

Braverman and Class Composition: Class Struggle Readings of the Labor Process

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ABSTRACT: Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* has had a complicated and enduring legacy with research on the labor process, including shaping Labor Process Theory (LPT) as an academic area of study. Fifty years on, the debates within and beyond universities have continued the changing nature of the labor process and the political implications. As LPT becomes a more accepted part of university institutions, this opens important questions about the connections to Braverman and Marx, as well as wider politics and the issue of intervention. This article starts by discussing the importance of the labor process, both to academic debates, as well as workers trying to make sense of their own work. It returns to discuss Braverman's unfinished contribution, reflecting on the project in which the book was situated. The main contribution of this article is to put forward a class composition reading of Braverman, drawing attention to a class struggle reading of the labor process. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates in LPT about the politics of research.

Introduction

Throughout the history of work, there have been many attempts to understand the labor process, its significance, and how to try and change it in various ways. Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* represented a critical turning point for Marxist analyses of the labor process. More recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in the topic of work and theories of the labor process. From a sometimes-marginal position within academic departments, research on work has become fashionable again – particularly with a focus on new forms of work and the possible futures of work.

Within academic research, Labor Process Theory (LPT) developed a critical approach to interrogating the antagonistic relationship between labor and capital in the workplace. There have long been constraints within LPT, whether focusing solely on the workplace, or the tensions inherent in academic Marxism. The resurgence in public and academic

interest in the topic of work has also seen a rising interest in LPT. As work returns to focus, LPT has provided an essential way into the historical debates on control, resistance, and technology (amongst others) and inspired new empirical research.

Alongside this, there has also been a revival of interest in radical Marxist traditions of workers' inquiry and workerist-inspired theories of class composition. These approaches have a shared starting point with the labor process. As Matheron argued, analyzing the labor process "makes sense" because "there has never been more Marxist 'evidence'" (Matheron 1999). However, by revisiting *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, we argue that we can refresh our understanding of the labor process by returning to class struggle readings – both of Braverman and the labor process itself.

This article starts by considering the importance of the labor process, both in academic research and

more widely. It then returns to Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, as well as his wider experiences and preceding writings, to reflect on contemporary debates about LPT. It considers Braverman's unfinished contribution and how the legacy of this has been used and interpreted. The next section puts forward a class composition reading of Braverman, focusing on a class struggle reading of the labor process. We reflect on the tensions of academic research and the politics of this, before concluding to discuss future directions.

The Importance of the Labor Process

The labor process is, in many ways, both an obvious and an unusual object of study. As Taylor famously found in his studies of the Midvale Steel Factory, workers already possess knowledge of the labor process, developed through their day-to-day experiences of work. The act of researching the labor process is, therefore, not an abstract inquiry, but instead one of accessing, developing, and sharing knowledge already in existence.

The publication of Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, two years before he died, is often considered the starting point of academic Labor Process Theory. It is sometimes noted that there was little serious development of labor process analysis between Marx's writing and the publication of Braverman's book. Indeed, some scholars argue that Braverman "launched" the labor process debate (Spencer 2000, 223). This formal "start" of LPT risks missing the wider contributions, both from workers, militants, and academics to the understanding of the capitalist organization of the labor process - as well as struggles against it.

Although Marx's *Capital* mainly focuses on capital, there are four important starting points for understanding the labor process under capitalism.

First, as Marx explains:

The capitalist buys labour-power in order to use it; and labour-power in use is labour itself. The purchaser of labour-power consumes it by setting the seller of it to work. By working, the latter becomes actually, what before he only was potentially, labour-power in action, a labourer. In order that his labour may re-appear in a commodity, he must, before all things, expend it on something

useful, on something capable of satisfying a want of some sort. Hence, what the capitalist sets the labourer to produce, is a particular use-value, a specified article (Marx 1867, 127).

Second, as this quote outlines, because the commodification of labor-power is the central feature of capitalism, it sets in motion a relationship of exploitation between workers (those with only labor-power to sell) and capitalists (the purchasers and exploiters of labor-power, who own the means of production). This exploitative economic relation is the foundation of class and therefore class struggle.

Third, Marx further unpicks the labor process by distinguishing between what he calls "the elementary factors of the labor-process; first, the personal activity...i.e., the work itself; second, the subject of that work; and third, its instruments" (Marx 1867, 127). These provide ways to understand the common elements of the labor process, but also start unpicking how it is organized in different contexts.

Fourth, Marx argues that the transaction between worker and capitalist needs to be followed "into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there stares us in the face 'No admittance except on business.'" Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is produced. We shall at last force the secret of profit making" (Marx 1867, 123). This "hidden abode" is an idea that is returned to in various ways throughout the LPT debates, both as a methodological problem, but also a political one. It also reiterates the point that the workplace is not a laboratory for researchers to study, but instead one populated by people and social relations. For researchers outside the "hidden abode," it is not readily apparent what happens inside of it and why.

Marx's own call for a workers' inquiry (1880) provides another way for thinking about both how and why we might want to connect the experiences of the labor process with the dynamics of capitalism. While the inquiry was often just a footnote in Marx's contribution, there is increasing evidence that it was used more widely at the time - and there are records that it was responded to (McAllister 2022). There is a history of different groups, from the Johnson-Forest Tendency, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, to Italian Workerists who tried to examine the labor process from the point

of view of workers (Haider and Mohandesi 2013; Woodcock 2014). Indeed, Thompson and Smith note that “Labor process debates over the years have become so identified with the text (*Labor and Monopoly Capital*) and commentaries on it that it is easy to forget that there was an important and independent prehistory” (Thompson and Smith 2000, 41), making specific reference to the Italian discussions on the class composition of the ‘mass worker.’

There are many reasons for studying the labor process at work. Throughout the history of work, there have been attempts to understand what the labor process is, its significance, and how to try and change it in various ways. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the topic of work. Famously, Taylor (1967) went to work in the Midvale Steel factory to understand the labor process. This was for specifically political aims: the development of a scientific theory of management and the overcoming of soldiering in the workplace.

The publication of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* triggered a series of academic debates that have gone on to shape LPT. As Smith argues, “*Labor and Monopoly Capital* cast a long shadow over debates on the nature of work in the late twentieth and twenty first centuries.’ ... from the 1970s ... the ‘labour process’ perspective on the ordering of work suggests that managerial action is chiefly motivated by capital-labour relations, by strategies of employers and their agents to try and control and stabilise the ‘unruly’ element/factor of production, namely living labour” (Smith 2009, 2).

As Smith notes, LPT has developed across the use of a series of concepts, including ‘labour power,’ the ‘control imperative,’ the ‘labour process as one moment in the cycle of production,’ ‘technology/tools,’ ‘purpose of production,’ ‘spatial divisions of labour,’ ‘conflict,’ ‘capitalism,’ and connection to ‘labour markets’ (Smith 2005, 208–209). Debates across these concepts have shaped the outlines of the field of study. An important part of these debates has focused on the issue of control in the workplace. For example, Edwards’ (1979) argument about ‘systems of control,’ or Goodrich’s (1975) ‘frontiers of control.’ These have been revisited considering changes in the economy, particularly around the organiza-

tion of work in call centres (for example, Fernie and Metcalf 1997; Taylor and Bain 1999). Part of these debates involved a challenge posed by Foucauldian approaches to understanding control, arguing against Marxist-inspired LPT.

However, more recently, there have been shifts in the debates within LPT, particularly focused on Paul Thompson and the ILPC conference. Thompson has long been an influential figure in LPT (Thompson 1989). However, Thompson (2023) has more recently been arguing for the establishment of LPT as a so-called ‘normal science,’ building on Ackroyd’s (2009) earlier arguments. Part of this is the need to reject the ‘gravedigger thesis’ of Marxism, severing the study of the labor process from a political project that positions workers as capable of overthrowing their own conditions (Thompson et al. 2022, 145). Following debates at the 2023 ILPC conference in Glasgow, there have been interventions comparing LPT with theories of class composition (Woodcock 2023). For example, Thompson and Pitts (2023) note the connection between *Labor and Monopoly Capital* and ideas of the ‘Italian Left,’ but explain that the main differences are as follows:

The first is that operaismo tends to read off from shifts in the management and reproduction of labour power coherent transformations in the composition of new class actors. The second is that it tends to use the method of ‘workers inquiry’ to connect the analysis of class composition with militant interventions to mobilise workers. The third is that it sees wider social, economic and political change being triggered by these emergent class subjects, leading to the suggestion of novel epochs or paradigms associated with particular forms or stages of division of labour and specific cutting-edge shifts in production (Thompson and Pitts 2023, XX).

However, they spend much of their argument criticizing “the strand of post-operaismo associated with Negri and his collaborators,” claiming that these “pitfalls ... cannot be put right with new, better class actors and new, better paradigm shifts” (Thompson and Pitts 2023, 173). While we acknowledge these concerns about deterministic readings of class composition, we argue that a return to Braverman’s

own political commitments reveals a more nuanced approach that avoids these pitfalls while maintaining a class struggle orientation.

This can be understood as a second retreat from Marxism in LPT, following the first attempt to do this in the late 1990s. It is worth revisiting some of the commentary on these debates. For example, Spencer argued that at that point “the retreat from Braverman and Marxism has created problems rather than resolved them. In particular, it has posed conceptual difficulties in connecting the labor process with capitalist production” (Spencer 2000, 239). Spencer notes that there is “a deep irony that after twenty-five years of Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital*” research “should once again be criticised for missing the specificities of capitalist production” (Spencer 2000, 239). With another 25 years since these comments, the warnings about the risk of LPT following ‘radical economics’ which “has charted an inexorable course towards synthesis with bourgeois economics – moves that exorcised its original subversive message” (Spencer 2000, 240) are vital to consider today.

Having established the importance of the labor process as an object of study and the contested terrain of contemporary LPT debates, we now turn to Braverman’s specific contribution and its unfinished nature.

Braverman’s Unfinished Contribution

Braverman’s contribution, as it is well-known, remained unfinished upon his death. Published in 1974, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* represents a sustained and substantial contribution to the theorization of the labor process. It was “a landmark work of Marxist scholarship” (Sweezy 1978, 31). In a foreword to the book, Paul Sweezy explains that reading the book was “an emotional experience” that seared into his consciousness “the sad, horrible, heartbreaking way the vast majority of my fellow countrymen and women, as well as their counterparts in most of the rest of the world, are obliged to spend their working lives.” He laments the “talent and energy which daily go into devising ways and means of making their torment worse, all in the name of efficiency and productivity but really for the greater glory of the great god Capital.” Sweezy wonders at

“humanity’s ability to create such a monstrous system” and expresses amazement “at its willingness to tolerate the continuance of an arrangement so obviously destructive of the well-being and happiness of human beings,” while imagining how different the world could be if the same effort were devoted to making work “the joyous and creative activity it can be” (Sweezy 1998, xxvii).

This is an experience that many later readers (the authors included) had when first engaging with the text. One of the most powerful justifications for writing the book was Braverman’s “nostalgia for an age not yet come into being” (Braverman 1998, 3).

In the intervening fifty years, that nostalgia has become increasingly urgent. Braverman was first and foremost a revolutionary. He was an industrial worker during the Great Depression. Having been a member of communist groups, he later joined the first Trotskyist party in the U.S. After losing his job in the steel industry during the Red Scare, he became an editor. The book is built upon Braverman’s experiences, as well as his writing in socialist publications, including on technology and automation (Braverman 1955) and the class structure in the U.S. (Braverman 1956). As Braverman died two years after the publication, this has left his legacy (as well as that of this book) open. However, Miriam Braverman explained:

Harry once said that he didn’t think he could write another book like *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. What he meant was that it represented a melding of his political and intellectual life with his experience as a factory worker. Harry saw this melding as the great gift of his years in the Trotskyist movement—internalizing an understanding of our world to make possible the living of a consciously socialist life (Braverman 1987, 7).

Scholars have since developed Braverman’s ideas in multiple directions, though often losing sight of the revolutionary project underpinning his work. It is important to remember that nostalgia for a socialist future underpinned the book, as part of a wider political project.

Labor and Monopoly Capital can be read as a book on its own terms. However, as part of a wider revolutionary project, the analysis of the labor process

is explicitly linked to Marxism. For example, at the start of the book, Braverman argues, “the critique of the capitalist mode of production, originally the most trenchant weapon of Marxism, gradually lost its cutting edge as the Marxist analysis of the class structure of society failed to keep pace with the rapid process of change” (Braverman 1998, 19). Braverman’s argument was also directed at other Marxists, showing the need to push Marxist theory into the world, making sense of the changes in the labor process, and the conditions of work. There is also a stinging critique of academic research from Braverman:

The cardinal feature of these various schools and the currents within them is that, unlike the scientific management movement, they do not by and large concern themselves with the organization of work, but rather with the conditions under which the worker may best be brought to cooperate in the scheme of work organized by the industrial engineer ... it is therefore not at all fortuitous that most orthodox social scientists adhere firmly, indeed desperately, to the dictum that their task is not the study of the objective conditions of work, but only of the subjective phenomena to which these give rise: the degrees of “satisfaction” and “dissatisfaction” elicited by their questionnaires (Braverman 1998, 96–97).

As Thompson and Smith have argued, following Braverman’s “premature death,” his “work became immutable: voiceless, eternal, to insult and injury, so that only others can mediate or ‘correct’ misinterpretation” (Thompson and Smith 2000, 41). For example, Jonna notes that

Labor and Monopoly Capital elicited a peculiar mixture of unease and ambivalence from academic writers—especially those on the left. Trapped between contradictory impulses—adamant dismissal on one side and reluctant praise on the other—reviews and assessments of Braverman’s work tend to adopt a tortuous sort of logic, praising his analysis for opening up a whole new area of analysis and crucial questions, but dismissing his answers, while barely considering his methods (Jonna 2015, 263).

Braverman’s legacy is uncomfortable for LPT in the university. See, for example, Burawoy’s (1996)

reluctant review of the ‘classic of its time.’ The most common interpretation is that it presents the “dual theses of the dominance of Taylorism and deskilling” (Thompson and Smith 2000, 41). For some, these have become the cornerstones of LPT, providing an academic route to developing LPT through subsequent studies of different kinds of work. LPT has an often-narrow focus on the issue of control at work. This focus on control is perhaps one of the most distinctive parts of LPT that has followed Braverman. However, this focus on control as one of the key dynamics of the labor process has been critiqued by Cohen (1987), who argues that control needs to be understood as part of the process of producing surplus value. Indeed, echoing *The American Worker* and other inquiries of the period, Cohen notes that workers are often concerned with pay and the intensity of labor, rather than the broader issue of control.

It is worth noting the criticism of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* that resistance and class struggle is muted – something that could also be applied to much of LPT analysis that follows. Indeed, Braverman’s analysis is “commonly accused of offering a sobering portrait of capital’s subjugation of labour, but no analysis of how and when the latter responds” (Brophy 2010, 475). See, for example, the often-quoted paragraph from Braverman that hints at an understanding:

[T]he hostility of workers to the degenerated forms of work which are forced upon them continues as a subterranean stream that makes its way to the surface when employment conditions permit, or when the capitalist drive for a greater intensity of labor oversteps the bounds of physical and mental capacity. It renews itself in new generations, expresses itself in the unbounded cynicism and revulsion which large numbers of workers feel about their work, and comes to the fore repeatedly as a social issue demanding solution (Braverman 1998, 104).

However, this is not developed in the book, nor was there the space for Braverman to develop it afterwards. It is this “subterranean stream” that we return to through a class composition reading of Braverman’s work.

Braverman and Class Composition

In his foreword to the original edition of *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Paul Sweezy (1998) highlights the unshakeable connection between Braverman's theoretical insights and their Marxist origins. The production of Marxist theory via the dialectical method is perhaps less remarkable of a sociological theorist of the 1970s in contrast to its rejection among some scholars today (even those who may once have been fellow travelers). However, it is the blending of Braverman's personal history of laboring, alongside his rigorous Marxist approach that sets his work apart. As Sweezy notes, "it is the combination of practical experience and theoretical acumen—a combination excluded almost by definition from our academic social sciences—which has enabled him to produce a contribution of surpassing importance to the understanding of the society we live in" (Sweezy 1998, xxvi).

Accepting the role of Marxist theory as the rudder of Braverman's contribution, the question of what Marxism means for him becomes central. On this question, Braverman's position is unambiguous. In a special issue of *Monthly Review* entitled, "Technology, the Labor Process, and the Working Class," he states that "Marxism is not merely an exercise in satisfying intellectual curiosity, nor an academic pursuit, but a theory of revolution and thus a tool of combat" (Braverman 1998, 313). For Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* is explicitly part of that project.

This necessitates a reevaluation of the role of class conflict as it appears in Braverman's work. In doing so, we start to see divergences within LPT as discussed above. These distinctions become more than just differences in research focus, but a difference in political priorities and perspective. The breadth of research that falls under the LPT banner may be attributed to a politically neutral 'scientific' objectivity (or so-called 'normal' science) wrapped up in its development as a purely academic pursuit. In doing so, however, LPT risks becoming the very thing that Braverman defined his work in contrast to. Indeed, on the question of Marx's "grave digger thesis," which forms the basis of many post-Marxists' post-ness, Braverman is again clear.

Even having delivered a stinging prophetic critique of the continued dominance of the Taylorist

control of work, of the manipulation of a reserve army of labor into emergent service work, and of the systematic deskilling and replaceability of the working class, his political commitment to working class agency was not shaken. This is, as Jonna argues, part of Braverman's project to develop "an understanding of the material conditions of labor and the structure and composition of the working class" (Jonna 2015, 269). Careful to avoid abstract over-determination, he states firmly that "I have every confidence in the revolutionary potential of the working classes of the so-called developed capitalist countries" (Braverman 1998, 315). It is clear then, that the foundations of Braverman's study are not simply a topography of the degradation of work or a lament for the social ills faced by the working class. Neither is it a communiqué from the front lines so the generals might strategize better. It is the beginning of a process of making sense of changes in the labor process on the account of the working class themselves. An attempt to read the changes in class composition.

However, one of the major problems with discussing "class composition" is that many of the foundational pieces that explore the concept do not reference it directly. For example, the approach was 'pioneered by Romano Alquati's reports on FIAT and later Olivetti. Though never using the term specifically, it was through these studies that the notion of class composition would emerge' (Wright 2002, 49). It is closely associated with the Italian *Operaismo* or Workerist traditions, with only some discussion in texts that have been translated.

One of the strongest definitions can be found in an excerpt from a book-length interview by Negri (1979). Negri argues that the definition of class composition comes from engaging with the changing nature of capitalist exploitation. He begins with "the organic composition of capital," which involves the relation between the constant and variable parts of capital and the rate of exploitation this relation implies. This relation is modified by both the constant and variable parts. Negri explains that "the variable part is qualified by the labour process, which is to say, by its capacity to develop labour-power and engage it in industry, in capitalist development, in relation to the type of relationship of composition determined

within a historical period” (Negri 1979, 1). The ways in which both parts reproduce themselves and the social level that is required are determined historically. For example, this involves a “certain quantity and quality of needs determined around a certain type of variable capital over a specific period” (Negri 1979, 1). This forms what Negri calls the technical composition of the working class.

The technical composition of class is only one part of Negri’s definition. It is combined with political composition, not limited only to the “objective factors of its organic relations and its reproduction” (Negri 1979, 1). Class composition is also “continually modified not only by needs, but by traditions of struggle, by existential, by cultural modalities, etc.; which is to say, by all those political, social, moral facts that come to determine, alongside the structure of the wage, the structure of the reproduction of the working class” (Negri 1979, 1).

It is therefore possible to read Braverman as deeply concerned with the changes to the technical composition of capitalism that he was confronted with. For example, Negri argues:

I think it entirely obvious that Taylorism, the rationalisation of production, what in Marxian terms can be called the entrance of large-scale industry, that this substantially modifies the political and technical composition of the working class. If, then, as began to happen, one goes on to view the new characteristics of struggle that this new type of worker determined; if one goes on to view the infinity of elements that defined this new proletarian figure in Turin (in the years that Turin changed, and from a small city in Piedmont became a large southern Italian metropolis) and one registers the enormous phenomena of change in class composition, then one also understands how this concept of class composition becomes extremely rich, as it permitted one to begin to define the referent of political action. I wouldn’t want it to be theoretically venturesome to claim that the concept of class composition is the only material basis from which to set out to speak of the subject. That is, a materialist conception of the subject is only given by passing through, filtering through class composition: only class composi-

tion provides us with the material and political complexity of the figure of the subject. A materialist analysis of the subject must pass by way of the analysis of class composition (Negri 1979, 1).

There is, therefore, much more to Braverman’s critique of Taylorism than just its narrow academic interpretation. Given the focus on technical changes to the labor process that Taylorism attempted, a more detailed class composition reading flows from this. In *Labor and Monopoly Capital* this can also be seen in the chapters on proletarianization and the character of service work.

Indeed, Braverman lays out two conditions of inquiry that mirror the terrains of technical and political composition:

It seems to me that a fruitful discussion of the working class as a class conscious of and struggling in behalf of its own interests will begin to revive as two conditions begin to be satisfied: first, as a clear picture of the class in its present conditions of existence is formed by patient and realistic investigation; and second, as experience begins to accumulate of the sort which will teach us to better understand the state of mind and modes of struggle of this class (Braverman 1998, 314).

However, it is also worth bearing in mind that the development of class composition from this context is also part of a wider argument. As Salar Mohandesi has argued, “Instead of looking to the relationship between an unconscious potentiality and a conscious actuality, the model of class composition takes advantage of the dual meaning of the word in order to trace the correlation between the manner in which a class is composed, or how it is materially constituted, and the manner in which the class composes itself, or how it actively combines the different parts of itself to construct a whole” (Mohandesi 2013, 85).

This is therefore an argument against the notion of class consciousness. The distinction between technical and political compositions “replaces, in a way, the traditional relationship between ‘class in itself’ and ‘class for itself’” (Mezzadro and Colectivo Situaciones 2005). This is a break from orthodox Marxist theorizations of class consciousness and the role of a party or external militants.

The problem with class consciousness is it can cause two problems for research into the labor process. First, it can distort the relationship between the research and workers. Class consciousness implies that most workers have a kind of false consciousness and need the “truth” of exploitation and class struggle brought to them from outside. Second, it can lead to a misunderstanding of why workers engage in struggles in the first place. Workers do “not fight together because of the consciousness that ‘they are all exploited.’ Struggles of workers arise from concrete work conditions, from actual situations of exploitation” (Mohandesi 2013, 85). This reaches the crux of why class composition matters: “workers’ struggles take different forms (in the past, in different regions or sectors, etc.) because the concrete labour-process and therefore the material form of exploitation differs” (Mohandesi 2013, 85).

Class composition is therefore an attempt to understand class struggle by returning to the labor process and the “hidden abode” of production. As Matheron (1999) explains, analyzing the labor process “makes sense” because “there has never been more Marxist ‘evidence’ needed to try and understand not only how class is formed, but also the directions of struggle. This goes beyond just studying the supposedly objective phenomena in the workplace. As Sergio Bologna explains,

for us class composition meant something quite other than simply the structure of the workforce and its stratification by job definitions, skill levels or income. This wholly sociological and trade unionist interpretation was quite different to what we understood class composition meant the synthesis of the struggle experiences, the subjective attitudes, the ideological sedimentations and the spontaneous behaviour of a particular class aggregate. Defining factors such as qualifications, skill-level, age, place of origin (i.e., all so-called ‘objective’ elements) were certainly included within the notion of class composition, but did not constitute its substance (Bologna 1991, 12).

This connection has been made by other groups that were undertaking workers’ inquiry. For example, with the Johnson-Forest Tendency this involved inquiry as a starting point for the development of

politics. In the second part of *The American Worker*, Romano and Stone explain, “Only by understanding the actual conditions of life and the actual strivings of an actual working class at a certain stage of its development, can the problems of humanity as a whole be understood. Those seeking in the modern barbarism for a unifying principle by which to understand the past and build the future, must turn their attention to the daily degradation of the individual and the concrete struggle for liberation which is developing in the working class” (Romano and Stone 1946, 169).

Similarly, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* were interested in understanding how the “new structure of the labour process” was leaving “its mark on the daily life and the consciousness of the workers” to understand “the consequences ... for the self-organization of the workers” (van der Linden 1997, 19).

The theorization of class composition starts from the experience and subjectivity of workers. Tronti argued for a “ferocious unilaterality” that “was to be no less partial than that of capital; what it alone could offer, however, was the possibility of destroying the thralldom of labour once and for all” (quoted in Wright 2017, 38). Instead of starting from how capital controls workers in the workplace, the aim is to understand the ‘political leap’ that Tronti outlines: “the leap that the passage through production provokes in what we can call the composition of the working class” (quoted in Haider and Mohandesi 2013, 49). This, therefore, takes up Braverman’s challenge: how to turn the nostalgia for a future into a reality. This starts with understanding the conditions, changes, and struggles over the labor process, through which workers are formed into a class capable of transforming society.

The Politics of the Labor Process

Throughout this article, we have discussed the contribution and different legacies of Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Fifty years after the publication of the text, it remains a controversial and sometimes uncomfortable text. Taken as the starting point for LPT, the book is often read on its own terms, separated from the wider revolutionary project of Braverman. It is, following Spencer’s (2000) previous argument, deeply ironic that an argument

about needing to take seriously the changes in the technical composition of work can lead to arguments for depoliticizing research.

Part of the uncomfortable nature of Braverman's book is that it was not primarily an academic text. Like Marx's *Capital*, the book was intended as a political intervention, not as fuel for university debates. The trajectory of LPT, particularly with leading figures like Paul Thompson, away from Marxism, opens a clear gap with Braverman's foundational work. For example, Thompson and Pitts argue that "researching the labour process may be political in the sense that we make choices about what, who and where to study...however, removing the boundary between research and explicitly political intervention is a different matter. The issue is not about the specific politics, but the blurring of a boundary that may affect the plausibility and legitimacy of the militant research they undertake" (Thompson and Pitts 2023, 172).

This speaks to the risk that Spencer (2000) warned of with the institutionalization of radical ideas into the university and the removal of their subversive content. Braverman's work cannot have its political content removed or sanitized, given how explicitly it features throughout. The production of knowledge is political, often more so than it may first appear (Althusser 2017). The ability to claim that one's own research is non-political is, in fact, a deep political statement. The question of research legitimacy is, indeed, fraught with political challenges that cannot be resolved through appeals to methodological neutrality.

If LPT is one legacy of Braverman, the development of theories of class composition has the potential to be another, subversive legacy. The labor process matters for understanding contemporary society. The way in which work is organized has implications for the conditions and struggles of workers across the economy. This is not to say that politics only begins with the labor process, but there is no denying the connection between the labor process and the subjectivity of class. In workplaces across the world, the 'subterranean stream' of workers responding to their technical composition has not dried up. The separation of the labor process from

politics denies the agency of workers to change their own conditions - and in the process address the political dimensions of why those conditions exist in the first place. Depoliticizing the labor process leaves academic research as a commentator on those conditions, hoping that elites will adapt policies or enact change on behalf of workers.

Instead, the ideas of class composition provide a way to effectively build on the contributions of Labor and Monopoly Capital. Rather than trying to build an independent theory of LPT divorced from politics, this is a militant approach of trying to combine research with struggles from the workplace. This is not about bringing a consciousness from outside but instead trying to understand the dynamics of struggles that relate to specific technical compositions in the workplace. This approach is not without challenges. Combining research with workplace organizing raises methodological questions about access, representation, and the relationship between researchers and workers. However, such politically engaged labor process research can produce insights unavailable to conventional academic approaches while contributing directly to workplace struggles.

This may not meet the criteria for 'legitimacy' in a strict academic sense, but the relationship between struggles and knowledge production offers the possibility to develop both together. Indeed, the strength of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* is that it came out of that relationship for Braverman. Ultimately, this is not about being accepted within universities or policy making circles, but about how we can collectively turn our "nostalgia for an age not yet come into being" into a reality (Braverman 1998, 3). Clearly, this is a different aim to what Thompson and Pitts (2023) are arguing for. There is a risk here that the arguments can talk past each other, with different aims, stakes, and motivations. However, the continuing debates in LPT on Braverman mean that the specter of political research on the labor process is yet to be exorcised. Long may Braverman be a reminder of a very different way of doing research.

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