

Introduction

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Introduction: Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* Fifty Years On

This celebration and extension of Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (hereafter *LMC*) was compiled and released between the fiftieth anniversary of the book's publication (1974) and the fiftieth anniversary of Braverman's untimely death (1976). In this sense, the issue commemorates that brief period in which the book and its author were driving new levels of attention to the capitalist labor process. Although Braverman was only able to witness the first two years of this process, his influence has grown considerably over the intervening five decades.

For the past five decades, Braverman's revolutionary text has inspired countless critical inquiries into the conditions and processes of work in industries ranging from automotive manufacture to software development to art and cultural production. Moreover, Braverman's critique of Taylorism, his analysis of the struggle for control over the labor process, and his keen insights on the power dynamics of industrial production continue to be relevant today, particularly as management is increasingly mediated by what Craig Gent (2024) has recently called "algorithmic management."

As an editorial team, we have come to this project out of reflection on what Braverman's book has meant to us in our intellectual and political development.

As scholars, organizers, and workers, we have found *LMC* profoundly influential—exemplifying militant working-class scholarship that transcends the kinds of depoliticized industrial analysis or academicized Marxism that so commonly gets produced in the neoliberal academy. In many ways, *LMC* stands out as a seminal Marxist text precisely due to its ability to imbue academic rigor with a profound commitment to working-class militancy. Moreover, in envisioning this special issue, we responded to a troubling tendency we see in the general interdisciplinary field of labor studies. This tendency obscures the Marxist foundations of traditions like labor process analysis, asserting a form of neutral objectivity that distances knowledge creation from the ethical and political responsibilities that should come along with it. Recognizing this separation between mainstream research into the conditions of labor and the tradition of radical inquiry inspired by Braverman and others like him, we set out to recenter the Marxist tradition.

In a sense, we celebrate by responding to the challenge that *LMC* levelled at Marxists fifty years ago: to use the tools of Marxist analysis not only to understand, but to change the conditions of work under capitalism.

Clearly, Braverman's legacy has been powerful, inspiring fifty years of research and debate. In fact,

the tradition of Labor Process Theory builds directly from Braverman's influence. As Paul Thompson (2024) argues, the debates over ideas including deskilling and workplace control have helped create a vibrant and energetic scholarly engagement with the processes and structures of the capitalist labor process. From Michael Burawoy's (1979) critique of Braverman's focus on the objective qualities of the labor process to more recent debates over Labor Process Theory's applicability to the digital workplaces of the twenty-first century, the body of work building upon Braverman's initial contribution runs the gamut, politically and theoretically.

With many scholars carrying forward Braverman's Marxist commitments, others have recently argued that Labor Process Theory ought to be treated more neutrally, or more in line with a "normal science" (Ackroyd 2009; Thompson 2024). That this special issue appears in *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry* should give some indication of which tendency the editors of this special issue follow. Recognizing the range and influence of the field of Labor Process Theory, we still believe that its utility for working-class strategy and radical knowledge creation should be our priority, particularly for Marxists working in the field.

The tools of Labor Process Theory are particularly powerful not only in helping us understand the processes of exploitation, real subsumption, worker control and the like, but also in highlighting vulnerable spots within these processes and developing strategies for exploiting these.

As a field, Labor Process Theory is made up of its own set of concerns and debates, particularly as new developments in the capitalist labor process continue to arise (Bagnardi and Maccarrone 2023). However, the development of such a rich body of critical research poses the risk of forgetting the continued relevance of the foundational text itself. Braverman's book was inspirational and applicable specifically due to its commitment to working-class struggle. In revisiting Marx's analysis of the labor process and applying it to the conditions of work and production in the twentieth century, Braverman provoked his contemporaries to systematically examine the conditions of production with the overt goal of

transforming them. This commitment is integrated into much of the contemporary research in the Labor Process tradition, but often stops short of highlighting how an understanding of the labor process can contribute to the task of building working-class power. As conditions have worsened for a great number of workers, and as precarity and insecurity proliferate, this task is of immediate importance.

As John Bellamy Foster reminded us in his contribution to *Monthly Review's* twenty-fifth anniversary retrospective of *LMC*: "Like all great Marxist thinkers, Braverman hoped that the class struggle would one day make his work dated... But in the present and immediately foreseeable future Braverman's work constitutes a tool of the class struggle, one that we can only put aside at our own risk" (1999, 18).

Far from becoming dated, Braverman's work and the critical approach he inspired continue to be applied to today's complex, diffuse, and highly volatile regime of accumulation. However, applications of Braverman's work vary considerably, often inspiring vigorous debate. That Braverman's text remains the subject of lively debate is a testament to its continued influence and critical importance. As Michael D. Yates (1999, 3) challenges: "It is, of course, our duty as radicals to energetically debate and criticize Braverman's work, but let us also remember that little has really changed since 1974."

Such a suggestion is, at first blush, difficult to accept, even twenty-five years after the book's publication, let alone after fifty years. That said, Yates's provocation is intended to push us to remember what has remained the same under capitalism: exploitation, dehumanization, and immiseration. Labor Process Theory, in its overtly Marxist form, presents workers, organizers, and scholars with powerful tools to respond to these aspects of the capitalist labor process, both through sustained analysis and collective action. Although the shape, tempo, and processes of the post-Fordist economy are markedly different from those of Braverman's time, the tools of Labor Process Theory assist us in understanding these changes at the point of production, extending a critique of yesterday's labor process to contemporary labor regimes that have developed far beyond the factory floor. Uberization, algorithmic manage-

ment, automation through AI, and the myriad other means of managerial control can still be understood as techniques of exploitation, of extracting value from workers through the organization and management of the labor process.

Braverman's applicability to such recent developments should come as no great surprise. Just as Marx's critique of political economy remained relevant even as the specific techniques of capitalist accumulation shifted over the decades, Braverman's dynamic approach to understanding the intersections of technology, control and class is remarkably useful in tracking and responding to the capitalist labor process's continual transformation. In fact, in applying Braverman's insights, scholars today contribute to his legacy, building upon the book's example of monitoring the ever-changing nature of accumulation. As Paul Sweezy explained in his foreword to the book's first edition:

[T]he outward manifestations of capitalism, though not its inner nature, have undergone tremendous changes in the last century. Capital accumulation has assumed new organizational forms; it has invaded old branches of the economy and flowed into many new ones. What needed to be done was to apply Marx's theory to the new methods and occupations invented or created by capital in its restless expansion. This is the task Harry Braverman has set himself (Sweezy 1974, xi).

This is a task worthy of sustained, energetic reinvigoration, and the pieces collected in this volume contribute to this end. This issue collects six articles, one interview, and four commentaries that reflect Braverman's contributions and apply his incisive analysis of the twentieth-century labor process to the conditions faced by workers today, fifty years later.

Each piece makes an original and distinct contribution to the critical interrogation of the labor process, building and reflecting upon Braverman's legacy and reminding us of labor process analysis's applicability to the contemporary world of work. Carrying forward Braverman's interrogation of skill, exploitation, work organization, and class, the articles and commentaries examine a variety of workplace contexts including (but not limited to) care, education, culture, and hospitality, while zeroing in on

the ways in which *LMC* can help us understand the organization of and operative dynamics of the labor process of each as well as ways that workers can challenge these. While representing a range of approaches, the pieces included in this special issue challenge us to consider labor process analysis and the dynamics of class, work and exploitation in relation to topics including disability, artificial intelligence, factual television, class composition, craft and skill, and care-work. Taken together, the eleven pieces critically investigate crucially important contemporary issues in the realm of production, pointing us toward avenues for intervention.

Articles

Jamie Woodcock, George Briley, Lydia Hughes, and Callum Cant situate the contemporary debate on Labor Process Theory in relation to class composition. Responding in part to Paul Thompson and co-authors' (2021) critique of the political efficacy of class composition analysis, the authors argue in firm favour of a reinvigoration of the Marxist tradition of labor process analysis, particularly in combination with other radical analytical traditions. The piece appropriately positions the special issue, putting Braverman's Marxist project and commitments in the spotlight and arguing that to effectively build on these, radical scholars should actively involve themselves in workers' movements. Moreover, the piece recentres the role of class in Braverman's analysis, picking up his "unfinished project" in relation to the challenges faced by the working class today. In demonstrating the explicit links between Braverman's book and the radical Marxist tradition, the authors force a return to the text and its contextual connection to contemporaneous radical inquiry, rejecting the prevalent tendency to view the text only in relation to the Labor Process Theory tradition. In doing so, the authors reassert the political power of Braverman's project, particularly as a tool for transforming the currently existing relations of production.

Arianna Introna continues this exploration of the utility of Braverman's thought for emancipatory politics by employing an unexpected constellation of theoretical concepts to outline a political standpoint internal to disability. Introna argues that Braverman's

theory of habituation contains a logic of resistance among those who cannot be habituated to or formally subsumed by wage relations. She explores this logic through the intractability of disabled peoples as a workforce. She writes that this intractability can be viewed through the Derridean idea of hauntology: that which cannot be reduced to ontology, in this context, the ontology of capitalism, which is that of the working class. Why hauntology? As Introna explains, Braverman's theories are infused with a logic of haunting that incorporates assumptions about the possible end, or final destiny, of capitalism.

Capitalism reproduces itself and its workforce to the extent that it also produces its own crises, or end. The working class is theorized as the force, or one among many that will lead to the end of capitalism, but what of non-workers? The intractability of non-normative body-minds to the structure of labor exploitation lends itself to an autonomist disability perspective derived from Ioana Cherasella Chis, who views class and disability as unfixed within constantly evolving capital-labor relations. Such a proposal convenes the politics of disablement, autonomist praxis, and Labor Process Theory in ways that deepen solidarity across subjects and communities engaged in anticapitalist struggle that may not be rooted in the wage.

Benjamin Anderson focuses on the categories of craft and skill, pulling the curtain back on the performance of authenticity in the context of neo-craft industries. The systematic alienation of workers' knowledge through the implementation of scientific management has inspired a nostalgia or longing for the craftsmanship of yore. The labor that caters to this taste for things produced by 'authentic' skilled labor subjects the material production to the same deskilled and alienated production schemes shot through Taylorism, while romantic portrayals of artisanal mastery are reified to fulfil this demand. Insight into the neo-craft labor process provokes fundamental questions of whether unalienated skill really plays a role in the conception, execution, and circulation of such a commodity. Following a thorough review of the discursive accounts which cover the sensibilities of craft in tandem with capitalist development, Anderson outlines a severe lack of attention to the material conditions of workers themselves under-

stood through accounts of workers' struggle and inquiry among craft coffee and beer companies.

Anna Zoellner and Angus Dixon identify changes in the production process of factual television programming in the United Kingdom that demonstrate how Braverman's approach can be applied to examine cultural labor. Their application maintains the specificity of the cultural labor process yet outlines how its particularities, while distinct from the dominant occupations of Braverman's time, have been rationalized by scientific management. The paper focuses on Producer-Directors and Edit Producers who once sustained control of conception and execution through an auteur hierarchy model. Recent shifts in the television industry show how cultural workers now contend with the reorganization of the labor process—what the workers identify as a non-linear sausage factory hierarchy model. The consequences of this shift are described in workers' accounts which convey conditions that mirror Braverman's claims of reduced worker autonomy and increased managerial control due to the separation of conception and execution. These models illustrate how Braverman's critique of scientific management can be used to explain the rationalization of cultural production and the familiar impacts of the emergence of divisions of labor in non-standard and creative sectors of employment.

Satomi Mikamoto uses examples from the food manufacturing context in Japan to trouble the question of whether workers' control of technologies will contribute to the reproduction of capitalist relations. She adopts the position that AI is real subsumption itself. Through a methodical overview of the Marxist concept of real and formal subsumption and Braverman's view that Taylor's principles of scientific management mediate real subsumption, Mikamoto raises the question of how the labor process will shift if its planning is displaced by AI production planning software. However, the crux of the paper is preoccupied with how knowledge should be handled beyond capitalist relations of production: Simply shifting its ownership does not necessarily mean that workers can organize production for use value purposes. Consequently, we must transform the very nature of production-related knowledge. In true Bravermanian tradition, Mikamoto

theorizes and insists on establishing the social life of workers' knowledge and the inevitable workers' resistance to its subsumption. Her contribution illuminates the ever-changing nature of the capitalist labor process and the effects that changes have on workers, although some authors extended this to consider what this means for management. The various tweaks to the capitalist production process ultimately cannibalize the proudly imposed divisions of labor. This is arguably done through the displacement of management altogether through the introduction of AI, at first to sort and manage data and training manuals, then to displace conception from the labor process altogether.

Tom Hoctor and Joana Almeida examine the productive/unproductive distinction in *LMC*, positing that conditions in the care sector are the culmination of decades of precarization and deskilling, further delinking the importance of this form of work and the conditions faced by its workers. Although recognizing the protracted debate over the category of unproductive labor, in the first half of their article, the authors discuss how it has increasingly come to characterize much of the contemporary world of work. To better intervene in this debate and extend it into the present context, the authors then put Braverman's conceptualization in discussion with feminist labor theory, particularly recent work on social reproduction and reproductive labor. They then apply these distinct but complementary theoretical traditions to an examination of the current state of the UK care sector, which has been systematically commercialized and precarized in recent decades. The authors argue that the key contradiction in the labor process of the UK care sector is that the degradation of conditions for care workers takes place in tandem with the increased social value of the services they provide. The more essential care work becomes, the more it is devalued and deskilled.

Interview and Commentaries

The political power of Braverman's legacy is particularly visible in retrospect, considering his influence both historically and today. An interview with Ursula Huws, conducted by Steff Huì Cí Ling, offers a generous telling of labor struggle anecdotes from Huws's time as a publishing worker and trade union activ-

ist, as well as her career as a Marxist feminist labor scholar. Their exchange recounts familiar caricatures of labor leaders and their cults of personalities, an almost cabaret-like scene of a picket line, and the rhetorical games that we have played in the academy, even among comrades. Huws insists that Marxist and feminist commitments are not to be concealed, but, rather, clearly stated to bring the antagonisms of capitalism and patriarchy into full relief. Most importantly, her reflections are grounded in militant and scholarly responses to interrogating reorganizations of the capitalist production process that have shifted significantly over the long arc of Labor Process Theory.

Renyi Hong returns us to the category of skill, taking aim at the contradiction between deskilling and an enduring identification with and commitment to work. Hong critiques the tendency in the twenty-first century world of work to substitute psychological justice for structural justice, revealing how craftsmanship was imbued with a romanticism of good, fulfilling work, a purported remedy to alienation. Building upon an overview of the development of Taylorism and so-called human relations, the piece proposes an extension of Braverman's deskilling diagnosis, asserting that new forms of emotional management offered a cultural fix to the dispossession of craft. Hong argues that a critical resistance to cultural narratives of work fulfillment, and a new form of craftsmanship that recognizes the shortcomings and divisions inherent in a view of craft as skilled, white, and male, should be understood as a complex resource for resisting the demands of capital and employers.

Robert Ovetz provides commentary from the context of academic worker organizing, which has made significant progress through the recent protests connecting worker and student solidarity with Palestinian liberation. Ovetz applies Braverman's analysis of technology to observe how scientific management and the division of labor manifests in higher education through the introduction of Learning Management Systems and generative AI. Ovetz argues that these tools not only transfer control of course design and delivery to non-faculty management and swell the ranks of management, but

also surveil and accommodate scab labor during labor action. His commentary exemplifies the practical maneuver that Braverman's contribution empowers—the vital leap from analysis to the recomposition of power among academic workers.

Steff Hui Cí Ling challenges the contentious category of the professional managerial class as its own class, asserting that the PMC are a division within the working class mainly distinguished from working-class wage earners on culturally and politically antagonistic premises. Ling suggests this division 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. Her contribution uses Braverman to reassert an overtly Marxian reading of class and management, helping us problematize realistic and uncomfortable divisions within the working class itself.

Donna Baines critically examines three key debates in the labor process literature since Braverman: those pertaining to agency, gender and service work. Baines positions care-work as a key site for critical inquiry, characterized by a four-way struggle over control between the worker, the employer, the state and the service user. As work in this sector is deskilled, work routines accelerated, and exploitation internalized, care-work highlights developments in the labor process that both complicate and extend Braverman's observations while illuminating opportunities for worker resistance.

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue testify to the continued applicability of Braverman's ideas while also standing out as a necessary and timely reassertion of the Marxist roots and commitments of the tradition he inspired. At a time of ever-accelerating crises and continued degradation of working conditions, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* stands out as a crucial text in the radical toolkit, one that challenges scholars and organizers alike to transform, not merely analyze, the conditions of contemporary work.

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