

Decomposing Books, Records and Desks: Braverman and Class Solidarity after the Professional Managerial Class

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In *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) Harry Braverman pointedly compared a chemical operator's work of reading and checking dials to the pedestrian ability of reading a clock (155). By posing the question of whether it is harder to read a dial than to tell time, he challenged the idea that outstanding skills are needed to fill the positions that manage and control the labor processes after a division of labor. He wrote that such tasks of reading instruments and keeping charts "endear" the middle classes who classify these straightforward faculties as technical skills warranting professionalization, higher wages and levels of authority.

Such attitudes among the working class are examined in the chapter, "The Middle Layers of Employment." In it, Braverman focuses on workers who "act professionally" (80) on behalf of capital. Among workers in the middle layers, there are hierarchical gradations between management in terms of authority, as well as between staff, which are indicated by technical expertise and a "tenuous working independence" (281). According to Braverman, possessing either authority or technical expertise represents an "unavoidable delegation of responsibility" (280). If authority is the defining character that fixes the middle layers between disciplining the working masses and the role of selling their labor power to the bour-

geoisie then you don't need a technical skill to wield authority. Possessing authority, or being proximate to power, isn't a skill set, it's an unfixed sociohistorical economic circumstance (Coombs, 1978). While I read Braverman's dials vs. clocks query as faintly facetious, my contention in this commentary develops from this analogy to challenge conflation of authority with skill as it appears in scientific management.

The most insulated from proletarianization are employees who have less to do with the technical labor process and more to do with overseeing it. Within Braverman's purview of the labor process, the closer one is to power, the less prone or motivated one might be to possess an actual technical skill set at all. Braverman's conception of the middle layer and his final notes on skill were adopted by the American New Left as the "professional managerial class" which has been, and continues to be, a controversial category complicating the practical theorization of working-class composition and struggle (Camfield, 2020; Carter & Choonara, 2022; Dixon, 1977; Graeber, 2014; Haider, 2020; Ikeler, 2020; Livingstone, 2024; Tarnoff, 2020).

Considering these ongoing debates, I will recount how Braverman outlined the implementation of scientific management as it relates to division within the working class, particularly between the

proletarian working-class wage earner and managerial class wage earner. The division of technical and conceptual labor is a site of class struggle for control over skill as “working-class knowledge” and this struggle requires a practical theorization of professional and managerial workers as members of the working class. Braverman’s framework of the “middle layers” already established that professional workers do not constitute a class of their own, but rather a sociological portrait painted for the benefit of capital. I focus on Braverman’s framework to challenge the concept of the professional managerial class because it does not contribute to a practical understanding of working-class composition and therefore hinders working-class solidarity.

Institutionalizing the Middle

Braverman recounted the first of Taylor’s principles of scientific management as the systematic gathering of data about the labor process. The second principle is the concentration of this knowledge as the “exclusive province” of management, which leads to the third principle, the monopolization of knowledge of the labor process to dissect and control every stage of the workers’ production (82). Regarding the second principle, Taylor advanced the notion that the practical collection of data and the application of scientific management is 1) beyond the logistical capacity of a worker who 2) has no legible reason to prioritize efficiency in the labor process, and 3) whose experiences do not accord with the laws of science.

The third principle can be summarized as the transfer of epistemic control of workers’ knowledge of themselves to those who can afford the time to study it “properly” (80) as well as the confinement of the results of such studies to those who own the means of production, the machines and factories. Taylor clarified that even if a workman was suited to oversee scientific management, “it would be physically impossible for them to do this at his machine and at a desk at the same time” since it must occur in a room full of books, records, and desks (80). This spatial division of labor serves as a vivid metaphor for the growth and reproduction of the managerial worker in the labor market, especially that which is

reproduced in places of study and training such as the university. Through the hierarchical reorganization of the labor process according to Taylor’s rationale, the installation of systems of power and class antagonisms is symptomatic of not only a systematic division of labor, but an institutionalized deskilling of the working class, executed as the second principle: the separation of conception from execution.

In Braverman’s accounts of craft labor, prior to the division of labor and the consolidation of monopoly capitalism as corporate firms and financialized regimes, craft workers cultivated a holistic and unified labor process. Braverman cautioned that we should not consider mental and manual labor as distinct operations of concept and execution respectively because mental labor is subject to being “subdivided rigorously according to the same rule [as technical labor]” (79). Braverman’s later chapters examine how scientific management encroached on workers often imagined as middle class or “white collar”—specifically clerical workers. The very workers installed in Taylor’s rooms of books and desks, who record and file the “science of work,” were not exempt from these calculations (79).¹

The variances in control and wages among the working class are theorized as a decomposition of labor processes that deskills one sector as it poises another for it. By recognizing the same scientific management of the labor processes in industrial production or manufacturing in office work, these chapters conclude that clerical workers are part of the working class. To further the contention that authority is not necessarily commensurate with skill, debates about who and what is the ‘professional managerial class’ are often discussions of workers’ behavioral or occupational associations with skill and authority (Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 1976; Haider, 2020; Ikeler, 2020; Liu, 2021). The technical conditions of scientific management in office work were much slower to appear than the expansion of the sector, which at some point did exude characteristics of authority and greater pay and this gave the impression that a very large middle class was emerging.

¹ See a case study of publishing workers discussed by Ursula Huws in the interview in this volume.

Some Social Qualities of the Institutionally Middle

In his study of the American white collar worker, C. Wright Mills (1951) connected the expansion of the American middle class to the central problem of modern capitalism: the necessity of identifying, circulating, and succeeding in new markets, “As far-flung and intricate markets come into being, and as the need to find and create even more markets becomes urgent, ‘middle men’ who move, store, finance, promote, and sell goods are knit into a vast network of enterprises and occupations” (67).² Braverman wrote that there is a tendency to define the class position of office labor based on this initial impression, or “secondary characteristics” (303). Secondary characteristics abstract the apparent changing technical composition of office work from both workers and commentators of labor, “It was not the color of the employees’ collar...but rather the whole complex of social position and position in the enterprise and the labor process that these terms symbolized” (241). Braverman shares a colorful diatribe in a footnote on this tendency: “The continued use of this terminology [white collar] long after the realities behind it have disappeared is one of the greatest sources of confusion in the analysis of this subject” (241). He pronounces it sociologically apologetic, “serviceable by those who are alarmed by the rustles of a more realistic terminology” (241). The terminology retains its “occupational flavor from the engineers, managers and professors at the top of the hierarchy, while its impressive numerical masses are supplied by the millions of clerical workers, in much the same way that stars of an opera company occupies the front of the stage while the spear-carriers provide the massive chorus” (241).

Braverman implores us not to study the middle classes in occupational or social broad strokes,

2 These occupations arose from what Mills identified as the “industrial mechanics” of the modern to neoliberal capitalist profit motive which expands Braverman’s study of the rationalization of the labor process to the rationalization of economies. Mills’ analysis of the political economic conditions for the appearance of the white collar worker is like a prescient incantation of monopoly capitalism and neoliberal globalization, “In response to the largeness and predatory complications of business, the crises of slump, the nationalization of the rural economy and small-town markets, the flood of immigrants, the urgencies of war and the march of technology disrupting social life, government increases its co-ordinating and regulating tasks.” (69)

and this footnote hints at the class antagonism of such a flattening sociological approach. Braverman emphasized this nuance in his analysis of the “middle layer” of employment comprising of “the engineering, technical and scientific cadre; the lower ranks of supervision and management; ‘professional’ employees occupied in marketing, financial and organizational administration, as well as in hospitals, schools and government administration” (Coombs, 1978, 88). Like proletarians, the middle layer employees do not have financial or occupational independence from the bourgeoisie, and like the bourgeoisie, the middle layer is not a class that can be determined by job category alone, but rather by its proximity and possession of authority over the labor process and wealth represented by their larger share of surplus value. In the case of the middle layers, the salaried relation seems to merely mediate authority as the middle layers’ duty and bonus (Braverman, 1974, 280).

Two decades earlier, Mills called white collar employees “assistants of authority” operating with “borrowed prestige” and he too invited us to see white collar workers with the nuance of their “class situation”: the source and amount of income. For the new middle class, occupation has been the main source of income, instead of property: “This is the clue to many differences between the old and new middle classes, as well as to the contrast between the older world of the small propertied entrepreneur and the occupational structure of the new society...In terms of property, the white-collar people are...in exactly the same property-class position as the wage workers” (71). Conclusively, for Mills, “[class] position is more definable in terms of their relative differences from other strata than in any absolute terms.” (75) Mills’ positioning of a wage earner’s relationship to property complements Braverman’s charge to study workers’ approximation to authority in the organization of the labor process and this should be understood as a vital conjugation in the study of, and strategy against, working-class dispossession.

For Coombs (1978), it had not been clear if Braverman located the character of authority at the economic, political, or ideological level but regardless predicted that employees of the middle layers would be proletarianized soon enough (89–91).

Braverman pointed out that in the earlier development of specialized and technically trained labor the middle layers occupied a privileged position in the labor market simply because supply had not caught up to the latent needs of capital accumulation which had been developing towards what we now know is neoliberal capitalism.

In a survey of non-managerial professional employees conducted in Canada between 1982–2016, Livingston (2019) observed that an increasing number of professional employees had experienced a decline in technical design and organizational decision-making which correlates the proletarianization of the professional workers³ to a gradual ceding of authority within their technical labor process (84). This development conforms to the second principle of scientific management, the separation of conception from execution, insofar as the professional worker initially entered a favorable wage relation in exchange for specialized or technical skills appraised with authority over design and decision-making.

Misrecognizing Class, Misrecognizing the Strategy

In 2013, Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich expressed that what has happened to the professional managerial class is a recursive situation, the same that craft workers and American industrial workers underwent at the beginning and end of the twentieth century (Livingston, 2019, 153). Notably, Braverman did not theorize the middle layers as a class. His chapter on the middle layers functions as an addendum to his analysis of clerical workers by conveying that new forms of employment that emerge out of the implementation of scientific management will also be deconstructed by its principles, that “the capitalist finds in this infinitely malleable character of human labor the essential resource for the expansion of capital” (Braverman, 1974, 39). Here Braverman’s analysis reveals Taylor’s “room” of books and records as a waiting room for deskilling, or proletarianization.

If the middle layer represents a latent surplus within sectors of formal subsumption, Ehrenreich’s professional managerial class could be understood as a surplus of what Huws (2019) calls “creative labour.” Capital needs both deskilled and creative labor in its control because capitalism must continuously develop the technologies to divide labor and control the labor process. This spells the taming of a revolutionary capacity: the desire to make, communicate, analyze and solve. Creative labor can appear and function as authority, but it is part of working-class knowledge systems. For Braverman, knowledge is inseparable from the practice of labor and such quality education will only pervade the working class when “the antagonisms in the labor process between controllers and workers, conception and execution, mental and manual labor are overthrown” (Braverman, 1974, 308). These antagonisms are marked and reproduced by concepts of the working class that are also subdivided in sociological broad strokes, coded by occupation or institutional affiliation, rather than unified in economic realities.

At Braverman’s funeral in 1976, Barbara Ehrenreich spoke of the importance of Braverman’s analysis as a bridge between Marxist analysis and the concerns of her generation, the New Left (Winnant, 2022). This eulogy was delivered shortly before the publication of “The New Left: A Case Study in Professional Managerial Class Radicalism” (Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 1976). The Ehrenreichs’ formulation of the professional managerial class should be understood as owing much to Braverman’s brief chapter on the middle layers, as well as to Braverman’s analysis of monopoly capital broadly. The Ehrenreichs did not take the “professional managerial class” as a class in formal dialogue with Braverman’s analysis of the middle layers because the Ehrenreichs’ case study is not about technical composition or proletarianization. It’s mainly a polemic specifically on the historically situated class contradictions among their own milieu (New Left professionals and students participating in civil rights, anti-war and free speech movements) and how they express themselves behaviorally and discursively in their relationship and commitments to such social justice movements.

3 Livingston (2019) argues that “professional employees should be understood as among the direct producers of profits (i.e. collective labour)” and defines professional employees as those who “are hired to do a wide variety of forms of labour under the control of employers and managers but all primarily contribute to the collective labour process.” (142, 147)

In this sense, invoking the professional managerial class as a “class” is a regrettable stylistic misnomer for a polemic that attempted self-reflexivity but conveyed guilt, strove to engage would-be class enemies as potential comrades, but instead instituted a discursive quagmire. The debates cannot really be recapitulated in full here but each underscores its response with an important question: what does the theoretical category of a professional managerial class have to do with organizing the working class? (Camfield, 2020; Carter & Choonara, 2022; Dixon, 1977; Graeber, 2014; Haider, 2020; Ikeler, 2020; Livingstone, 2024).

I think this question was at the core of the Ehrenreichs’ polemic when they emphasized that the genesis of the professional managerial class is “predicated on the atomization of working-class life and culture and the appropriation of skills once vested in the working class” (19). They concluded that text by offering four recommendations for solidarity between the newly radicalized and the long proletarianized, the last of which rings a Bravermanian note, stating that these camps should confront each other over issues of knowledge, skills and culture.

Concerning Reorganization of Knowledge, Skill and Culture

In the last chapter of *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Braverman conveys the proletarian project beyond seizing the means of production as we may know it, “The worker can regain mastery over collective and socialized production only by assuming the scientific, design, and operational prerogatives of modern engineering. Short of this, there is no mastery over the labor process” (307). Seizing the means of production is not only about controlling the means of production but wrestling with capitalist attitudes that have institutionalized deskilling as skilling along divisions of mental and physical ability, factory and office, laborer and professional. In this respect, the Ehrenreichs were correct to problematize the university as a laboratory of class consciousness, even though they were rhetorically hapless to diagnose the problem as a “class.”

Haider (2020) discusses the classical Marxist formula of the “merger” between the bourgeois intellect

and the working-class struggle to address the problems of ideology among the professional managerial class. The formula “recognizes that [an understanding of exploitation] doesn’t happen spontaneously: it has to be constructed within organizational forms that undermine the elevated position of intellectuals and facilitate the flourishing of the intellectual capacities of workers.” Braverman cited Georges Sorel who wrote that “the modern factory is a field of experiment constantly enlisting the worker in scientific research,” and Albert Thierry, who said “the simplest worker is a physicist” (307). Whether the middle layers can become organized for revolutionary means (rather than capital accumulation) concerns a reorganization of knowledge, skill and culture, towards cultivating working-class knowledge of—and for—itsself.

While changes in capitalist labor process recursively unsettle the economic realities of middle arrangements that should intensify the contradiction and swell the ranks of the working class, such a hopeful theory of mass proletarianization overlooks the variable of political ideology (Carter & Choonara, 2022). Put quite bluntly, “Even if the PMC is proletarianized, this doesn’t mean it’s any more likely to develop revolutionary ideas” (Haider, 2020).

Until recently, Canada had the highest level of general post-secondary education completion in the world.⁴ If we graph that demographic onto findings that non-managerial professional workers attained knowledge that increasingly exceeds that required by their jobs, a condition that implores us to recognize the “underemployment of general intellect” (Livingston, 165), then how are workers socialized over generations of lived and expectant economic security in the sanctuary of higher education and the middle layers going to politically respond to the changes in their labor process—to proletarianization?

Graeber (2014) described “middle classness” as a qualitative (social and political) rather than quantitative (economic) category. It is first and foremost, “a feeling that the fundamental social institutions that surround one—whether police, schools, social service offices, or financial institutions—ultimately exist for your benefit” (76). This describes an attachment (I would even go as far as

4 At the time of writing, Canada has been surpassed by South Korea.

to say an entitlement) to liberal democratic institutions that have historically reproduced a feeling of social and political security. Graeber does not call this false consciousness, but his paradigm of “middle classness” describes a profoundly metaphysical attachment to maintaining a positive relationship to authority and the provisionally outlined distinction from the economically proletarian.

The Fictions Of, and For, a Fictional Class

Siegfried Kracauer’s study of the salaried masses during the Weimar Republic prefigured Braverman’s formulation of the middle layers and the Ehrenreich’s professional managerial class. He offered a pessimistic foreshadowing, “For the life of the salaried employees desperately needs some adequate explanation for the constraint that weighs upon it,” putting economic realities squarely on the impetus of ruling class storytellers, “and the more the ruling class dispenses with the proper concepts the more this life will lose its way” (Kracauer, 1998, 96).

These ruling class “stories” woven for the salaried masses of Weimar Germany predate and go beyond Kracauer’s interwar example (Lowe, 2024). Such abstractions are part of an accumulation of racial and gendered abstractions that mobilize powerful cultural productions to cognitively produce modern European colonial understandings of morality and control (Bohrer, 2018, 67). These stories are echoed in the patriarchal public life under Italian fascism,⁵ told as leisure practices established throughout the British colonies,⁶ and offered as a palliative to mounting employment dissatisfaction, economic recession, and withering democratic participation because of the absence of social conflict and political partici-

pation in public or communal life⁷ (Dogliani, 2024; Mowatt, 2022; Spracklen, 2023).

Drawing from the work of Anne McClintock expanding on the gendered and sexual dynamics of colonial capital, and many others critiquing the limits of feminist and Marxist theory halted in the political economic welfare of heterosexual middle-class white woman, Bohrer (2018) identifies the middle-class as a keystone of racial domination and colonial power:

One of the lasting effects of the heterosexualist coloniality of power, McClintock argues, is that there exists a kind of hierarchical inventory of human beings, one that justified not only the subjugation of non-white and colonised people, but that of women and workers generally. In this regime, the English middle-class male was placed at the pinnacle of evolutionary hierarchy. White English middle class women followed (68).

To circle back to my claim that authority is not tantamount to skill, but an unfixed sociohistorical economic circumstance, Edward Said (1993) furthered the notion of authority as a quality of social positioning that culturally deputizes some layers of society to supersede the humanity and dignity of others. He wrote that imperialism and colonialism are not simply processes of capital accumulation, they are also “impressive ideological formations.” These cultural and epistemological formations advance the premise that “certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination: the vocabulary of classic nineteenth-century imperial culture is plentiful with words and concepts like ‘inferior’ ... ‘subordinate peoples,’ ‘dependency,’ ‘expansion,’ and ‘authority’” [my emphasis] (9).

Upon the retrieval of such succinct and compelling designs, the liberal imagination is calibrated to perform as a venerable “non-class” that is neither intellectually proletarian nor economically bourgeois, and therefore politically magnetized to any power whatsoever. These ideological formations of sheer difference, yet pointed classlessness, implicates the

5 Sports, leisure, entertainment, particularly cinema, literature, theatre, music, and even folklore were offered to middle-class Italians with an attendant emphasis on youth, physical ability, and a masculinist performance hierarchy: “In the 1930s the new middle classes could access rituals, clubs, and leisure environments once exclusive to the aristocratic and upper middle class. Following Mussolini’s example, the younger party leaders each chose at least one discipline to practice publicly, and often controlling it as if a fief.” This passage offers a sense of how middle-class proximity to authority could manifest as the opportunity to practice culturally and socially, not necessarily economically, as elites (Dogliani, 2024).

6 Mowatt (2022) discusses how consensus for British expansionism was established through a ‘pedagogy of touring imperialism animated with cultural products such as modern travel agencies, public exhibitions and children’s books like *Baby Patriots*, an ABCs of imperial ideology’ (6).

7 Looking beyond Adorno’s critique of the culture industry, Spracklen (2023) argues that rationalized leisure has limits within counterhegemonic spaces of leisure, such as heavy metal subcultures which resist mass consumption by nature of its formalism and historical solidarity with anti-establishment communities. (290-294)

Ehrenreich's recommendations: how will the militant working class confront Braverman's middle layers, Mills' new and old middle classes, and Ehrenreich's professional managerial class, over these fictions as compelling as they have been, and to the extent that histories of exploited labor are established as settler-colonial forces and are today reinforced by racialized and migrant labor?

In Livingston's contemporary yet historically spanning analysis of non-managerial professional workers, the data shows that opposition to the profit motive has increased significantly among professional employees and service workers experiencing underemployment. However, this remains a minority view. While that does not suggest the "emergence of coherent oppositional class consciousness among non-managerial employees," the data does "indicate a convergence in the political attitudes of professional employees and more traditional working-class employees" (Livingstone, 2019, 164). Here is a hopeful finding, but class is continuously and necessarily being made more intricate as we move through the history of capitalism, carefully accounting for its historical fractures to clarify and reground various theoretical commitments to addressing internal antagonisms founded on institutional and socialized division of working-class knowledge.

Conclusion

With resistance to the sociological broad strokes that Braverman cautioned against, my discussion of Braverman's middle layers and "professional managerial class" seeks to clarify these terms as categories of the working class that have developed from an analysis of workers' relationship to power, authority and skill mediated by the second principle of scientific management, the separation of conception and execution—not classes unto themselves. Where conception and execution have been separated in the labor process, antagonisms become embedded in the working class. Arguing that these antagonisms constitute a separate class unto themselves is a distraction from the task of theorizing it as a political force by rebranding the working class as a sociological object for capitalists and socialists alike to exploit or pander to.

So, what does solidarity look like? Toscano (2023) wrote of class politics as "the practical negation of mass psychology" of the kind that inflames the liberal imagination as such (22). There are stakes in not only regaining control of our labor processes, protecting the interdependence of conception and execution, but in the working classes' understanding indeed, of itself, that is illegible to the oppressor, "To cleave any conception of the proletariat away from the petty psychology of the masses is especially vital when our political imaginaries, across the spectrum, are saturated by strange replicas and refractions of a 'classical' class struggle that remains an object of nostalgic desire and misrecognition" (22). A politics of external illegibility can spare us from re-narrativizing our own histories of political (mis)calculations—to instead strategize strange and surprising solidarities across sectors of conception and execution.

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