

Braverman and the Long Arc of Labor Process Theory: An Interview with Ursula Huws

Steff Huì Cí Ling
Simon Fraser University

Ursula Huws is a foundational scholar in the political economy of labor and digital technologies. In the 1970s, Huws published groundbreaking studies investigating the role of computing and telecommunications in the rise of telework, especially as it related to gender and women's work. She is among a pantheon of scholars whose intellectual and manual contributions affirm the significance of praxis in labor process theorization, not only as an academic but as a figure who comes from the intellectual tradition of the working class. Within this tradition, Huws most significantly extended feminist and Marxist analysis of the labor process and union militancy to social reproduction and digital labor. Her major contributions to critical analyses of work include coining the term "cybertariat" in the early 2000s to grasp the transformations in the composition of the working class and its labor processes. In talking to Huws, the conversation affirms that theorizing is best done by workers, a status held by both she and Braverman.

The following interview was conducted between Vancouver and London in June 2024. It has been edited for length and clarity.

Steff Huì Cí Ling: What feminist commitments can those of us who draw from Braverman's framework make in our analysis of capitalism's gendered and racialized labor schemes?

Ursula Huws: I first came across *Labor and Monopoly Capital* some time after I moved from London (where I had been a trade union activist in the publishing industry) to Leeds, in the North of England, in 1976. Over the next two years, while continuing to work in publishing, I was involved in setting up a Trade Union and Community Resource and Information Centre [TUCRIC] which opened in 1978. Braverman greatly influenced the thinking that informed this development.

I think there are two key points. First, it made office workers visible as workers, which was particularly important for feminism because the office workforce at the time was overwhelmingly female. Second, it made technological determinism visible. For me, one of the central messages from Braverman was the idea of commodification and seeing the development of technology as part of a process of commodification that could apply across a whole range of different goods and services.

That attention to commodification was shaped distinctly by your feminist perspective, while many people who are influenced by Braverman in your generation focus more on the labor process — would you be able to speak to that a little bit more?

I think he was actually taken up in quite a reactionary way in the field of labor sociology. A lot of male sociologists at the time were challenged by feminism and the people who didn't want to see office work as real workers mainly focused on male dominated forms of labor, with particular models of trade unionism like auto workers, steel workers, transport workers, etc. A new generation of women and feminist researchers seized on Braverman as a way of pointing out that office work was subjected to the same processes.¹ There was a big overlap between those researchers and new forms of organization—trade unionization—among office workers, and women seeking to become more active in their trade unions. One example here would be the feminist trade union activist Jane Barker who wrote a paper on word processor operators with Hazel Downing.² The white male sociologists liked to try and defend their territory against all these feminists by insisting on the importance of the struggles of organized workers, especially in the auto industry.

The auto industry played a particular role in that period, one that was relatively easy for middle class white guys, including PhD students, to infiltrate and to construct themselves as part of the working-class struggle. There was a lot of that going on, and they searched the literature for ways that they could justify what they were doing as part of the vanguard. Braverman certainly gave them some tools for that and quite a few men used such experiences to build academic careers for themselves in labor sociology. These days, we see another generation doing much the same thing in relation to platform delivery work.

There's a historical pattern whereby new technologies don't really get seriously implemented until there's a good reason for capitalists to do so and that tends to happen after a big financial crisis. Then they need to restructure labor and the first groups they have their sights on are obviously the best organized ones because they're the most expensive and the ones that are fighting them! So, it's not surprising that print workers and auto workers were in the firing line after the 1973 crisis. In the case of the auto industry, robotics came in and in the case of the print industries, it was digitalization of printing processes. But that meant that these were fields where new technologies were aggressively introduced and they became early sites for the application of these new technologies.

Until 1978, I had been working in the publishing industry and was quite closely involved in seeing up close what that meant. I could see what the introduction of computerization meant for print workers and by extension for editorial workers and other workers who were members of the journalist union. At the time in the UK there were about ten different unions across the printing and publishing industries, many of whom were office workers. For example, there was union called NATSOPA [National Society of Operative Printers and Assistants] and one called SOGAT [Society of Graphical and Allied Trades], both of which were primarily made up of white-collar workers and then there was the NGA [National Graphical Association] whose members were mostly typographers, normally considered to be skilled blue-collar workers.

There was this huge convergence where very low paid women workers in offices operating QWERTY keyboards and incredibly high paid offset lithograph machine operators, lithographers, working in newspaper and magazine offices, being forced to change from working from the machines they'd been trained on to those same QWERTY keyboards. One lot of workers were low paid, unionised women and the other lot were extremely high paid, well-organised and male. Basically, they were using the same technology, so there was a huge potential for the women workers to be used as a kind of reserve army to take over the work. This was a huge mess, politically and

1 Huws, Ursula. "The Fading of the Collective Dream? Reflections on Twenty Years' Research on Information Technology and Women's Employment." In *Women Encounter Technology: Changing Patterns of Employment in the Third World*, edited by Swasti Mitter and Sheila Rowbotham. UNU 1359-7922 1. London New York: Routledge, 2003. <https://archive.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/uu37we/uu37we0y.htm>.

2 Barker, Jane, and Hazel Downing. "Word Processing and the Transformation of the Patriarchal Relations of Control in the Office." *Capital & Class* 4, no. 1 (March 1980): 64-99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030981688001000106>.

demographically and in terms of its relation to many other skills, traditions and so on. There was considerable potential for women to be treated as scabs.

In those debates, a lot of the leftist male sociologists seemed to have hitched themselves to the cause of the organised male workers, but it wasn't as simple as that. There was another dialectic involving internal divisions, both on the left and between different groups of organised workers. A lot of the militant organised male craft workers were actually very happy to come out on the picket line to support women office workers.

In my direct experience, that happened repeatedly and that's how we got union recognition at Penguin Books when I worked there from 1970 to 1973. The print workers were generally represented in local Trades Councils, along with other trade unions. So there were these great big burly construction workers who were in the same Trades Council as the print worker, and they would stand on our picket lines wielding placards with strong wooden supports — they were really scary! The lorries that were delivering the books to the warehouse would not cross that picket line, whereas if they'd seen a few girls in miniskirts as they would have seen us, they might have charged right through. So there were strong solidarities on the ground that were invisible to the academics.

Could you describe what you have seen as the depoliticization of labor process theory under Thatcher?

Of course they were not all middle-class career seeking labor sociologists, but some were. Meanwhile Thatcher was coming on the horizon, and it was no longer fashionable to be a Marxist. There was a bloody political battle being fought against the militant tendency which was the left of the Labour Party in Liverpool which culminated in Neil Kinnock as leader of the Labour Party, kind of expelling all the people from the left, rather as Starmer is doing right now. That was the tendency on the right wing of the Labour Party in Britain and at least one of the most prominent academics who made a name for themselves as experts on 'labor process theory' was actively involved in that process.

Against this backdrop it is difficult not to see careerist labor sociologists as appropriating labor process theory and making it very abstract and apolitical. When international labor process conferences, and various publications on the subject were launched, it carried on in that tradition. This has become mainstream and standard for the last thirty years in labor sociology, not just in the UK, but, across Europe and to some extent globally. For the younger generation of Marxists, it's become requisite to frame their research this way. If it meant being published, taken seriously or being positively examined one would often appropriate Marxist things without appearing to be Marxist.

So, you could say labor process theory has become a complete distortion of what it originally was. Braverman was a Marxist, explicitly a Marxist, and in some ways, I would argue limited by the Marxist ideas that were around in the 60s. It's interesting that Braverman came up through the ranks. He was an active trade unionist who came to Marx based on his own experience. At the time, the dominant idea of Marxism in the American New Left was the one promulgated by Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff. They were so locked into the idea of monopoly capitalism that they ignored a lot of other Marxist traditions, particularly French regulation school theory, which they absolutely hated.

I remember once in an article that was being published by *Monthly Review*, I used the term post-Fordism, and they went absolutely apoplectic with rage. You just weren't allowed to say "Fordism", let alone "post-Fordism"! I had to dance my way around it, avoiding using the word itself and writing a whole paragraph using some explanatory phraseology like "the normative model of employment regulation that was around in the post-war period."

Those of us organizing and working within gendered and racialized regimes of work may have more to desire from Braverman's analysis. Fifty years on, in what ways do you think Braverman attempted to deal with gender and race, and what were some more notable oversights?

I think precisely because Braverman was a white man and a member of the American working class, he

was sensitive to gender issues in an interesting way, and I suspect motivated by rather the same motives as those guys who came out to support people like me on the Penguin picket line. But when I reread *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism* a few years ago, I was really struck by his complete blindness to issues of race. There was a kind of everyday racism that was so much a part of white working-class male culture in the United States in the sixties and seventies, that he didn't even see it. The same way that some white guys in Britain didn't see gender, except to see women as scabs. There's a long, strong history of black organizing in trade unions, and there were men of that American working class, especially communist men of that generation who were very seriously building bridges and contributing to the civil rights movement and so on. Braverman's focus was so much on what capitalists were up to with technology that it seemed to be outside his field of vision, so it's terribly absent.

If you look at the history of labor regulation in the United States, you see a systematic pattern whereby two groups of workers are excluded almost entirely from a lot of labor rights — domestic workers and agricultural workers. Both groups are in the direct line back to slave labor. The history of the trade union movement in the United States in that post-war period was very much a history that excluded those groups or saw them as kind of special cases in one way or another. This is a serious lacuna, but you can't expect anybody to be an ahistorical kind of superhero and different people have taken different things from Braverman. For socialist feminists, I think there was a lot of positive stuff to work with.

What are some theoretical tools that *Labor and Monopoly Capital* has to offer for the feminist struggle compared to those that were developed for the white male Fordist workers.

There was a period of about four or five years when Braverman was being digested by a whole range of activists on the left — not just feminists but also environmentalists to some extent. Braverman's critique of technological determinism could be applied in relation to environmental issues as well as worker health and safety issues. This was also a time when there were huge contradictions and conflicts emerg-

ing in the women's movement — especially among growing radical feminist and revolutionary feminist movements that were quite critical of socialist feminism.

In some feminist circles, even being in a trade union was sometimes seen as being masculine. There were big debates going on and in fact the National Women's Liberation Conferences of the seventies sort of collapsed in 1978 because there was such a lack of agreement. I felt the work that I was doing on the commodification of domestic labor was not really heard in the cacophony of these debates that were going on about wages for housework which was a strong tendency.³ There was also an idea that progress was being made in terms of what we could call the socialization of domestic labor. Socialist feminists were putting their energy into expanding social services, like demanding more nurseries.

Even if you presented a nuanced analysis that looked at the extra domestic labor created by having a washing machine, as I did at one CSE [Conference of Socialist Economists] workshop in 1978, this was dismissed by the men present, with people saying things like, "Oh, but washing machines are a good thing!" Although Marxists were problematizing technology in the workplace, they were not problematizing it in the field of social reproduction.

On the old male trade union left and its academic admirers, there was still a kind of glorification of old technologies. There were people who wanted to resist new technologies in mining, for instance, but if ever there was a job that ought to be automated out of existence, I would argue it's probably mining. It's horrible, dangerous, awful work.

What we saw was the presentation of alternative plans, new technologies, but the same old paternalism!

There was a famous workers' inquiry at Lucas Aerospace where the Shop Stewards Committee came up with the Lucas alternative plan. This involved ceasing the manufacture of military machines and, instead, making kidney machines. They had a charismatic leader, Mike Cooley, who was

3 Federici, Silvia. *Wages Against Housework*. New York: Power of Women Collective and Falling Wall Press, 1975.

a senior technical worker in the white-collar section of the trade union. The members he represented were basically the people that were designing new technological applications, like numerically controlled machine tools and stuff like that.

This alternative was considered wonderful by progressives on the left and he was given a job by the Greater London Council to develop alternative technologies. Nobody talked to the women on the shop floor, at Lucas Aerospace, apart from a few feminist, but in this new plan they were being assigned the same kind of shit jobs, whether it was making tanks or making kidney machines. They saw this alternative plan as something that was being imposed on them by these white male techies. There was one group of women at a Lucas factory in Burnley, in Lancashire, who formed an alternative breakaway union, they were so pissed off at the sexist way they were treated by union officials.

I can remember Cooley being met with rapturous applause at a meeting of the Greater London Council, talking about alternative technologies in the early 80s. Somebody saying, “Yes, but you know, surely all these skilled machine operators are going to be made redundant, what’s going to happen to all these shop stewards?” In other words, what is going to become of the trade union reps who’ve got these skills which are now obsolete? And Mike Cooley said, “Oh no problem, we’ll send them all to Vietnam, and they can train the workforce there in all these machine tools to help the economy recover after the war.” And I can remember being booed as I said, “In Vietnam they need these obsolete 1960s technologies like a hole in the head. In the 1980s, they need 1980s technology to develop the local economy. What are you doing!?”

But they were so obsessed with the idea of not changing the skillsets of these glorious heroes of the revolution, these white male shop stewards, that they couldn’t grasp the idea that the skills they had were part of a historical process and it’s not in capitalism’s interest to retrain these organized well-paid guys to use new technologies for which capitalists could just recruit very low paid, black workers, women workers — anybody from the reserve army. It was such a fundamental lack of comprehension.

In retrospect, it’s probably difficult to realize how powerful such voices were on the left. I was considered a heretic for challenging this guy. Their ideas around skill were so gendered, and so exclusive. We were up against all that kind of stuff. Even if there was a critique of new technologies in one field, there was an uncritical acceptance of those same technologies in other fields. It always seems to be medicine that is wheeled out to justify new technologies. Now, it’s AI. I cannot open my inbox without finding yet another email from McKinsey Global Institute about how AI is going to cure cancer, or dementia or whatever it is.

How have you seen Marxism and feminism develop over the years in relation to the academy?

I didn’t have an academic job for about 20 years, not a job at all, because it was enough for somebody to say, “Oh, she’s a Marxist” in one set of circumstances for you not to get employed. In the areas where it was okay to be a Marxist, it was enough to say “She’s a feminist” for you not to be employed.

As is inevitable and good, new generations come along who put a different spin on things — and that’s how it should be. Combining things with different traditions is really, really important, because the last thing you want is to freeze in stone the sort of hostilities that are from legacy conflicts. If you are from my generation, one of the big difficult bridges to cross was between Italian autonomous theory and the more traditional Marxist political economy in North America. Enda [Brophy] is the generation that has managed to [bridge them]. That was a very big bridge to cross. In Europe, only a minority of my generation have accepted that there is a link to be made between French regulation school theory and other kinds of Marxism. In my case, I learned quite a bit by connecting with some Latin American intellectuals. The previous generation of Latin American students were reading both French regulation school theory and David Harvey, for instance. Such connections were almost taboo in, for example, France for that generation.

My point is that it’s always important to be open to theoretical traditions you may have been warned off. Take what you can from whatever traditions are around. Materialist analysis is really, really important,

particularly in relation to labor. Even in so-called non-manual work, labor is physically hard. It takes its toll on your body, and we mustn't forget that, but materiality isn't everything. We also have to engage with ideology and there are a lot of different ways of doing that. For example, you can do it with Gramsci, or with various structuralist or post-structuralist theories, but there are all kinds of different traditions for dealing with it.

And it seems to me that many of these are best seen as alternative ways of understanding the same thing, so it isn't useful to regard any of them as 'incorrect.' There is always a complicated dialectic between what's in your mind and in your speech and in the discourse and in the surrounding ideology and what the material reality is. Braverman, of course, is part of the tradition that foregrounds materiality, but that is not the only tradition. What I was thinking about when I was reading Braverman is that this text that we're celebrating is fifty years old, but to me it feels like it is still explaining phenomena pertaining to the arrangement of labor and technology that remain very, very relevant.

As you were talking about these rearrangements of technology— where it's celebrated and where it is not celebrated, and how gendered labor shifts between the office and the shop floor — I am hearing the emergence of a male labor aristocracy that inherited some of those more practical tools from Braverman's analysis and then became gatekeepers.

Yeah, gatekeepers of class solidarity or something. It's really interesting to hear how there's this kind of denial — an idea that your labor will be immune to automation — even after you've engaged with the labor process theory that has described the very threats that you are faced with but from twenty or fifty years ago. Perhaps one of the insights that feminists can draw from Braverman is its attention to where technology is being celebrated and where it's moving forward and how that's impacting the gender dynamics along the hierarchy of the division of labor.

Even though the degradation of labor is recursive, the demographics of these rearrangements can be a bit less predictable. This scene of burly craftsmen

coming to this picket line is such a sight (and site) of class solidarity. It's a kind of historical convergence as well, where the women office workers who are sort of faced with the degradation of labor that the craftsmen faced are now sharing space on a picket line.

I think there's one other way that feminism comes into this story. If you're researching labor from a Marxist perspective, the idea of false consciousness often comes up and with it the assumption that the researcher somehow knows more than the workers do. This used to be applied an awful lot to women. For example women who would name sexual assault in the workplace as a central issue and that would be written off by male researchers as, "Oh, these women have false consciousness, they don't understand class solidarity, etc."

I was having a really interesting conversation recently about this with a Brazilian friend of mine, Ludmila, who also researches platform workers. This is a field where we are often pushed by policymakers to say what the solutions are, and you say things like, well, they should have employee status, access to the minimum wage, etc. Then you actually talk to platform workers and they're very ambivalent about those things—those aren't actually what their demands are. Then along comes the Marxist scholar who says, "Oh, they've internalized this ideology of being entrepreneurs, and they've got false consciousness." Ludmila, who's interviewed a lot of platform workers in Brazil, was saying, well, you know, it's so consistent, this pattern, and I was saying, yeah, it's so consistent, it's like we're saying they've all suffered from false consciousness. And that's really not a good enough explanation, we need to dig down and find out why. Because the reality is that a lot of the workers she's been interviewing in Brazil, black workers, and black women workers, they have good reasons — historical reasons — to be profoundly mistrustful of the people who say, oh, yeah, you can be part of the working class on the same terms as all these white guys. They have a long history of being at the bottom of the pecking order and being treated differently. Maybe having employment status just means that they are becoming absorbed into a form of bureaucratic management and their survival depends on being able to avoid that.

I think Braverman probably sat in the middle on

this, and he was drawing on his own actual experience as a worker and the actual experience of the workers he knew. But enough programmatic Marxists tend to think, well, these are the collective solutions we should be organizing for — and I think feminism says, “hang on a minute, listen to workers, take seriously what they say. Don’t just impose from above the demands that you think they ought to be organizing for and actually find out what they really want.” And what they really want might be something different. I mean, you know, fifty years ago, feminists discovered that women didn’t necessarily want a wage rise, they might prefer, for example, a shorter working week or better health and safety regulation. I think that’s just something else to bring into this feminist critique, which, ironically enough, is on the side of respecting the material reality. Methodologically, it’s really, really important for labor researchers to properly listen to workers, not just to go in with an agenda.