-esteem. Further, in making this prescription, managers could maintain a contradictory circumstance of labor: they could exploit and deskill workers, generating a dependence on a capitalist mode of life whilst defanging the “cynicism and revulsion” noted by Braverman. They did this by assuring workers that their unhappiness could be fixed through more enlightened forms of management.

The Blind Spot

To be clear: Braverman was deeply committed to structural justice for the working classes, and he painstakingly made the cogent argument that degradation of skills could only lead to weakening of working-class wages, bargaining power, and their psychological capacities of resistance. But he also underestimated the consequences of deskilling—for the negative attitudes to the robbery of craftsmanship was met with more sophisticated styles of emotional management.

If we are to commit ourselves, like Braverman, to class consciousness, we must address not only the technical and discursive degradation of skills: we must challenge the cultural configuration of production and work itself. Anti-work scholars have already proposed a range of strategies, each requiring further experimentation and critical development (see Berardi, 2009; Frayne, 2015; Weeks, 2011). In *Passionate Work*, I argue that confronting the degradation of skills must occur on multiple fronts. One such front involves challenging the pejorative labels of “lazy” and “unproductive” often ascribed to the unemployed, recognizing the decision to opt out of capitalist labor systems as a legitimate form of resistance. We must also critically interrogate every mechanism that claims to offer self-actualization through work, from gamification to the compulsory sociality embedded in workplace cultures. Crucially too, we need to ask ourselves what craftsmanship today should accomplish and look like. As Braverman (1998/1974) contended, craftsmanship is not simply about doing or skilling, it must be understood as a complex resource for resisting the demands of capital and employers.

But before doing any of these, it is important

to consider one key omission in *LMC*’s legacy: the gendered politics residing behind the idealized image of working-class power—craftsmanship. Even in the medieval periods, the privilege of craft livelihood, enjoyment, and recognition was based upon a gendered division of labor: men labored in public and women in the home (Hanlon, 2016; Stein, 2016). This meant that craftsmen could only enjoy the work of their hands and render it a form of resistance because women were there to cook, clean, and raise their children. As Isabelle Lorey (2015) powerfully argues, the very conception of the “free” worker capable of selling labor-power is premised on whiteness and maleness; the idea that labor could securitize the life of the white, male artisan is enabled only through the unpaid labor of women in the reproductive sphere. Hence, even as a romantic fantasy, craftsmanship was never an equally distributed social imaginary. Gender and race were two dominant spheres expropriated to enable the exploitation and resistance of “workers,” coded male and white (Fraser, 2022).

Writing at the height of second-wave feminism, Braverman (1998/1974) paid curiously scant attention to the gendered dynamics of work, save to describe how women were being recruited into the degradation of skills through entry as a clerical workforce. In this aspect, the use of women for rote and often hazardous work was represented less as the degradation of skill for women—since they were presumably hired precisely because the work required little skill—but the degradation of work for men, who were being replaced as their jobs are broken down and simplified (see Braverman’s critique of Crozier, p. 90). Though bemoaned for the brutality of capital exploitation, women’s labor was historicized and politicized based on gender.

When later critiqued, Braverman insisted on gender being an “addendum” that could be retrofitted into an analysis of the labor process. While he admits to the importance of women’s work, he says that *LMC* was not designed to describe the totality of social production. In this, Braverman not only misses the point that women’s labor is historically constitutive of the labor process (existing as subsidy in the reproductive realm); he also failed to grapple with the unique affective dynamics of women’s work, which

could have sensitized him the problematic idealization of craftsmanship.

As economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer (2005) explains, the social lives of women are largely ruled by a thesis of “separate spheres,” assuming “distinct arenas for economic activity and intimate relations, with inevitable contamination and disorder resulting when the two spheres come into contact with each other” (p. 21). This is especially clear with feminized work in the reproductive realm, which is defined by a critical contradiction: that homework is meaningful but that this meaning can be corrupted if met with financial remuneration. This logic—of love being a wage for work—differs significantly from the dominant critiques of Mayo which were centered around the stupefying and conformist nature of workplace harmony.

This lapse reveals a blind spot lying in plain sight. Observing that Mayo had preferred the use of women as experimental subjects in the Hawthorne plant, Eva Illouz (2008) concludes that Mayo’s “initial findings were (unknowingly) gendered, reflecting women’s emotional culture, in which nurturance, care, display of affection, outward expressions of support, and linguistic communication were central to social identity and to the performance of social bonds” (p. 70). Illouz raises this also to criticize the appropriation of women’s experiences: having taken their accounts as depersonalized “data,” human relations managers were also quick to translate them into a masculine language of “science.”

Unfortunately, such gendered politics also tinged the critique of Mayo. The charge that Mayo softened the rugged quality of American individualism is unmistakably laced with the shadow of masculinist paranoia—a paranoia that prevented commentators from seeing what Christina Morini (2007) calls the “feminization of work” (p. 43). This marks the double move: the fact that men’s work would be increasingly modelled after the subordinate position of women under patriarchal capitalism, but that this turn would not be announced as capitalism’s tendency to dispossess, but a given racial and gendered tint to be blamed on “ambitious” women, “greedy” immigrants, “woke” intellectuals, and “desperate” third-world subjects (p. 43).

In this, the consequence of the blind spot of gender in *LMC* extended beyond an absence in the

discussion of women’s work. On one level, it demonstrated complicity to patriarchy. And in being nostalgic for the loss of masculinist craftsmanship, *LMC* also failed to launch a more incisive critique that could bring together solidarities across lines of difference. At its worst, this may even work against a global form of class consciousness, pitting populations against each other, each subject to the anxious attempt to securitize what remains of their privilege (Lorey, 2015). But even the casual ignorance of gender would lead us to miss the need to offer a more equitable imagination of how hybrid human-technological production can be structured democratically.

Returning to Braverman

So, why Braverman, why now? For one, Braverman is an orienting device. Even half a century after the publication of *LMC*, many of its theses hold true. Further, generations of scholars continue to be schooled not only by Braverman’s method and politics but also by his passion for bringing forth a more equitable future. As a gift then, *LMC* deserves to be cherished and critiqued in equal parts. The romantic inheritance of craftsmanship in *LMC* need not be denied; it must be prodded, challenged, and renewed.

Following and going beyond Braverman, we need to investigate not only the continued deskilling of work, but how this deskilling is not affectively and logically related back to the “cynicism and revulsion” that Braverman (1998/1974) hypothesized (p. 104). This might be one of the most insidious outcomes of the psychological turn in work culture: it has fractured the collective action that Braverman suggested would occur. Recent studies of work culture have documented the individualization and pathologization of unemployment and poverty (Chen, 2015; Gershon, 2017; Hong, 2022; Silva, 2015; Sharone, 2013). Instead of seeing the resentment, despair, anxiety, and apathy of un- and underemployed workers as legitimate responses to a cruel system, more people are apt today to name these feelings as evidence of laziness, indifference, indulgence and even mental illness. The “flawed system” as Ofer Sharone (2013) puts it, has become attributed to a “flawed self” (p. 70).

This is not unrelated to *LMC*’s thesis. As Sanford Schram’s (2015) study of welfare programs

notes, those seeking career aid are more likely to be subject to forced emotional and attitudinal counseling than skills training. And even in the presence of training, the nature of “skill” remains questionable. In my interviews, platform workers stated that institutionalized attempts at upskilling or reskilling were often trivial or unrecognized by hirers (Qiu, Hong, & Badger, 2023). The emphasis on “skills” only rationalized self-blame for the majority: they were underemployed because they did not pick “new” skills. Deskilling legitimated and contributed to their sense of worthlessness.

Under such circumstances, workers were apt to use literal labor-time to bolster their identities. Many were proud of their dedication to long, hard hours of work. In a full circle from *LMC*, Taylorism now embraces the psychological turn in work to justify bodies and time as the only commodity worth protecting for the working-class. This shows something: half a century after *LMC*, Braverman’s insights remain important to critique and heed.

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