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Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry



**Labor and
Monopoly Capital**
The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century
Harry Braverman



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This journal represents an attempt to explore issues, ideas, and problems that lie at the intersection between the academic disciplines of social science and the body of thought and political practice that has constituted Marxism over the last 150 years. New Proposals is a journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry that is dedicated to the radical transformation of the contemporary world order. We see our role as providing a platform for research, commentary, and debate of the highest scholarly quality that contributes to the struggle to create a more just and humane world, in which the systematic and continuous exploitation, oppression, and fratricidal struggles that characterize the contemporary sociopolitical order no longer exist.

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Cover: Magneto Assembly at the Ford Highland Park Plant, 1913; The Henry Ford, THF9600 [detail]. Inset: First cover of Braverman's *Labor & Monopoly Capital*.

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Introduction

Benjamin Anderson, Steff Huì Cí Ling, and Enda Brophy

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.

—Vancouver, Canada, August 2025

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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’” (Mezzadri 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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Harry Braverman's Hauntology of the Capitalist Mode of Production: An Autonomist Disability Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the relevance of Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* for studying disability formation under contemporary capitalism and the contribution that a disability standpoint can make to anti-capitalist politics. Putting Braverman's discussion of the universalization of the capitalist mode of exploitation and the habituation this depends upon into conversation with disability studies illuminates how his analysis implicates a hauntological dimension. Braverman foregrounds both how capitalism envelops every social relation and the difficulty with which it reproduces its domination, derived from resistance to becoming habituated into capitalist exploitation. I develop an autonomist disability perspective on Braverman's hauntology by examining the resonance between his work and Ioana Cerasella Chis' analysis of 'disability composition' (2023). First, I probe how a political standpoint internal to disability reveals the othering of disabled people based on the intractability that bodymind non-normativity presents to capitalist exploitation. Second, I attend to the logic connecting this marginal situatedness to wider working-class resistance to habituation that Braverman theorizes. I conclude by speculating on modes and purposes of symbolically universalizing disability to deepen resistance to the universalization of, and habituation to, the capitalist mode of production.

Introduction

As Ioana Cerasella Chis has recently theorized (2023), the contemporary oppression of disabled people is produced by a 'disabling capitalism' within a framework in which disability and anti-capitalist emancipation are entangled. In my article I will not trace the socioeconomic phenomenon of disability in relation to Braverman's ontology of an evolving mode of production. I will instead engage Braverman's theory of universalization of, and habituation into, the capitalist mode of production as delineating a hauntology, rather than ontology, of capitalism.

I will trace this as unfolding in the Derridean double sense of an ontology riven by its contamination with otherness produced by the universalization of the capitalist mode of production, having as its telos the envelopment of what is outside it; and by its definition in relation to the anticipation of future events pregnant with the possibility for the habituation into the mode of production not to be renewed generationally.

For Derrida, 'hauntology' is a category which is irreducible to the ontology that it makes possible. It contains within itself eschatological and teleological effects implicated in 'the discourse of the end or the discourse about the end' and, inevitably, the frustrating yearning to comprehend 'the extremity of the extreme' (Derrida 1994, 10).

Braverman's theories of a universalization of a capitalist mode of production propelled towards the continuous envelopment of new others, and of the enforcement of workers' habituation as in need of continual reproduction to ensure capital's domination, are infused with a logic of haunting that incorporates assumptions about the possible end, or final destiny, of capitalism as much as of the purpose which processes of universalization and habituation serve (as opposed to their cause). This combined eschatological and teleological frame is what transforms Braverman's ontology of the capitalist mode of production into a hauntology.

I propose that disability brings out the hauntological framing of Braverman's investigation based on the intractability of non-normative bodyminds to successful insertion within the capitalist mode of production, in ways that thwart its universalization and forceful habituation of the working class into its structures.

Studies of disability as a socioeconomic and political phenomenon help foreground the hauntological dimension of Braverman's theory of capitalism in proportion as they are attuned to the challenges that attend the inclusion of non-normative bodyminds within the standardized relations of production that define capitalism.

The first part of my analysis will probe the ways in which a political standpoint internal to disability reveals how the othering of disabled people based on the intractability that bodymind non-normativity presents to capitalist exploitation, as well as outright discrimination, generates subject positions situated outside of, or marginally vis-à-vis, universalized relations of capitalist production, thus debunking the naturalness of these relations.

The second part of my investigation attends to the logic that rivet this marginal situatedness to the space of a wider tendency within the working class to resist habituation into the capitalist mode of production, which Braverman theorized. In this section I will seek to develop an autonomist disability perspective capable of valorizing Braverman's insights into the possibility for anti-capitalist resistance, besides his analysis of the evolving structure of the capital-labor polarity.

In conclusion I will speculate as to modes and purposes of symbolically universalizing disability to deepen the logics of resistance to the universalization of, and habituation to, the capitalist mode of production laid out by Braverman. I propose that by appreciating how disability already belongs within the working class, it becomes possible to re-vision disability resistance to capitalist accommodation by indicating a route potentially available for the whole of the working class to follow.

In the spirit of Nivedita Majumdar's 'radical universalisms,' the refusal of workers' habituation afforded by lived experience of disability encapsulates

the possibility for resistance to habituation that all working-class subjects possess, if differentially.

Disability And/Outside the Universalization of the Capitalist Mode of Exploitation

Braverman's discussion of the universalization of the capitalist mode of exploitation in conversation with recent studies of the political economy of disability sharpens the lens they provide to glean the grounds of disabled people's oppression and marginalization in capitalist societies as much as the ways in which a focus on disability marks the unfolding of Braverman's ontology of the capitalist mode of production in a hauntological register.

For Martin Hägglund, Derrida's theory of hauntology foregrounds how 'spectrality is at work in everything that happens' and how an 'identity or community can never escape the machinery of exclusion, can never fail to engender ghosts, since it must demarcate itself against a past that cannot be encompassed and a future that cannot be anticipated. Inversely, it will always be threatened by what it cannot integrate in itself—haunted by the negated, the neglected, and the unforeseeable' (Hägglund 2018, 83).

It is on this basis that for Derrida 'hauntology' is a category which is irreducible to "everything it makes possible: ontology, theology, positive or negative onto-theology" (Derrida 1994, 83) and rather than belong to ontology, it operates by introducing a logic of haunting into "the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time" (Derrida 1994, 202).

Braverman's theory of universalization of the capitalist mode of production yields up a hauntology because this universalization continually reaches out to envelop what lies beyond the boundaries of what it has already included, without ever achieving closure. Disability is the remnant that is produced, and left behind, by processes of failed universalization.

As suggested in my introduction, for Chis the oppression of disabled people is produced by a 'disabling capitalism' within a framework in which disability and anti-capitalist emancipation are entangled. Chis proposes a materialist approach and the concept 'subjects of disablement' to pinpoint

“the historically contingent nature of disablement and directs focus to materially rooted experiences, social positionality and social relations more generally” (Chis 2023, 10).

Building on, and modifying, the UPIAS-inspired (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation) social model of disability, which discerns between impairments that people have and the social oppression which they encounter, envisioning disability as socially produced by the latter, Chis probes the ways in which “capitalist social relations subject people (with impairments, who are D/deaf, chronically ill, neurodivergent or experience mental distress) to disablement oppression and exploitation” (Chis 2023, 10).

Intent on signaling towards a combined and coalitional analysis of disablement and class, Chis studies disability and class as relational and non-categorical social formations as they form within capitalism. This socio-political and historical rather than biological-ontological understanding of disability is what provides in Chis’ account an ontology of disability “oppression and exploitation under capitalism” (Chis 2023, 11). It is also what connects with Braverman’s ontology of a universalizing mode of production, which I will discuss as constantly folding over into hauntology.

Braverman theorizes the ways in which capitalism comes to envelop every social relation. In this way he provides key insights into the processes which, at the sociopolitical and historical rather than the biological level, determine the emergence of disability as a capitalist social and relational formation. For Braverman the violence and reach of capitalism became universal with the onset of monopoly capitalism, proceeding geographically and expanding into different forms of human activity.

In his discussion of the development of ‘Service Occupations and Retail Trade,’ Braverman unpacks how the violence and reach of the capitalist mode of production becomes universal in proportion as the expansion of capital continues geographically and into different forms of human activity. It was the advent of the era of monopoly capitalism which created a ‘universal marketplace’ and “transformed into a commodity every form of the activity of humankind

including what had heretofore been the many things that people did for themselves or for each other” (Braverman 1998, 250).

The grounds on which the incompatibility between the universalization of the capitalist mode of production and disability resides derives from the imbrication between universalization and ‘normalcy’, which disability theorist Lennard Davis describes as “the political-juridical-institutional state that relies on the control and normalization of bodies” (Davis 2002, 107). Normalcy is constructed to create the “problem” of the disabled person’ (Davis 1995, 24) through the separation of able-bodied (or temporarily able-bodied) people from the severely disabled “so that they cannot be seen as part of a continuum of physical differences” (Davis 1995, 7).

Davis traces how the development of the concept of norm on which normalcy relies is inseparable from the rise of industrial capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries, and was not challenged by Marx. Marx, in fact, merely registers its functioning through the theorization of the totality of productive labor-power as a ‘homogeneous mass of human labour’ composed of individual units of labor-power each of which is ‘the same as any other, to the extent that it has the character of a socially average unit of labour-power’: this is what allows the possibility to calculate ‘the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in [a given] society’ and organise for the extraction of surplus-value (Marx 1976, 129).

In proportion as it reproduces Marx’s reliance on the “notion of the average man in a discussion of the labor theory of value,” which “is based on the idea of the worker constructed as an average worker,” Marxist critique too fails to challenge the fiction out of which capitalist normalcy emerges (Davis 1995, 28).

Ella Bee Glendining’s documentary *Is There Anybody Out There?* (2023) dramatizes the encounter between non-normative embodiments and the capitalist normalcy that sustains the capitalist mode of production. It explicitly addresses the marginalization of disabled people both within the occupational structure, and outside of it, in a conversation between the protagonist Ella, born with a rare condition called proximal femoral focal deficiency, and her autistic friend Naomi.

Even though Ella can either walk or use a wheelchair, discriminatory attitudes prevent her from finding employment. Reflecting on possible answers she could offer to the question “What do you do?,” Ella ponders “Can I say what I think about this question. I have applied for ten gazillion jobs in my adult ... I was desperate”, and even more so after having been offered a night shift at the Asda supermarket store and having had the offer withdrawn shortly after.

Ella bitterly recalls, “They changed their mind and they said that they didn’t want me anymore, and they never really explained why, but I think we know.” Naomi shares her memories of Ella’s job-seeking endeavors, and expresses amusement at her inability to secure low-paid occupations due to invisible barriers: Naomi reminisces “I was with you when you had applied for every fucking job ... You got that job at Asda and you were so thrilled about it you posted a Facebook status and then ... (laughs) It was a night shift at Asda and you were like “I am Asda lady of the night” (laughs).”

Ella’s marginalization and exclusion from the occupational structure which would have seen her having a chance of getting the night shift at Asda evokes circumstances that have traditionally led the disabled people’s movement to demand the right of access to work and accommodation in the workplace. These demands are grounded in the social model of disability, in turn rooted in historical materialism, which works from the awareness that “capital accumulation [is] organised in such a way that it [disables] people by excluding them from the activity—wage labour—through which people [are] expected to secure their income” (Hall and Wilton 2015, 241).

When the imbrication between disability, work and neoliberalism is specifically considered, Dan Goodley, Rebecca Lawthom and Katherine Runswick-Cole have theorized as ‘neoliberal-ableism’ our contemporary context of austerity as one in which we are all “subjected to slow death, increased precarity and growing debility” (2014, 980), as well as “expected to overcome economic downturn and respond to austerity” through hard work, self-identification as workers and a resilient attitude (2014, 981).

Crucially, however, disabled people are uniquely positioned to be resistant to the forceful insertion

from the sphere of welfare into that of waged work. The uneasy fit between non-normative embodiments and minds and the standardized, growth-oriented organization of work under capitalism has been examined from multiple angles in disability studies since the development of the field in the 1980s.

As Paul Abberley noted long ago, “the abolition of an individual’s disablement is ultimately dependent upon and subordinate to the logic of productivity” (1987, 92). More recently, Mitchell and Snyder have stressed the linkage between disability and the onset of capitalism by noting how “disability was first coined in the mid-1800s to designate those incapable of work due to injury” (2015, 211).

In a similar spirit, Robert McRuer has connected capitalism to disability by arguing that ‘the compulsory nature of able-bodiedness’ that underpins the symbolical and material marginalization of disabled people is rooted in the industrial capitalist system: for McRuer, being “free to sell one’s labor but not free to do anything else” equals being “free to have an able body but not particularly free to have anything else,” so that “compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice” (2006, 9).

If complicated by the additional pressure exerted by discriminatory logics specific to the regime of capitalist normalcy, Ella’s experience speaks to the compulsions that dominate society under capitalism, which Braverman traces back to the determination of capitalist social relations by the polarity between labor and capital. For Braverman, “Labor and capital are the opposite poles of capitalist society. This polarity begins in each enterprise and is realized on a national and even international scale as a giant duality of classes which dominates the social structure” (Braverman 1998, 261).

This duality leaves no room for an outside refused by, or refusing, incorporation into the capitalist mode of production. For Braverman ‘a necessary identity’ between labor and capital obtains because on the one hand,

capital is labor: it is labor that has been performed in the past, the objectified product of preceding phases of the cycle of production which becomes capital only through appropriation by

the capitalist and its use in the accumulation of more capital'; on the other hand, 'as living labor which is purchased by the capitalist to set the production process into motion, labor is capital (Braverman 1998, 261).

On this account, the working class is "the animate part of capital, the part which will set in motion the process that yields to the total capital its increment of surplus value" (Braverman 1998, 261). Braverman concludes that, on this basis, "the working class is first of all raw material for exploitation" (Braverman 1998, 261).

Ella's exclusion from the 'animate part of capital' and the 'raw material' of capital's exploitation introduces the socioeconomic and political phenomenon of disability as different from that which defines the temporarily able-bodied working class. If for Braverman capital uses the working class as raw material for exploitation and constrains its social and political existence, Robert McRuer's concept of compulsory able-bodiedness, which under capitalism covers over "with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice" (2006, 9), foregrounds a set of exclusionary logics not accounted for by the universalizing movement of the capitalist mode of production.

Together, Braverman's analysis of the necessary identity between capital and labor and McRuer's of the operation of compulsory able-bodiedness under capitalism delineate a system of differential incorporation into the system of domination that is the hallmark of the capitalist mode of production. Ella's failure to find employment due to discriminatory attitudes materializes incompleteness as intrinsic to the duality between capital and labor that Braverman posits.

It validates the scenario drawn by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder in discussing a regime of 'neoliberal inclusivism' which ensures that only 'the abled-disabled' manage to gain "by paradoxical means... entrance into late capitalist cultures," leaving behind the "nonlaboring populations" who are "not merely excluded from, but also resistant to, standardized labor demands of productivity particular to neoliberalism" (Mitchell and Snyder 2015, 211-212).

The difference that marks disability within the working class can be further appreciated in relation to

Braverman's definition of the working class based on the dependence by labor on capital for its own subsistence. The "formal definition of the working class" is that of a "class which, possessing nothing but its power to labor, sells that power to capital in return for its subsistence" and this, despite having shortcomings as a "static definition," constitutes "the only adequate starting point for any attempt to visualize the working class in modern society" (Braverman 1998, 261).

By this definition Ella does belong within the working class, as her excitement at the prospect of finding waged employment intimates her need to find a job in the first place, matching Braverman's definition of 'working class' as a class dependent on capital for its own subsistence. At the same time, Ella is set apart from the working class thus defined because the stakes are set against her engaging in waged work.

Braverman's formal definition of the working class is what for him provides the only adequate starting point for studying the working class with a specific focus on "the mass occupational categories which embrace, with a few anomalies and exceptions, the unmistakably working-class population" (Braverman 1998, 262). In proportion as disability emerges on the margins of the polarity that connects capital and labor, it also migrates to the periphery of the occupational structure of society that is bound by said polarity.

At the same time, Ella's experience presents a slippage within Braverman's ontology of the capitalist mode of production, which presupposes a drive for universalization through envelopment of every social relation. For Braverman "We may gain a rough first approximation of the working class in this century by considering at the outset the mass occupational categories which embrace, with a few anomalies and exceptions, the unmistakably working-class population" (Braverman 1998, 262).

Ella's exclusion from the workforce through disability discrimination haunts Braverman's account of the evolution of occupational structure under capitalism as a difference resistant to incorporation which occludes the possibility for any universalization of the capitalist mode of production to achieve fulfillment. The shifting occupational structure traced by

Braverman on the one hand remains accompanied by the exclusion of disability in ways that show the universalization of the capitalist mode of exploitation to be faltering.

On the other hand, it reveals the persistently decentered position that disabled people occupy with respect to temporarily able-bodied workers under capitalism, and the social marginalization this marginality warrants.

Despite being rooted in the logic of compulsory able-bodiedness specific to capitalist normalcy, the marginalization of disabled people by the mode of production on which their subsistence depends, but which is placed beyond their reach, warrants Braverman's assessment of the balance in the power relations between capital and labor.

For Braverman, despite the identity between the two, it is capital which retains the upper hand. While the working class 'lives a social and political existence of its own, outside the direct grip of capital. It protests and submits, rebels or is integrated into bourgeois society, sees itself as a class or loses sight of its own existence', it does so 'in accordance with the forces that act upon it and the moods, conjunctures, and conflicts of social and political life'; of these forces primary is the set of those that derive from the 'permanent existence' of the working class as 'the living part of capital' which ensures that 'its occupational structure, modes of work, and distribution through the industries of society are determined by the ongoing processes of the accumulation of capital' (Braverman 1998, 261).

Braverman conceptualizes the 'direct grip of capital' on the working class in ways that resonate with Søren Mau's idea of 'economic power.' For Mau 'economic power' indicates "logics, structures and dynamics that constitute the essence of capitalism across its historical and geographical variations" in ways that sustain the ability of capital to "shape social life" and "re-organise the material conditions of social reproduction," namely "the processes and activities involved in securing the continuous existence of a given society" (Mau 2019, 12).

Braverman's interest lies in singling out the grounds on which the working class is "seized, released, flung into various parts of the social machin-

ery and expelled by others, not in accord with its own will or self-activity, but in accord with the movement of capital" (Braverman 1998, 261) as a prelude to a discussion of surplus populations. Braverman quotes Marx's "description of the movement of capital and labor" (Braverman 1998, 265) to identify the ways in which a surplus laboring population is both a product and a lever of capitalist accumulation, as well as a condition of existence of the capitalist mode of production.

In the context of the structural production of surplus population, a disability perspective grasps its impact as violence on the non-employable surplus population. Most importantly for the purposes of my analysis, because the reproduction of capitalism is inseparable from the reproduction of the class relation itself, of which capital and wage labor are the constitutive factors, and because disability occupies a marginal position with respect to the latter, the welfare state cannot be expected to have the survival of non-productive disabled people as its goal, as social democratic theory which sees the welfare state as a benign apparatus would have it.

As disability historian Dorothy Porter notes, from its inception social security was "distributed as a social right to those who obtained it through participation in the labour process" while "it continued to be doled out on a means-tested basis as handouts to those unable to work," and these "remained perceived as public burdens" (Porter, 1999, 234). Social citizenship always embodied "the citizenship of earners"—able-bodied men (Porter, 1999, 234).

Disability theorists have examined how exclusion from wage labor "lies at the core of disabled people's oppression in every aspect of modern life" (Russell and Malhotra 2019, 6). Being denied the opportunity to work and make a material contribution to society's wellbeing is the root cause of disabled people being labeled as "other" or "useless" (Oliver 1999).

This is rendered in Ken Loach's film *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), whose protagonist finds himself having to claim social welfare following a heart attack. We learn that the options for claimants of social welfare are "On the one hand, Jobseeker's Allowance, only for those able and ready to work. But if you're ill, you have to apply for Employment and Support, get

an assessment carried out.” Dan responds “Well, I’ve done that but they’ve knocked us back,” at which Dan’s work coach at the jobcentre explains “Right, well if you’ve been deemed fit for work, your only option is Jobseeker’s Allowance. Or proceed with the appeal on Employment and Support.”

Although initially Dan declares his intention to claim Jobseeker’s Allowance and then appeal the ESA decision, he is gradually worn down by the process, which he defines as a “monumental farce.” He is also struck down by ill health. He is “a sick man looking for nonexistent jobs,” that he could not “take anyway.” To the work coach in the jobcentre Dan complains, “Wasting my time, employers’ time, your time. And all it does is humiliate me, grind me down.”

Dan ultimately comes off JSA without any other income to support himself and dies before attending his appeal for ESA. The film ends with the speech he would have read at the appeal, but could not as the “State drove him to an early grave,” in the words of his friend Katie.

Dan’s speech: “I am not a client, a customer, nor a service user. I am not a shirker, a scrounger, a beggar, nor a thief. I’m not a National Insurance Number or blip on a screen. I paid my dues, never a penny short, and proud to do so...I demand you treat me with respect. I, Daniel Blake, am a citizen, “nothing more and nothing less,” captures the impossibility for disabled people to fit Marxist concepts that are limited by the conceptual framework of capitalist normalcy and able-bodiedness.

The marginalization and exclusion of disabled people within the capital-labor totality and the occupational structure of capitalist society obliges critique of the historical universalization of the capitalist mode of production and the constructedness of its categories. It also signals towards the incapability of this mode of production to include non-normative embodiments and minds, despite the efforts of disabled people to accommodate themselves to its inaccessible structures.

The symbolic marginalization and demonization of disabled people reliant on welfare and the negation of the barriers to employment that they encounter, in turn, index the uneven processes of universal inclusion within the capitalist mode of production.

Appreciation of this reveals how disabled forms of non-productivity can contribute to effecting a “revolution within the conception of worker subjectivity,” if they are not conceived of as merely attached to individuals “incapable of working within the narrow standardization efforts of capitalism” (Mitchell and Snyder 2015, 221).

Disability And/In Resistance To Workers’ Habituation

As I have suggested in the previous section, Braverman theorizes the “direct grip of capital” on the working class as constituting the framework which sets constraints on the political and social life of labor. In this second section I will explore how Labor and Monopoly Capital provides a key concept for studying the possibilities of anti-capitalist politics despite and against these constraints, and for identifying the contribution that a standpoint of struggle internal to disability can make to this politics: namely, Braverman’s theory of workers’ habituation to waged work, which the capitalist mode of exploitation depends upon and which Braverman presents as a fraught and lengthy process.

Building on Braverman’s insights into workers’ habituation from a disability perspective valorizes the capability of disabled people for anti-capitalist politicization but also the ways in which Braverman’s analysis of capitalism unfolds in a hauntological rather than ontological register, on which the capitalist mode of production is defined by lack because of its failure to transform disabled people into workers.

For Mark Fisher (2014) temporality is key for Derrida’s hauntology, as hauntology feeds a sense of what is haunting us under contemporary capitalism is not the specter of a past golden age but the ‘not yet’ of futures expected. Translating Fisher’s insight into a dimension where it is capital that is subjected to haunting, Braverman’s theory of habituation makes visible the logics whereby, for the capitalist mode of production, the hauntological ‘opposition between “to be” and “not to be”’ operates in both a teleological and eschatological sense (Derrida 1994, 10).

It is capital’s need for the constant renewal of workers’ habituation to manage the inevitable recurrence of workers’ resistance, the possibility for

workers' habituation to lapse at some point in the future, and the location of the need for its entrenchment as a presupposition of the capitalist mode of production that powers the logic of haunting that prevents Braverman's theory from producing an ontology of the capitalist mode of production.

Braverman foregrounds both the ways in which capitalism moves to envelop every social relation, and the difficulty with which it reproduces its domination. Such difficulty resides in the resistance of individuals to becoming habituated into the capitalist mode of exploitation. If for Braverman the violence and reach of the capitalist process of habituation becomes universal in proportion as the expansion of capital proceeds geographically and reaches into different forms of human activity, capital needs to enforce subordination to the process whereby humans are transformed into workers: this enforcement is a process that requires constant and generational renewal, and that will never deliver complete compliance.

In Chapter 6 of *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, fittingly titled 'The Habituation of the Worker to the Capitalist Mode of Production,' Braverman theorizes the need for capital to enforce subordination to the process whereby humans are transformed into workers as a process that needs to be renewed constantly and generationally, and as a process that constantly, and generationally, will never be able to achieve complete compliance.

He remarks, "the habituation of workers to the capitalist mode of production must be renewed with each generation, all the more so as the generations which grow up under capitalism are not formed within the matrix of work life, but are plunged into work from the outside" (Braverman 1998, 261). Moreover, Braverman identifies a connection between habituation and the possibility to refuse it based on how habituation functions to enforce a state of subjection that is not natural and as such refusable. For Braverman, "The condition is repugnant to the victims, whether their pay is high or low, because it violates human conditions of work" (Braverman 1998, 261).

The possibility for resistance to habituation that Braverman indicates resonates with that made necessary by disability's location on the margins of the

occupational structure under capitalism and, consequently, of capitalist society. Is There Anybody Out There? entangles the abandonment of ableist frameworks of cure with the rejection of a work-oriented life in Ella and Naomi's conversation about ways to answer the question "What do you do?"

After relating her job-seeking efforts and conflict with discriminatory employers, Ella asks Naomi, "Why can't you do that stuff? And it's okay if you don't wanna answer, if you think that question's worded wrongly." Naomi replies, "Because I can't do the thing. Like, the thing people put on ... I don't have it." She crucially situates her response in relation to the combined overcoming of the desire for a cure, and the denunciation of the demonization of disabled people on benefits as ableist. Naomi recounts,

"I've lived with this thing my entire life and it's, like, it's such a journey. I used to imagine myself in the future and I imagined myself as "better", you know. And at some point you just realize it's not gonna happen and this is it. But that's incredibly freeing at the same time. That's so freeing, because it's like, this is it, like, it, and it's fine, it's wonderful."

Naomi follows this up with the reflection, "I feel like the entire sort of hatred towards people on benefits is, like, ableism, largely. I am on disability, you know. I'm disabled. I have a carer. My carer is my mum."

Naomi's reflections express critique of the ways in which, within capitalist societies, human worth cannot but be "measured by one's capacity to contribute to society productively" (Aho 2017, 321), disabled people cannot but be "at the lower end of an ableist cascade of worthiness" (Blattner 2020, 11) and "the abolition of an individual's disablement" cannot but be "ultimately dependent upon and subordinate to the logic of productivity" (Abberley 1987, 92).

How disability generates subject positions conducive to the refusal of habituation, like Naomi's, is grasped by disability theory intent on grasping the threat that intractable non-normativity presents to the fetishization of waged work as the route to societal recognition.

According to Ellen Clifford, disability "has the potential to cause unrest" (2020, 39) because "dis-

abled people's position in society is tied to what we represent within capitalism: an "unproductive" element that cannot earn our own living or, if in work, is unable to produce the same levels of profit for employers as non-disabled workers" (Clifford 2020, 40). The stigma, immiseration and vulnerableization to which disabled people are subjected under capitalism are precisely intended to "discipline the workforce, encouraging workers to maximize productivity in their jobs, regardless of workplace conditions or income, lest they face the same fate" (Clifford 2020, 41).

Despite the specificity of disability as a socio-economic and political phenomenon under capitalism, Naomi's refusal belongs within a large pool of resistances traced by Braverman in ways that intimate the need for a perspective that maps the changing structures of the capitalist mode of production but also the possibilities of resistance to it. For Braverman,

beneath ... apparent habituation, the 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).

With these words not only does Braverman capture the vulnerability of the workings of capital to multiple forms and possibilities of resistance. They also call for a diversity of situated angles from which to connect perceptual reframings of the realities of resistance to the symbolic grip of capital on our bodies and minds. It is here that the contribution of disability as a vehicle for exploring the possibilities of refusing habituation, and thus functioning as a *memento mori* for capitalism, most powerfully fits within Braverman's theory of habituation.

A shift in perception that could facilitate this exploration is described by Rod Michalko in his discussion of "ways, some similar to one another

and some entirely different, of perceiving disability, of feeling it, and of understanding and experiencing (living) it" (Michalko 2022, xxviii). For Michalko this is "what brings disability into appearance; this is what materializes it; this is what attributes meaning to disability" (Michalko 2022, xxviii).

The stakes in this perceptual shift are enormous for both disabled people and for society, as the ways in which the "materialization and appearance of disability is fashioned" influence how "disability is acted upon, treated, and experienced" in society (Michalko 2022, xxviii).

When the possibility for the working class to resist, sabotage or refuse habituation is concerned, the recognition of a shared investment between disabled and temporarily able-bodied members of the working class in organizing against worker habituation is what is afforded by a prior realization that "the more disability can be, the more society can be" (and this realization is considered by Michalko to be "the radical gift of disability studies") (Michalko 2022, xxix).

Michalko's contribution belongs within a wider framework delineated by Tanya Titchkosky, Elaine Cagulada, Madeleine DeWelles, Efrat Gold, which employs a "relational orientation to disability" to trace the ways in which "disability appears and disappears" (2022, 4) and "how disappearances of disability are intimately tied to the contexts of their appearances" (2022, 8).

A similar relational framework can be gleaned from the attention that Braverman devotes to the possibility and reality of resistance to habituation as an "incessant and unending process" of "transformation of working humanity into a "labor force," a "factor of production," an instrument of capital" as an 'incessant and unending process' (Braverman 1998, 96). The need for the continuous reproduction of habituation exposes the capitalist mode of production to vulnerability both due to the impossibility to transform disabled people into productive labor and because of the possibility to generalize their failed habituation politically.

Braverman's theory of habituation interrogates how the capitalist mode of production 'appears' from a perspective of struggle that resonates with

that called for by autonomist analyses of the evolving capital–labor relation (which, similarly to Braverman, combine this perspective of struggle with a focus on the theorization of the forms that the capital–labor polarity assumes at different stages of the development of the capitalist mode of production).

As Braverman explains, “classes, the class structure, the social structure as a whole, are not fixed entities but rather ongoing processes, rich in change, transition, variation, and incapable of being encapsulated in formulas, no matter how analytically proper such formulas may be” (Braverman 1998, 289).

Bearing this mutability in mind, the mapping out of the formation of subjects of disablement alongside their resistance to habituation into the capitalist mode of production should be the starting point of analysis for developing what Chis proposes as a “coalitional politics that places disablement at its centre, together with other processes of exploitation and oppression” by building on “a cultural–materialist understanding of identity and the Autonomist Marxist class composition thesis to propose a distinction between the ‘technical’ and ‘political’ compositions of disability” (Chis 2023, 9).

Putting Chis’ insight into conversation with Braverman’s work exemplifies how an autonomist political standpoint internal to disability illuminates ways in which the othering of disabled people based on the intractability that their bodymind non-normativity presents to capitalist exploitation generates subject positions well-placed to resist habituation.

Chis proposes a Marxist Autonomist-adapted ‘disability composition’ approach to examine the “technical composition of disability (that is, everyone who is subjected to disablement, regardless of whether or not they acknowledge the subjectivation)” alongside the “political composition of disability” that emerges when “the subjects of disablement organise themselves for collective struggle via politically collective identities” (2020, 13).

For Chis these technical and political compositions are “internally co-constitutive and their iteration within a particular socio–historical context can be established through empirical enquiry” (Chis 2020, 13).

Chis’ combination of her concept of “subjects of disablement” to theorize “the capitalist-specific collective experience of living in a disabling society”

(Chis 2023, 14) with the analysis of how “some subjects of disablement establish the political composition of disability through the socio–political identity” (Chis 2023, 9) exemplifies how an autonomist disability perspective provides a useful starting point to refuse the disappearance of disability from Braverman’s subterranean stream of resistance to habituation, as part of a wider refusal to reproduce at the theoretical level the relegation of “disabled people ... on every margin of every group, political or otherwise” (Titchkosky et al 2022, 2).

An autonomist disability perspective draws attention to the existence of this subterranean stream of resistance as the motive force constitutive of Braverman’s hauntological conception of the capitalist mode of production, and pinpoints its relevance for a wider exploration of the possible relationship between the autonomist reversal of the antagonistic poles of class struggle and the reversal of the perspective from which to approach the relationship between normalcy and disability.

This critical move overturns the vulnerability the latter is seen to experience with respect to the former by drawing attention to how ‘everyone is virtually disabled, both in the sense that able-bodied norms are “intrinsically impossible to embody” fully and in the sense that able-bodied status is always temporary’ (McRuer 2006, 31).

In this scenario, for Lennard Davis disability is ‘always an actively repressed memento mori of the fate of the normal body’ (1995, 1) and Michalko, echoing Davis, argues that disability as memento mori “becomes a reminder both of the fragility of the human body and of how fortunate or graced are those who are not disabled” (Michalko 2002, 100).

Dislocating the balance of power in which normalcy is entrenched as the powerful and regulating pole is accompanied by the shift of perspectives of analysis from one internal to normalcy to one internal to disability as a category of struggle. For Tanya Titchkosky, this shift generates a politics of wonder(ing) about “that which organizes bodies and social spaces and their worlds of meaning” which allows us to “remake our lives together” (2011, 16).

In a similar spirit, McRuer introduces ‘crip theory’ to describe a form of theorizing that wields

analytical and political power by voicing what he calls a ‘severely disabled perspective’ on the basis of the severity of the critique this grounds; ‘severely disabled bodies’ here are not “the most marginalized” but those “best positioned to... call out the inadequacies of compulsory able-bodiedness” (McRuer 2006, 31).

On a later formulation, for McRuer the critical act of crippling consists in exposing how “able-bodiedness and able-mindedness get naturalized” and how the non-normative bodies and minds that “should be at the absolute center of a space or issue or discussion get purged from that space or issue or discussion” (McRuer 2018, 24).

In the spirit of ‘cripping’ operations and reframing, an autonomist disability perspective re-centers disabled people as anti-capitalist subjects of struggle against which to test the validity of theoretical concepts and categories, as well as of the activist practices to which Marxist theory aims to respond and contribute.

Universalizing Disability Within Braverman’s Subterranean Stream of Resistance to Habituation

To conclude, an autonomist disability perspective on Braverman’s work grasps the relevance of his double critique of the universalization of, and enforced habituation to, the capitalist mode of production to envisage the role that disability can play in anti-capitalist struggle. I have suggested that disability’s anti-capitalist power resides in the difference it marks within a universalized mode of production and in the refusal of habituation into it, in which non-normative bodyminds—Chis’ subjects of disablement—can participate.

Thus, while Braverman does not explicitly engage with the appearance of disability as a socioeconomic and political phenomenon, his theorization of the universalization of the capitalist mode of production and its reliance on the continuous habituation of the working class offer fundamental tools for politically locating disability within the subterranean stream of resistance to habituation from a position only available to subjects excluded or marginalized from the capitalist mode of production.

An autonomist disability perspective valorizes Braverman’s appreciation of the relationship between

capital’s need for a continual enforcement of habituation and the potential for it to be interrupted. In so doing, it also revises Braverman’s theory of habituation as a theory of the haunting of the capitalist mode of production by the possibility for it to be undone through collective refusal of habituation.

If for Derrida ‘hauntology’ is a category which is irreducible to “everything it makes possible: ontology, theology, positive or negative onto-theology” (Derrida 1994, 83), an autonomist disability perspective accentuates Braverman’s foregrounding of what an ontology of the capitalist mode of production presupposes and conceals; namely, its incomplete universalization and habituation of the working class into subservience.

What incomplete universalization and habituation share is their being haunted by disability as what remains intractable to incorporation or accommodation. Symbolically universalizing disability by appreciating how it already belongs within the working class and the subterranean stream of resistance to habituation revisions disability’s exclusion from capitalist universalization and its resistance to capitalist habituation as indicating political subject positions available for the whole working class to assume.

Arguing that normalcy functions by constraining the material and symbolic range of the possible under capitalist relations of production, what we need are visions that challenge the logic of capitalist normalcy while making visible the possibility to imagine, and create, modes of organizing life alternative to those enjoined by the capitalist mode of production.

If, as Vlad P. Glăveanu contends, “The possible re-emerges as an organizing category in our lives and our thinking not despite but because of living through the seemingly impossible and unimaginable” (2023, 3), a conversation between Braverman’s theory of habituation and autonomist disability perspectives such as Chis’ points to the unravelling of any semblance of permanence and naturalness that the capitalist mode of production, and the regime of normalcy which supports it, strive to maintain.

It also calls for a critique of deterministic spaces and frameworks that deny the possibility of remaking the world beyond the successful universalization and

habituation that the capitalist mode of production depends upon. This perspective enables a further interrogation of the mechanisms whereby normative and non-normative modes of thinking alternatively curtail or facilitate possibilities for imagining resistance to the universalizing telos of the capitalist mode of production and habituation into it.

This understanding of universalization expands the conception of disability beyond a focus on the individual or the biological body in isolation to make visible its social relevance and presence. Universalizing disability undoes the dichotomy between the particular and the universal in the spirit of Nivedita Majumdar's 'radical universalisms,' or universalisms that are "deeply anchored in lived experience" of the particular in a way that "encapsulates the universal" (Majumdar 2021).

The possibility of this undoing is grounded in the acknowledgement that the resistance to habituation afforded by lived experience of disability encapsulates the possibility for resistance to habituation that all working-class subjects possess, if differentially.

Symbolically universalizing disability by appreciating its presence and belonging within the subterranean stream of resistance to capitalist habituation, conceptually dismantles the barriers that capitalist normalcy manufactures between disabled and temporarily able-bodied members of the working class, and overturns the marginalization of disabled people to the margins of spaces and theories of class struggle to which they could make a fundamental contribution.

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Craft Fetishism: Skill, Labor, and the Artisanal Imaginary

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ABSTRACT: A central concern in Braverman's (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital* is the role of skill in the struggle between labor and capital. The lasting understanding of the deskilling thesis is that changes in the organization of the labor process and its technical composition led to a siphoning of skill from the craft worker and its translation to specialized knowledge controlled by the professional managerial class. Fifty years since the book's publication, many processes Braverman described have continued to develop, even as management itself has been deskilled, distributed, and technologically rationalized. Over the past two decades, however, skill has emerged as a new site of scholarly debate, espoused by many as a path to liberation for today's immaterial workers. As digital technologies increasingly mediate social and working life, material skills practice offers potential reconnection to material knowledge and traditions. Arising alongside this emerging craft discourse are diverse economic manifestations of "craft capitalism." From heritage denim to craft beer, craft-branded commodities inhabit a privileged position in 21st century urban economies. This paper interrogates tensions between craft mythologies and labor process organization in craft industries, examining how craft skill is fetishized—remaining alienated from craft workers while deployed as a simulacrum for a timeless artisan and pre-industrial production routines.

Introduction

In the introduction to his 1974 classic, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Harry Braverman asserts that his analysis avoids the romanticism of a "sentimental attachment to the outworn conditions of now archaic modes of labor" (6). In reading Braverman's work, one notices his commitment to understanding capitalist development as an unfolding historical process, with new managerial techniques, technological innovation, and workplace organization playing central roles in that process's trajectory. However, observing the rise over the last decade of a global neo-craft and artisanal economy, one wonders whether capital and its functionaries remain committed to a similar romanticism. Recognizing that this development depends on an image of artisanal and pre-modern productive practices, how should workers and scholars understand the contemporary cachet of markedly outdated, craft-inspired labor processes, and what role do craft workers play in their reproduction?

There are many entries into an analysis of the craft-inspired mode of production. Conveniently, a central concern for Braverman is the role of skill in

the struggle between labor and capital, a dynamic of central importance in discussions of craft and artisanry. The lasting understanding of Braverman's so-called deskilling thesis is that changes in the organization of the labor process and its technical composition lead to a siphoning of skill from the craft worker and its translation to specialized knowledge to be controlled by the professional managerial class. This is, as we shall see, an oversimplification of how skill is operationalized and extracted through the labor process, which depends, at least in part, on the externalization of craft knowledge from the worker and its concentration in the hands of management. Craft skill, in this sense, ceases to be a resource controlled by the worker, becoming instead the domain of engineers, designers, planners, and managers. For Braverman, the labor process functions, at least in part, to facilitate this dispossession of skill and knowledge from the worker, serving as a catalyst for the separation of conception and execution.

Fifty years since the book's publication, we observe the extent to which many processes

Braverman described have continued to develop, even as management itself has been deskilled, distributed, and technologically rationalized. However, over the past two decades the category of skill has emerged as a new site of scholarly meditation and debate, one espoused by many as a path to liberation for today's immaterial workers (Sennett 2008; Crawford 2009; Gauntlett 2011). As our social and working lives become ever more mediated by digital technologies, this argument goes, the practice of material skills for work and/or leisure holds the potential for reconnection to and reintegration of material knowledge and traditions. Such discourses would have been relatively unheard of in Braverman's time, his analysis being of the labor processes of Fordist capitalism. Much has changed in the last 50 years, and as one confronts post-Fordism's highly flexibilized, contingent, and digitalized division of labor, one must also contend with the degree to which Braverman's analysis remains applicable in 21st century production circuits.

Neo-craft industries represent particularly rich test cases, their workforces often composed of highly educated yet materially skilled workers while their output is typically materially substantive but culturally imbued. In neo-craft industries, we encounter a tense union of a more-or-less Fordist labor process engaged in producing the niche, culturally rich commodities of the post-Fordist economy. Discourses of tradition and quality often serve to obscure this tension, leading to an image of craft commodities as atemporal objects, existing outside and against traditional labor processes.

Arising alongside this emerging craft discourse are the diverse economic manifestations of "craft capitalism" (Anderson 2022) and the "hipster economy" (Gerosa 2024, 1). From heritage denim to craft beer, craft-branded commodities inhabit a privileged position in 21st century urban economies and beyond. What often goes unquestioned is precisely what the terms craft and artisanal mean in these contexts. Drawing upon popular and industry sources as well as interviews with makers and craft workers, this paper interrogates the tensions between craft mythologies and the organization of the labor process in craft industries. Specifically, it examines the function of

skill within these labor processes, highlighting the ways in which craft skill is fetishized in the craft industrial labor process, remaining alienated from the craft worker at the same time it is deployed as a simulacrum for a timeless artisan and the routines of a bygone age of pre-industrial production, marking, to a degree, capital's unwillingness to move beyond "the outworn conditions of now archaic modes of labor," instead opting to remobilize them in the valorization process, if only at a discursive level.

Moreover, as neo-craft enterprises proliferate, so does the discursive slippage of craft as a distinct category of production. Whereas the skilled activity of the artisan is readily apparent when one encounters the wares of a self-employed jeweler or ceramic artist, it becomes increasingly diffuse and imprecise when one considers large-scale craft branded industries. These craft enterprises operate under what I have elsewhere called "craft industrialism" (Anderson 2022, iv)—the tendency for scalable neo-craft firms to operate under Taylorized labor processes while mobilizing the discursive category of craft to imbue their output with an image of skill. This skill has been dispossessed from the worker, effectively making skill a fetish in the neo-craft economy. Simply put, under craft industrialism, firms operate as Fordist enterprises while positioning themselves discursively as craft or artisanal. This tendency creates the conditions for what I suggest should be considered craft fetishism—the replacement of craft skill at the point of production with the image of such at the point of consumption.

To interrogate this phenomenon of the fetishization of skill in the neo-craft labor process, this article begins with a brief overview of contemporary conceptualizations of craft and skill, particularly as these relate to the emergence of the neo-craft phenomenon increasingly carving a path throughout global urban (and increasingly rural) economies. After setting the conceptual backdrop, the discussion progresses to consider the methodological commitments and procedures of the present intervention, namely the prioritization of a set of voices regularly obscured in discussions of the neo-craft movement — those of craft workers, rather than craft entrepreneurs. The paper is motivated by the critical tradition of workers'

inquiry, a collaborative approach to qualitative data collection intended to uncover worker experiences while providing a platform for workers' interests (Notes from Below 2018).

With these definitional considerations out of the way, the article moves to its primary contribution. As the final three sections will demonstrate, the neo-craft resurgence presents theoretical complications vis-à-vis the role of skill in craft production. Specifically, whereas craft discourse portrays the neo-craft movement as an opportunity for the reunification of conception and execution, close observation of the labor processes at work in neo-craft industries reveals the opposite: that craft industrial labor processes continue the legacy of Taylorism, masking this behind a facade of autonomous creative labor, labor that is rarely observable in the more recognizable exemplars of craft production. In neo-craft industries we see the continuity of Taylorized, Fordist production, but with the sheen of post-Fordist flexibility, specialization, and distinction, a sheen not easily observable in the labor process itself. This article makes the case for a reconsideration of the role of the craft worker beyond the shallow discursive picture of the skilled craftsperson archetype, arguing instead that the craft worker is integrated into the neo-craft labor process as typical industrial or service labor while they are discursively propped up as a timeless, skilled artisan.

Conceptualizations of Craft in the 21st Century

There is not a single, agreed-upon definition for craft in either its historical or contemporary usage. Braverman, for instance, described the crafts as the individual, unified tasks assumed by groupings of skilled workers under the social division of labor: wheelwrights, bakers, and so on. This is, essentially, the term's meaning when we use it to describe a particular vocational grouping today, the manual crafts. But importantly, the term also enjoys a complicated position vis-à-vis arts practice, either as an adjective describing artistic skill or as a disciplinary competitor to art, as in arts and crafts. Today, it is also used as a marker for a particular kind of commodity, one assumed to have been produced by hand, locally, or in small

quantities. Simply, craft is a complicated term with various applications.

Contemporary craft discourse conceives of craft as an alternative production approach that departs from mass manufacturing values and reflects different processes (Adamson 2019). Thought around craft's recent resurgence in so-called neo-craft industries tends to emphasize craft's connections to ideas of authenticity, tradition, quality, and localness (Crawford 2009; Sennett 2008; Gandini & Gerosa 2023; Gerosa 2024; Luckman 2015; Ocejó 2019). The craftsperson or maker, in both the popular imagination and the academic literature, is portrayed as a creative producer who, driven by their passion, sets about their productive activity with a commitment to quality for its own sake (Sennett 2008; Ocejó 2019). This focus on quality when paired with the small-scale craftsperson's output is conceived by many commentators as an implicit challenge to the mass production paradigm of the Fordist and early post-Fordist models. Craft, in this sense, represents an alternative approach to production, where work has the potential to be more dignified and less alienated. What often goes unaddressed is the degree to which the current cultural movement toward artisanal production is qualitatively distinct from its historical predecessors.

In his recent book, *The Hipster Economy*, Alessandro Gerosa (2024) makes a compelling case that one of the distinctions between traditional crafts and those activities and industries that compose today's neo-craft economy is the particularly ephemeral and consumable character of much of the output of today's craft industries. Consumption of such goods—craft beer, artisan coffee, and the like—for Gerosa, is an exercise in “petty conspicuous consumption” (2024, 64) wherein consumers can achieve small tastes of authenticity at a much lower price point than that of durable, traditional craft commodities—furniture, decor, etc. This ephemerality is understandable when we locate the contemporary wave of craft enthusiasm against the backdrop of both the neoliberal and digital social transitions. Consumption of craft commodities arguably allows one to reconnect with the material while they buy into neo-craft industries' discursive positioning as

alternative to the faceless, impersonal monoliths of the corporate world (Gerosa 2024; Land 2018).

That this image should extend into the world of work should be obvious. Just as craft commodities are assumed to be authentic by default, the work of producing them is frequently seen as less directly exploitative and alienating than that of their industrial and service counterparts (Anderson 2021; Fox Miller 2019; Delgaty & Wilson 2023). However, while the image of neo-craft industries evokes the traditional workshop and its internal structure, accounts from within these industries' labor processes often reveal an industrial division of labor and an internal hierarchy of roles and tasks, resembling the Fordist factory as much as or more than the pre-industrial workshop. Whereas craft makers and entrepreneurs, as self-employed or hobbyist craftspeople, enjoy some level of creative freedom and autonomy, the same cannot be said of craft workers who occupy support roles within craft industrial production.

Recognizing this contradiction between craft's popular image and its actually existing labor process, in the present analysis, craft, far from being the remit of passionate makers-cum-entrepreneurs, is conceived as a semiologically inflected grouping of productive enterprises that, while bearing the hallmarks of quality, localness, and authenticity, regularly use these assumed characteristics to obscure or hide a Fordist labor process. This is not, of course, universally the case, but as we will see, many neo-craft industries claim artisanality while they depend on a large workforce of deskilled or otherwise non-artisanal labor. In fact, skill represents a curious and contradictory element of the neo-craft labor process, one discursively exalted while concentrated within a top-down productive regime.

Skill and the Image of Such

Understanding craft's contemporary meanings requires examining skill—craft's most contested element and the fulcrum of Braverman's analysis. Any discussion of craft in its present usage must contend with the factor of skill, particularly if one is interested in how the neo-craft labor process differs (or fails to differ) from its contemporary and historical counterparts. Skill is a curious element of the labor

process, one internal to but arguably externalizable from the worker. In Braverman's critical assessment of Taylor's (1911) principles of scientific management, skill occupies a central position as one of the lost elements of worker autonomy as the labor process is divided between conception and execution. The crafts in their basic form are, according to Braverman, constituted by the unity of planning and doing, each craft being a component of the societal division of labor.

Skill, for Braverman, is a product of the unity of head and hand, one that is eroded as these two elements of labor are separated, particularly through the introduction of scientific management and new technological innovations. To understand skill and its role within the labor process, however, one should take the requisite time to interrogate its relation to both conception and execution. Moreover, for the purposes of this paper we must also unpack and critically examine the role that skill plays in the neo-craft labor process and the ways in which this role is discursively employed to compose craft industrialism's popular image. In this section we set out to understand the complex role of skill in contemporary neo-craft production. This is accomplished, first, by discussing Braverman's conceptualization of skill and the function it plays in his analysis of the labor process. This leads, second, to a consideration of the application of skill in today's craft industries, revealing that in many, skill is a vestige of a lost regime of production, one that undergirds a common view of neo-craft industries as skill-driven even as many are administered in a Fordist manner. Finally, the section ends by positing that in today's craft industries, skill becomes an ingredient in a pervasive fetishization of craft in which the image of skill, the very idea of a skilled artisan at the heart of production, is enough to mark an industry or commodity as craft, even if that skilled worker is of negligible importance in the labor process.

To begin, let us consider skill both as understood by Braverman, but also in relation to the broader literature on craft. Skill is, in Braverman's use, a common element in both the industrial and pre-industrial labor process. His particular use of skill in relation to the control of the labor process suggests that he conceives of skill as existing at the nexus of

mental and manual labor, an element of work that is developed through the unified production of craft commodities. As management attempts to control the labor process through the separation of these two elements, unified skilled work is replaced by rote, kinetic operations; simply, as planning is removed from the process, the autonomous characteristic of skill is degraded and externalized to management. His key case to illustrate the process of deskilling is the application of Taylor's time and motion studies to simplify working routines. What is suggested in Braverman's treatment of skill is that as planning is removed from execution, planning is representative of craft knowledge, particularly that knowledge gained through actual engagement with craft processes. Once removed from the equation, being transferred to the remit of management, the remaining motive tasks become deskilled and interchangeable.

That some aspects of craft knowledge can be estranged from the worker is clear. Early examples of rationalization through an industrial division of labor clearly illustrate that knowledge gained through craft practice can inform the layout and routines of the labor process. However, how should one understand those elements of craft knowledge that are inalienable, that cannot be transferred between individuals?

Commentators on craft like Richard Sennett (2008) and Peter Dormer (1994) explain that much of craft knowledge is tacit, tacit knowledge being that grouping of insights that one learns through experience but cannot readily translate into language. As Dormer explains, craft skill is developed through years of experience working directly with materials, making skill a form of material knowledge not easily transferred from person to person. Meditating on this same characteristic of skill, Sennett offers an example of Antonio Stradivari and the layout and operation of his 17th-18th century workshop. While Stradivari trained and worked with several apprentices throughout his life, none were able to reach his level of mastery. For Sennett, this underlines the experiential nature of craft skills while simultaneously making room for the figure of the craft virtuoso.

Of course, mastery and virtuosity undoubtedly exist in some examples of neo-craft production; these are industries that attract scores of highly passionate

and talented people after all. However, we should question just how much of a challenge this is to the Bravermanian view of skill and its extraction from the worker in the labor process. Are the heights of skill (likely as compounded by a certain personal talent) reached by virtuosos like Stradivari representative of skilled work in the capitalist labor process, and, if this level of skill is inalienable from the skilled crafts-person, does this necessarily call into question the adequacy of Braverman's general analysis?

A critical reflection on today's craft industries would suggest that the answer to this question is a resounding "no," particularly since these industries still make room for virtuosotic flair within and as a discursive component of the labor process. Instead, in the neo-craft enterprise the Taylorist process of deskilling continues through a regimented division of labor which subordinates the material process of the craft commodity's production while the image of the skilled craftsperson, master, or virtuoso is elevated as a representation of the values of craft. Whether this skilled craftsperson is applying their skill in the production of the craft commodity is immaterial so long as the craft industry and craft industrialism generally can project this virtuosity onto both the process and its product.

Skill, in this sense, exists at the nexus of the material and the ideological. Skill as it is expressed in the unity of planning and execution is extracted from the worker through the material reorganization of the labor process and the degradation of the worker's role, while simultaneously being reified in the craft commodity. The craft commodity becomes a fetish of the craft labor process, evoking a sense of quality, artisanry and mastery even if no such mastery is on display in the labor process itself. In the neo-craft labor process, skill matters less than the idea thereof.

The Division of Labor and the "Unity" of Craft Production

Having established skill's fetishization in neo-craft discourse, we must now examine how labor processes are organized in craft industries and the degree to which skill remains necessary. To begin unpacking these questions, this section will examine the division of labor in typical neo-craft industries, particularly

those that produce consumable craft commodities (brewing, baking, coffee roasting, and the like). Although this section will treat the neo-craft division of labor and labor process in a general and theoretical way, it is built upon previous ethnographic research, including non-participant observation and craft worker interviews conducted between 2018 and 2021 (Anderson 2022; Anderson 2021). This section uses Braverman's analysis of the capitalist labor process to locate neo-craft industries squarely within the Fordist tradition, even if influenced by the cultural markers of the contemporary "aesthetic regime of consumption" posited by Gerosa (2024, 13). It will do so by reviewing Braverman's general historical assessment of the evolution of the division of labor from a social division of labor to a Taylorized industrial division of labor. It will consider how the neo-craft division of labor resembles a Taylorized labor process and how this resemblance measures up against craft discourse. Finally, it will consider the roles of the craftsperson and the craft worker in this labor process, setting the stage for a discussion of the potential for craft worker organizing, the subject of the final section.

The early chapters of Braverman's book focus considerable attention on the division of labor and how its industrial maturation has led to a degradation of autonomy for the worker. Building upon the contributions of figures like Adam Smith and Charles Babbage, Braverman argues that the division of individual detail tasks amongst workers is a unique product of the capitalist labor process, as is the division of the routines of the worker under the dictates of Taylorism. Although we will interrogate these assumptions in the paragraphs that follow, they raise some important questions in relation to the ascendancy of neo-craft production in the post-industrial west. First, if the industrial division of labor is marked by the progressive segmentation of tasks and routines, to what degree might the unity of production under the neo-craft division of labor be thought of as a corrective of this outcome? Second, to what degree is the imaginary of a unified neo-craft division of labor accurate to the realities faced by craft workers? Asked differently, are the working routines of craft workers reflective of a kind of head/hand unity, or are there other aspects of the neo-craft regime of production

that should be brought into our understanding of craft industrialism?

To answer these questions, we should begin by considering the differences between the forms of division of labor reviewed by Braverman. In Braverman's analysis, the division of labor common to all human societies is the divvying up of socially necessary labor by occupation, specialization or role. Simply put, every society is dependent on certain tasks, tasks that are divided socially to meet a collective need, resulting in several crafts and trades. This social division of labor is one in which craftspeople are in control of their working routines, their labor process. The craftsperson under a social division of labor is responsible for the planning and execution of their productive enterprise, whether they go about their tasks in a holistic or variable manner. The craftsperson under such a productive regime enjoys a unity of mental and manual labor and the freedom to pursue this in the manner they see fit.

By contrast, the industrial division of labor brought forth with the rise of the industrial capitalist system further divides the process of production from vocations to tasks. Building upon Adam Smith's (1776) example of the pin factory, Braverman explains that under the detailed, industrial division of labor, management breaks the productive process down into its component parts, with craftspeople increasingly being relegated to the position of detail workers. In Smith's allegory, this involves moving pin production from a process of one worker completing multiple operations to multiple workers completing a single operation. For Smith, this is illustrative of the efficiency of the industrial labor process, the output of a detailed division of labor resulting in a much higher level of productivity than could be realized by a simple division of vocations. Such a division of labor, however, increases the alienation of the worker, further removing the worker from conception and relegating them to a labor process of rote repetition.

The conditions faced by workers under an industrial division of labor have been the fodder of critiques of the industrial system since its inception. For the early leaders of and adherents to the 19th century arts and crafts movement, the industrial division of labor led to the immiseration of and loss of dignity for

the industrial working class (Ruskin, 1854; Morris, 1883). For thinkers like John Ruskin and William Morris, the reduction of the worker to the provider of simple motive operations necessarily resulted in a loss of autonomy and a reduction in workmanship. For these thinkers, the unity of planning and execution was a necessary ingredient in both human fulfillment and the production of quality.

The arts and crafts critique, however, was of the labor processes and conditions of 19th century industrial production. One can but imagine their response to the advent of Frederick Winslow Taylor's (1911) principles of scientific management. Taylor was particularly interested in wresting even greater degrees of control from workers and reallocating those to management. This required an acceleration of the industrial division of labor, divvying up not only the discrete tasks of production, but the routines of each of those tasks. Whereas a pre-Taylorist industrial worker might be tasked with the repetitive completion of one operation leading to the production of a completed commodity, under Taylor's system, the particular manner by which the worker completed that operation would be studied and dictated by management, the latter striving toward even greater levels of control over the minutest details of the labor process in order to extract the maximum amount of labor from a given amount of labor time.

According to Braverman's assessment of the Taylorist onslaught, this quest for ever greater levels of control of the labor process led to a near-monopolization of planning on the part of management, destroying the historical unity of craft production and replacing it with deskilled and monotonous task work. Whereas even under the conditions of the 19th century industrial division of labor the workers maintained some autonomy in terms of how they went about completing their tasks, under Taylorism management exercised control by monopolizing workplace decision-making (Braverman 1974, 107). In essence, what has been commonly referred to as the deskilling thesis might better be thought of as the deunifying thesis: the process of building managerial control through the separation of planning and execution. Skills, of course, still have a role to play in such a conceptualization, but skill in this sense should

be thought of as a product of the unity of head and hand. As Braverman explains, Taylor's first principle aimed to render the labor process "independent of craft, tradition, and the workers' knowledge," making it depend entirely on managerial practices rather than worker abilities (1974, 113). Skill is removed from the equation not through the simplification of the labor process, as the deskilling moniker might imply, but rather through the siphoning off of craft knowledge and its replacement with managerial directives and procedures.

Over a century after Taylor's intervention, his principles are still observably in use throughout the industrial regime of production. Scientific management functioned as the dominant approach to organizing the labor process through most of the 20th century, both under capitalism and state socialism. Of course, through the intervening years managerial doctrines shifted and changed, but scientific management remained central to the planning and coordination of the labor process of mass industry. One still sees it in use in the massive factories of the automotive, textile, and electronics industries. Importantly, though, as mass production has increasingly moved from the traditional centers of the capitalist core to the emerging economies of the periphery, material production in the more recently de-industrialized north continues, but in some cases packaged differently, appealing to a new "aesthetic regime of consumption," to borrow a phrase from Alessandro Gerosa (2024, 13).

Proponents of the neo-craft renaissance often tout craft as a re-unified alternative to the impersonal routines of industrial production. One of the most influential voices in contemporary thought about craft is the American sociologist Richard Sennett (2008), who goes to great lengths to build a conceptual connection between thinking and doing as the cornerstone of the craft ethos. For Sennett, the impulse to produce high quality goods for their own sake is an emerging value in the 21st century economy and functions as an alternative to the alienation and disempowerment of traditional work. Craft, according to Sennett, is an orientation to productive activity that uses passion to reintegrate the head and hand, or, in the language we've been using, conception

and execution. Sennett's description of the process of separating conception and execution is not dissimilar to those offered by the thinkers of the arts and crafts movement, much of Sennett's discussion focusing on how the two elements of craft production are separated through various social processes. These include new computer-assisted approaches to design, the organization of the workplace or workshop, and the move toward mass produced uniformity. However, Sennett's analysis often falls flat vis-à-vis the conditions faced by workers beyond the psychological ramifications Sennett projects onto them because of the disunity between head and hand. The craft ethos, for Sennett, is one that is driven by a desire to reunite these two elements of craftsmanship (*sic*).

More popular commentators of craft, people like the American motorcycle mechanic and philosopher Matthew Crawford (2009) and (another) motorcycle mechanic and TV host Eric Gorges (2019), see craft as a pathway toward more edifying and dignifying working lives (not to mention lives in general). For both commentators, the material unity of craft is a compelling antidote to the generalized ennui experienced by many living in our heavily digitized world. Here again, these thinkers see a reintegration of thinking and doing as a corrective to the social ills brought about by the combination of technological development and the hegemony of Fordist production (though neither is likely to articulate it in this way).

Left out of these influential popular accounts of the rise of neo-craft is a serious consideration of the livelihoods, vocational outlooks, and working conditions for makers (craftspeople) and craft workers (employees). Fortunately, there are several thinkers in the general stream of Creative and Cultural Industries (CCI) who have taken on the task of understanding these important aspects of the neo-craft phenomenon. For example, whereas Susan Luckman's analyses of what she calls the most recent "wave of renewed interest" in craft also suggest the benefits of reuniting thought and action, particularly in the face of a crisis of authenticity in life and work, they probe deeper into the actual working routines and vocational patterns of makers and other craft workers (Luckman 2015, x; Luckman & Andrew 2020). This concern, for Luckman, is often focused on

the heavily gendered balance of reproductive labor in the home and entrepreneurial and aspirational labor in craft. This concern for the rhythms of production and their consequences for makers and workers is shared by thinkers like Alessandro Gerosa (2024) and Mark Banks (2010), the latter questioning how the historical and contemporary subordination of craft work to artistic work in the cultural industries threatens the conditions and vocational stability of craft.

We should note, of course, that Luckman and Banks are analyzing craft respectively as entrepreneurial fabrication and decoration and manufacture in cultural production. Less work up to this point has focused on the productive regimes undergirding craft industrialism, that is, the scalable production of authenticity-marked commodities. Gerosa identifies the scale production of authenticity as a central engine of valorization in the "hipster economy," pointing out that under the current "aesthetic regime of consumption" craft-inflected consumables give consumers a fleeting experience of authenticity, even luxury. Unfortunately for the purposes of the present argument, like other critical analyses of neo-craft production, Gerosa's intervention focuses considerable attention to the entrepreneurial impulse of craft business owners and makers, leaving the rank-and-file workers on whom these industries depend largely unaddressed.

While it is easy to reconcile the entrepreneurial maker with neo-craft discourse's focus on the unification of planning and doing, this unity is evasive as it relates to the craft worker. A common example given of the ascendancy of craft production is the craft brewery, but although it is trotted out as the prototypical neo-craft industry, seldom is its labor process examined. From the outside, brewing might appear as the creative work of a knowledgeable and talented brewer who, after conceiving of a recipe, sets out to realize it through fermentation. This is all technically true but overlooks the vast amount of labor necessary to translate that recipe from an idea to a physical can or keg of beer. While the brewer at an extremely small operation might do all the work by themselves, for municipal and regional breweries, it is far more likely that they will have a range of production and service assistance: assistant brewers,

warehousing and cellaring workers, bottling and labeling workers, retail associates, and so on. Viewed from this vantage, the labor process of an industry like craft brewing functions not as a reunification of conception and execution, but a continuation of the processes of the industrial division of labor, albeit one that elevates the “skilled craftsperson” above the rest of the craft workforce. If, as appears the case, the labor process remains divided along industrial lines, the centrality of skill remains elusive and dispersed.

Craft worker testimonies bear this out. Several workers interviewed for a study of the working conditions of neo-craft industries reported a disconnect between the discourse of skill and creativity and their daily work routines (Anderson 2022). Those working in support roles regularly reported that the creative planning in their craft industry (be that baking, brewing, coffee roasting, or clothing manufacture) is reserved for a select segment of the craft workforce, typically craftspeople with managerial responsibilities. Workers who were initially attracted to their industries due to an expectation of creative autonomy often found themselves following the designs, recipes, or plans of a craftsperson/manager. Arguably, this tendency compounds as a craft operation scales up. The unity of conception and execution in neo-craft production may, of course, exist in some craft enterprises, but many craft workers are aware that they remain alienated from the labor process and that their work remains largely deskilled.

One should ask at this stage what this division of labor means in relation to the pervasive discourse of neo-craft as somehow alternative to mainstream production. Craft discourse edifies the character of the craftsperson or artisan, putting them on a pedestal that eclipses the vast amount of work contributed by non-artisan craft workers. A close look at the labor process in a scalable neo-craft industry, however, reveals this to be a mirage, one that uses the image of skill to obscure the mundane division of labor at work in craft industrialism, one often made up of a range of so-called “unskilled” roles—packaging, retail sales, warehousing, and the like. The positioning of a business or industry as craft is often a simply discursive maneuver, allowing our collective imaginations to fill in the empty spaces

left by craft’s imprecision as a term. Skill, in this sense, is elusive because while it is present in the craft labor process, it is assumed to be ever-present, a fetish of a kind of work that plays a small role in much of craft industrial production.

This leaves the craft worker in a curious position vis-à-vis their role within the neo-craft labor process. Whereas the industrial discourse projects their role as one of skill, passion, and the like, they commonly confront a workplace where their skills are subordinated to rote, deskilled industrial routines. What does this contradiction mean for the ways craft workers understand their own vocational identities and the promises neo-craft discourse makes about their value as workers? And, importantly, if craft workers are not satisfied with the conditions they face in these industries, what recourse do they have for organizing alternatives?

Skill and Organizing in the Neo-Craft Economy

The contradictions between craft discourse and craft labor realities have concrete implications for worker organizing. In 2020, as businesses and workers alike were navigating the massive workplace challenges leveled by the global COVID-19 pandemic, workers in two third-wave coffee chains in Vancouver, British Columbia organized to join the United Food, Commercial, and Warehouse Workers’ Union Local 1518 (UFCW 1518). Workers at Matchstick Coffee and Cartems Donuts decided they needed to come together to form a union for several reasons, citing furloughs, irregular schedules, and health and safety as primary concerns (Anderson 2022). The workforces of both companies were and continue to be greatly diverse, with the union drive at Cartems being led by queer workers and workers of color. Similarly, the roles held by these workers were varied. The eventual bargaining units of the unions included baristas, retail associates, and kitchen assistants. One notices, of course, that these are not roles that are automatically included in the craftsperson category. In fact, it might even be appropriate to categorize these workers as an alternative segment of the craft industrial workforce: craft workers rather than craftspeople (Anderson 2021).

The stratification of roles within the neo-craft economy is complex and variable by industry and firm. However, the exemplars of scalable craft industries, those producing consumable craft commodities like artisan food and drink, tend to have a regimented division of labor that depends heavily on the support of less skilled or deskilled work to elevate the role and image of the craftspeople. Interestingly, however, when asked about their attitudes to their work and their industry, many workers in the former category report high levels of passion for their work and their product. While some do aspire to creative working lives in their craft, many recognize the disparities of their industries' divisions of labor while maintaining a certain vocational loyalty to their chosen industry. In brewing, according to Chloe Fox Miller (2019), this is due in large part to the sense of glamour projected onto the industry, even for those workers who work in support roles. The tendency for these industries to attract support workers through the image of creativity and cultural value while the businesses themselves recognize their dependence on non-artisan workers reveals a key contradiction in neo-craft's discursive positioning. Fox Miller argues the glamour of craft brewing leads brewery owners to view workers as "interchangeable, rather than possessing unique skills valuable to the success of the business" (2019, 85), intensifying associations between manufacturing and unskilled labor.

Of course, just as businesses are aware of the contradiction between the image of the craftspeople and the roles of craft workers, so too are these workers themselves. As my (2022) research with craft workers in the Pacific Northwest region of North America suggests, workers in the region's craft industries (brewing, coffee, baking, and the like) increasingly see themselves as industrial workers rather than temporarily inconvenienced creatives. Initially attracted to these industries due to their image as hip, enriching places to work, my respondents reported high levels of disillusionment due to the mundane realities they faced on the job. Far from being the energetic, creative workplaces they expected, these workers found themselves in traditional, hierarchical workplaces where instead of being valued for their skill, they were treated as interchangeable inputs in the production (or service) process.

In an industrial grouping distinguished by its projection of skilled work, the fact that many neo-craft workers see their work as devalued at the level of skill is telling. For many of these workers, the cachet that comes with being associated with these kinds of industries is a crucial element in their initial and continued attraction to their current vocation (Fox Miller 2019), but if the creativity and skill projected onto these industries is not characteristic of their working lives, one wonders how long this attraction lasts. Indeed, while this attraction functions as a means for the manufacture of consent and generation of self-discipline, it simultaneously serves as a catalyst for worker discontent (Burawoy 1979). Moreover, as craft workers recognize their deskilled roles within the labor process, they appear primed to take decisive collective action in the form of unionization drives, particularly in those workplaces (like cafes and breweries) where the industry has positioned itself as progressive or community-minded and where employers have hired workers motivated by these values.

In essence, while workers in these industries are imagined as skilled craftspeople, many work in "unskilled" or deskilled roles, and recognizing this have recently begun organizing. While this doesn't necessarily implicate skill as the sole or even central factor in these organizing attempts, it does suggest that the labor processes in neo-craft industries are more complex and less "unified" than much of craft discourse suggests. Furthermore, in a division of labor that deifies skilled labor at the expense of less skilled but still necessary roles, it is becoming apparent that all is not creative, passionate and dignified. Instead, the subordinated roles of support workers and the disconnect between neo-craft's promises and practices are implications of a set of industries that hide exploitation and hierarchy behind an image that upon closer inspection fails to depict the actual conditions faced by the workers propping up the neo-craft renaissance.

As demonstrated above, this dynamic is a manifestation of a fetish that sits at the heart of craft discourse and the discursive positioning of neo-craft industries. Neo-craft enterprises depend on an assumption of skilled labor, but this assumption is

often based on little more than the idea of a skilled craftsperson's involvement in the production of the craft commodity. Frequently, this skilled work occupies only a small portion of an otherwise complex and deskilled labor process, sometimes one bereft of the kinds of craft skill purported to characterize both the process and the product. Obviously, craftspeople are still involved in the neo-craft economy, but craft fetishism obscures the labor process of neo-craft production, projecting an image of skilled work that may or may not actually be present, at least in a significant way, within the neo-craft labor process.

Conclusion

This article has examined the paradox at the heart of contemporary craft production: while neo-craft industries position themselves as alternatives to alienated industrial labor, promising reunification of conception and execution through skilled work, they frequently reproduce Taylorized labor processes behind a facade of artisanal authenticity. By tracing skill's role from Braverman's original analysis through contemporary neo-craft economies, we have seen how craft industrialism depends on what I have called craft fetishism—the replacement of actual craft skill at the point of production with its image at the point of consumption.

The evidence from craft worker testimonies and organizing efforts reveals that many employees in neo-craft industries recognize the gap between discourse and reality. While craftspeople and entrepreneurs may enjoy creative autonomy, the majority of craft workers labor in deskilled support roles that bear little resemblance to the romanticized image of the skilled artisan. This stratification enables scalable production while maintaining the discursive benefits of craft branding, allowing firms to extract value from both the labor of deskilled workers and the cultural capital of craft itself.

Fifty years after Braverman warned against sentimental attachment to “outworn conditions of now archaic modes of labor,” capital appears to have found profitable ways to remobilize precisely such attachments. Where Braverman sought to avoid romanticism, contemporary craft capitalism embraces it, deploying the image of the timeless craftsperson

as a commodity fetish while continuing the processes of deskilling and managerial control he documented. The neo-craft phenomenon thus represents not a departure from Fordist production but its continuation under new aesthetic regimes, suggesting that Braverman's analysis remains as relevant today as when first published—perhaps even more so, as capital learns to commodify the very critiques mounted against its rationalization of work.

For craft workers increasingly aware of these contradictions, the path forward may lie in collective organizing that acknowledges their position not as aspiring artisans temporarily displaced from creative labor, but as industrial workers deserving of dignity, fair compensation, and democratic control over their labor process. Only by moving beyond craft fetishism can we confront the material realities of neo-craft production and build genuine alternatives to alienated labor.

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Production Line TV: Labor and Process in Factual Television Production

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ABSTRACT: Despite calls to reject Harry Braverman's labor process theory as deterministic and unsuitable for studying cultural work, continuing rationalization of media production warrants re-examining his arguments. This article investigates the reorganization of UK unscripted factual television production from linear to multi-linear workflow and its consequences for worker experience. Based on semi-structured interviews with self-shooting Producer-Directors and Edit Producers—practitioners at opposite ends of the production process—we analyze how processual change affects different work roles and production stages. We identify parallels with Braverman's observations: the separation of conception from execution transfers creative control to management, stricter division of labor fragments production teams, and workers become replaceable components rather than essential specialists. Our findings demonstrate the persistent validity of Braverman's claims about alienation and exploitation, albeit with differences in nature and scale. While cultural production retains specificity—particularly, the integration of mental and manual labor and relatively high skill requirements—the general principles Braverman outlined materialize in distinct ways in this context. Crucially, these effects are not challenged but heightened by contemporary flexible employment conditions. We argue for the value of studying labor processes in cultural production while accounting for industry- and genre-specific particularities and workers' subjective responses to structural conditions.

Introduction

The critical attitude towards labor process theory in cultural production scholarship builds on two main factors. Firstly, Braverman's approach does not account for the specificity of cultural production that distinguishes it from other forms of work, especially for those workers directly involved in the production of media texts (see Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011; Hesmondhalgh 2019). Compared to the manual, repetitive and low-skilled labor that Braverman discusses, media production requires higher skilled and specialized labor, is project-based and collaborative, often involves a certain degree of autonomy and attachment while lacking Braverman's distinction between manual and mental labor. Secondly, media workers operate in a flexible post-Fordist employment context with different features and pressures compared to the Fordist labor market Braverman based his claims on. Nevertheless, as we describe in

the first section of this article, there are sufficient similarities between recent changes in media production and Braverman's observations about the transformation of the labor process to suggest a re-examination of Braverman's arguments in a cultural industries context.

We focus on the production of unscripted factual television programming in the UK and investigate the consequences of recent reorganization of the production process and its related changes in the division of labor and occupational roles for the experience of work. We follow a genre-specific approach to production research, as genre shapes the specifics of production processes, values and conditions (see Alacovska 2016; Bruun 2011). Rooted in documentary, unscripted factual television as a broadcasting category refers to productions filmed on location rather than in a studio, which depict people, settings

and events in their real-life context. This means that, while planned and prepared to some degree, the action filmed does not follow a script with written dialogue. Our investigation does not include the production of unscripted factual entertainment formats such as set-based talent, game or reality shows.

Our argument is based on the joint analysis of two interview studies with practitioners involved in the production of unscripted factual programming in the British television industry. These included workers at the beginning and the end of the production process, namely, self-shooting Producer-Directors (PD), who capture raw footage on location, and Edit Producers (EP), who edit the footage into the final program. This approach enabled us to examine the impact of reorganization on different work roles and in different production stages. We conducted anonymized semi-structured interviews in 2022–2023 with twelve mid-career freelance workers (seven PDs, five EPs) with 20–30 years of industry experience. Gender and ethnic demographics reflected typical UK television workforce composition (Ofcom 2023; CDN 2023)¹. Due to their substantial professional experience, respondents were able to draw on a rich and diverse body of experience in their reflection on industry trends and conditions.

Based on this interview data, we explore the impact of industrial transformations respondents have witnessed. In the first section of this article, we provide a short introduction to recent shifts in the British television industry and describe the organizational transformation of the production process for unscripted factual television programs from linear to multi-linear production that emerged from our data. We highlight parallels in this transformation with Braverman's observations about scientific management and resultant shifts in the division of labor. In the second part of the article, we analyze the consequences of this processual change for PDs and EPs. We show how the economically motivated reorganization of the production process, firstly, reduces

worker control and autonomy, and secondly, creates a disconnect between production departments. In the final section of the article, we explore the implications of these findings for television workers in relation to Braverman's claims about alienation, exploitation and deskilling. These include a tendency for standardization over specialization in terms of skills and a heightened risk of alienation and exploitation that adds further pressure in an already highly competitive and insecure labor market.

The Reorganization of Factual TV Production

Harry Braverman's influential work *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) addresses the conditions of work under capitalism with a focus on the organization of labor processes. A central argument in his book concerns the consequences of Taylor's "scientific management", which standardized production and altered the division of labor, which—aided by technology—standardized production and altered the division of labor to increase production output while keeping production costs down. The objective behind this management strategy is purely economic and aimed at maximizing efficiency in production and increasing what Marx termed "surplus value" (2000). The strategy involves the reorganization of the production process, separating conception from execution and dividing labor processes into routine tasks that require less skill. As a result, control over the production process shifts from workers to management, giving management greater opportunity to dictate the pace and organization of work (Cuneo 1976).

According to Braverman, such scientific management leads to a degradation of work, characterized by alienation, exploitation and deskilling. These characteristics are also identified as typical features of media production in critical cultural labor scholarship (e.g. Banks 2007; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011; Grugulis & Stoyanova 2011), but there has been little focus on the role of labor processes in this context. In our analysis we investigate the impact of managerial reorganization of production processes in factual television production to understand whether and how it may contribute to alienating and exploitative conditions.

¹ While gender and ethnicity matter for their everyday experience of work, these characteristics were less influential in respondents' perception and evaluation of production process, which we focus on here. Instead, occupational role and extent of industry experience emerged as explanatory factors for their assessment of industry change.

While Braverman largely concentrated on “blue collar” industrial labor in his writing, he also observed a trend toward rationalization among higher skilled “white collar” occupations—which are typical for media work—predicting similar outcomes for such labor in the future (Jonna & Foster 2016). Production systems have developed further and changed since Braverman’s writing in the 1970s with a shift toward flexible, team-based work structures aimed at increasing worker involvement and participation. Critical voices argue that these attempts to humanize scientific management have largely been unsuccessful and claim that post-Fordist “flexible specialization” is an expression of the same capitalist objectives and leads to a similar degradation of labor as identified by Braverman (Previtali & Fagiani 2015; Sonn et al. 2019). This flexibilization of labor has become a dominant feature of media industries alongside marketization and commodification (Hesmondhalgh 2019). Against this context, we can observe a dramatic transformation of the British television industry and television production since the late 1980s that forms the background of ongoing efforts to rationalize television production.

Industry Transformation

One of the key changes in British television was the emergence of an independent production sector, triggered by the creation of Channel 4 as a broadcaster-publisher (Darlow 2004) competing with established broadcasters BBC and ITV and supported by the 1990 Broadcasting Act (Barnett & Curry 1994). Channel 4 had a unique set-up: it would be publicly owned but funded by commercial revenue, produce no in-house content, and function as a publisher relying on programming initially provided by ITV franchises (its first broadcast programme, *Countdown*, was made by Yorkshire TV) and the nascent independent TV production companies, often formed by ex-staffers from the BBC and ITV. Prior to this, union strength had protected jobs and demarcated skills through a “closed shop.” Political efforts to reduce union power in broadcasting, epitomized by Thatcher’s criticism of “restrictive practices” and the 1990 Broadcasting Act, fundamentally reshaped industrial relations. A bitter industrial

dispute at TVam in 1988 proved to be a turning point, resulting in significant job losses and setting the scene for what Campling (1995) believes became a political rather than economic strategy to reduce union power through the Act.

The Act, inspired by the neoliberal Peacock Report, enforced 25% of commissions to independent companies. This shift toward independent production was accompanied by a reorganization of the television labor market as broadcasters reduced permanent staff positions. Technological change also resulted in an end to demarcation despite industrial action at both the BBC and ITV franchises throughout the 1990s. By the late 1990s ITV had shed nearly half their staff, and freelance employment in the BBC had risen to 60% (Ursell 2000). Into the 2000s the independent production companies and then the “super-indies” began to dominate the sector and productions now relied on a pool of non-unionized, mostly freelance workers employed on a short-term basis, who carry much of the risk and insecurity of the sector (Ursell 2000; Percival & Hesmondhalgh 2014; Zoellner & Lee 2020).

Alongside this growth of independent production companies, the number of television channels and, most recently, digital platforms and streamers expanded significantly, all now competing for the same revenue and market share. The growing demand for content increased production activity, but economic pressure and competition alongside the high risk and high production costs typical for media industries (Hesmondhalgh 2019) motivated attempts to rationalize the production process to reduce costs and increase profit. Most prominently, workers are now mainly hired on project-by-project basis, and production budgets started and continue to fall (Ursell 2000; Ursell 2003; Miller et al. 2022). This flexible employment system differs from the Fordist structures Braverman discusses. Nevertheless, we agree with Previtali and Fagiani, who argue that deskilling and degradation of labor in contemporary capitalism remain relevant as the flexibilization and casualization of labor present a continuation—and even intensification—of cost rationalization as a managerial objective (2015, 81).

These industry-wide developments also affect the working conditions and managerial priorities

in unscripted factual production. They provide the context for the reorganization of labor processes and responsibilities that emerged from our data and form the focus of this article. This processual reorganization was further facilitated by shifts in programming form and content of this genre. Objectives to increase the profitability of program productions are visible in the changing textual preferences of broadcasters and distributors. In the case of British factual television programming, this can be seen in the shift from one-off/single documentaries to serialized and formatted factual programs and risk-averse commissioning (Zoellner 2009). This began in the 1990s with so-called “docu-soaps,” which were observational “fly-on-the-wall” documentary series, usually centered on the daily activities in a specific location and professional context, such as driving schools, vets’ practices or hospitals.

This setting made it easier to estimate and control costs and involved a certain level of narrative constraint or predictability, while serialization lowered costs per broadcast-minute. Subsequently, fully “formatted” factual programs began to appear where a template could be applied across a whole program, reducing unpredictability both in terms of production and narrative (Lee 2018). Since then, factual series have expanded into various forms and do not only cover real-life events but may also involve artificial situations and rules set by the production team, which offer greater control over content and thus more predictable budgeting (Lee 2018). Most factual programs could now be considered formatted to some degree, involving standardization of production processes and textual form.² The tendency towards formatting and serialization in factual programming was further encouraged by the expansion of the global format trade and the potential of

additional revenue through international sales to broadcasters and platforms (Chalaby 2011; Chalaby 2016).

Against the background of industry and genre transformation as outlined above, interviewees described a reorganization of the production process and shifts in occupational responsibilities over time, which we summarize as a change from linear to multi-linear production. In the remainder of this section, we explain this change in more detail in terms of process and division of labor based on our interview data and relate it to Braverman’s claims about the separation of conception and execution.

Multi-Linear Production

To reduce costs and standardize production, the workflow for unscripted factual programs shifted from linear to multi-linear structure, enabled by increased commissioning of formatted series. The linear “auteur” approach involved one production team with a Producer Director (PD) taking the creative lead in the shooting, then scripting and editing of a program across all production stages, from development to production to post-production. The new multi-linear system involves overlapping cycles of separate teams working parallel rather than subsequently on different production stages. Rather than taking a holistic approach based on a single (auteur) voice, programs are now produced in separate segments with only production management, usually represented by a Series Producer (SP), having an overview. As the example in Figure 1 illustrates, this system produces more volume in less time. While more workers are required for multi-linear production, they are employed on shorter contracts than the previous auteur model and are only involved in parts of the production. The linear model, on the other hand—despite also employing freelance labor—allowed the PD to shape the project from pre-production through to delivery.

In the multi-linear system workers are separated geographically and by production stage into three main categories: a production team based in the production office for pre-production, which includes production management and SP, a shooting team capturing footage on location including

² The changing industry terminology for this genre in British television reflects the broadening of the category and a softening of genre-related textual values (Zoellner, 2016). The classic program category of “documentary,” a genre associated with investigation, advocacy and social justice, was broadened to “specialist factual,” which stresses the informational and non-fictional nature of the programs in distinction to factual entertainment, and is now frequently included in the category of “unscripted TV,” which emphasizes the lack of script rather than the genre’s factual nature and also includes reality TV and game shows.

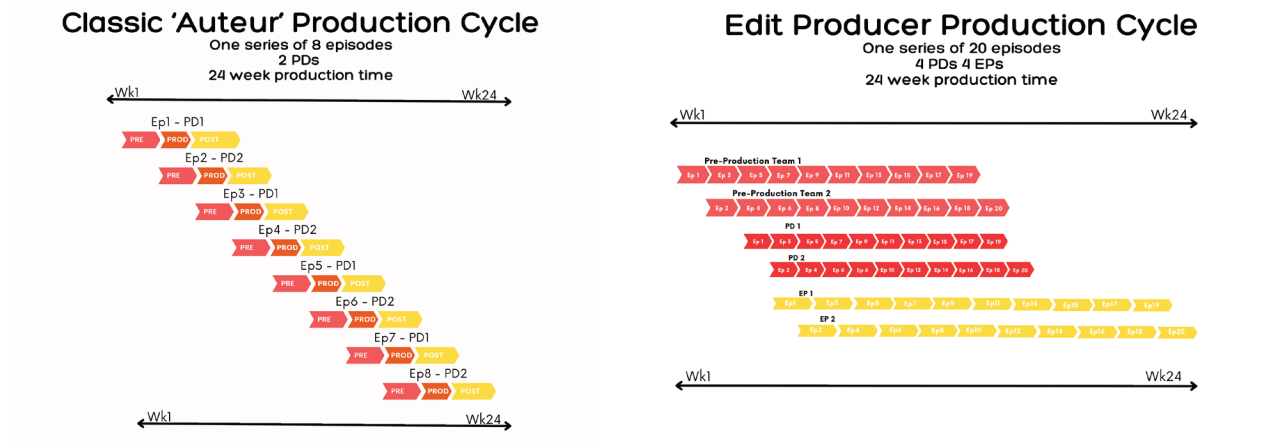


Figure 1: Linear and multi-linear production cycle

self-shooting PDs, and an editing team in the edit suite, often in a separate location, involving an Edit Producer (EP).

While not every factual production follows this structure, multi-linear production has become the dominant model in respondents' experience. In our research we investigate the impact of this reorganization on the work of PDs and EPs respectively. The restructuring of the production process into a multi-linear system follows principles that mirror Braverman's observations about scientific management, especially concerning the separation of conception from execution and its implications for the division of labor, occupational roles and creative control as we explain next.

Division of Labor and Occupational Roles

Beyond fragmenting production teams, rationalization reshapes occupational roles and the division of labor. In the linear auteur cycle, a Producer-Director or Director typically controlled the entire process for each episode: from conception and pre-production through filming with a camera and sound crew to editing with an Editor. Only on larger budget productions were these roles sometimes split. From the late 1990s, Digital Video Directors and self-shooting PDs began replacing crews and Directors, reducing both workforce and labor costs. Rather than hiring an expensive, skilled craft team of camera operator, sound recordist and director, productions increasingly relied on single individuals to do the same job. Sound recordists suffered most from this transition and are

now nearly completely absent from the production of this entire genre. The occupational convergence of the PD role requires multitasking, makes them solely responsible for the quality of the footage and increases their workload significantly. The introduction of new digital technology, for example, in the form of easy-to-operate, highly automated industry standard cameras, helped to reduce production costs further and enable companies to recruit workers with less technical skill and experience.

A Producer-Director supervising the whole production implies a longer production cycle, since editing can only start after filming has been completed. As broadcasters began to commission more high-volume productions, companies aimed to make production even more economical and to deliver programs in a shorter timeframe. The introduction of Edit Producers marked a second significant shift in occupational roles. It removed PDs from the editing process and editing could start while the program was still being filmed (see Figure 1). The EP, along with the Editor, was now the person entrusted with getting the program into shape for transmission. They would write the voice-over script, choose music and make editorial decisions on narrative structure and sync selection. Similarly to the shooting team, this change reduced the edit team in size and shifted workload and responsibility from a team to an individual. The PDs and EPs in our interview sample are part of the first generation of television workers, who transitioned from the old 'auteur' set up to the new

multi-team arrangement, adjusting their occupational skills and responsibilities in the process.

The stricter division of labor by production stage and the resulting fragmentation of production teams parallels Braverman's observations of capitalist efforts to rationalize production. Changes in occupational profile suggest an impact of this reorganization on skills and working conditions, which we explore further below. In addition, multi-linear production means that workers are only familiar with the program segments they are working on and are separated from the program as well as from most other members on the production team. This lack of insight concerning the program relates to Braverman's claims about the separation of conception from execution in scientific management.

Conception, Execution and Control

In the case of cultural production, conception refers to the development of a creative idea and execution to the realization of that idea by creating a cultural text or artifact. Where previously, in what Franklin (1999) called "holistic technologies," the Producer-Director led the program through the whole production process, each step is now broken down into separate steps carried out by a largely different set of workers in what Franklin terms "prescriptive technologies." As Franklin states, "[w]ith holistic technologies, the worker is in control; with prescriptive technologies, the worker is under control" (1999, 11). This means that neither PD nor EP are (usu-

ally) involved in the conception stage, that is, the pre-production phase, during which program topic, angle and contributors are determined and researched (see Figure 2, step 1). The PD leads the first stage of execution (filming), and the EP leads the second stage of execution (post-production) (Figure 2, steps 2 and 3).

Executive management, usually in the form of a SP and/or Production Manager (PM), oversees the whole process, and there is generally little interaction between the different departments according to interviewees. This separation of the creative conceptualization of a program idea from the practical realization of this idea transfers control to the managerial level and reduces the creative input and autonomy of workers, as we describe in further detail in the next section. This transfer of control confirms Braverman's claims about the impact of scientific management, which removes control over production from the worker and thus reduces artisanal craftspeople to replaceable employees.

However, unlike Braverman's observations, cultural production cannot be easily divided into "mental" and "manual" work that correspond to conception and execution respectively. In fact, mental and manual work remain largely integrated in the execution stages of cultural production involving a variety of tasks ranging from mundane, unskilled work (organizing permits, booking accommodation, moving kit, traveling, logging rushes, completing paperwork) to activities that require significant professional experience and skill (composing shots,

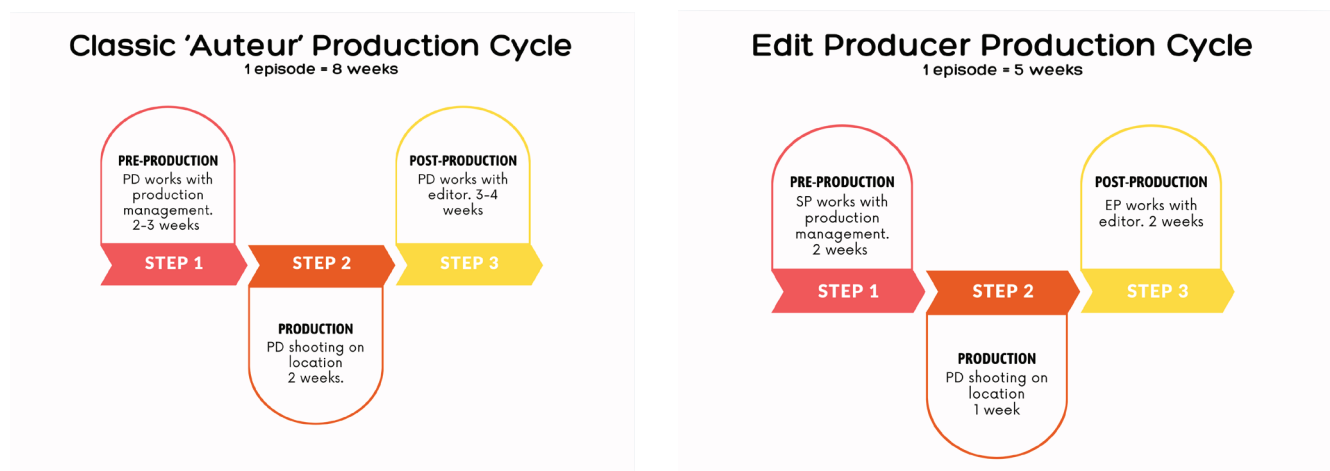


Figure 2: Separation of conception from execution by production stage

interviewing contributors, writing scripts, editing music), most of which include both a physical and intellectual aspect.

The transfer of control over conception to management, perhaps ironically, also increases the hierarchical structure in production. While in the previous system decisions and approval could be made by one manager, a fast-paced multi-linear process involving a bigger production team overall and more simultaneous production activity tends to require more complex approval processes (see Figure 3). All interviewees worked for independent production companies on programs commissioned by broadcasters such as the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and other networks and platforms. The executive management that respondents interact with includes Executive Producers and CEOs at company level and, perhaps more importantly, Series Producers and Production Managers at program level (job titles may vary). Crucially, in this production system executives at independent companies are subjected to creative control by commissioning editors at broadcasters (Zoellner, 2022), adding another layer to the hierarchical structure. Overall, more extensive quality control from management is notable, as now several managers, ranging from SP at the production company to Commissioning Editor at a television channel or platform, tend to give feedback on scripts and edits at different stages of the production. Displaying a critical attitude to this standardization of both content and production process, some EPs used the term “sausage factory” for this form of production—echoing former ITV

executive David Liddiment’s critique of TV formats as “factory television” (Chalaby 2016, 11).

Our discussion of changes in production process and occupational profiles highlights parallels between managerial strategies in contemporary cultural production and Braverman’s Fordist production context. Strategies are motivated by capitalist goals of profit maximization and focus on the rationalization of process, in particular the reduction of labor costs and production time. We see similarities in the separation of conception from execution and the related transfer of control to management alongside a stricter division of labor fragmenting project teams by production stage. We also identified limitations to the application of Braverman’s thesis to cultural production, in particular, his distinction between mental and manual labor. In the remainder of this article, we explore the consequences of the processual and occupational changes we have discussed so far. We focus on two areas where respondents experienced a notable impact, that is, creative autonomy and inter-departmental relations. We then address the implications of this impact for alienation, exploitation and deskilling to investigate whether and to what extent Braverman’s arguments about the results of scientific management are applicable in factual television production.

Consequences of Multi-Linear Production

Having established structural transformation, we now examine its impact on workers’ daily experience. Drawing on our interview data, we discuss the impact in relation to two characteristics of media

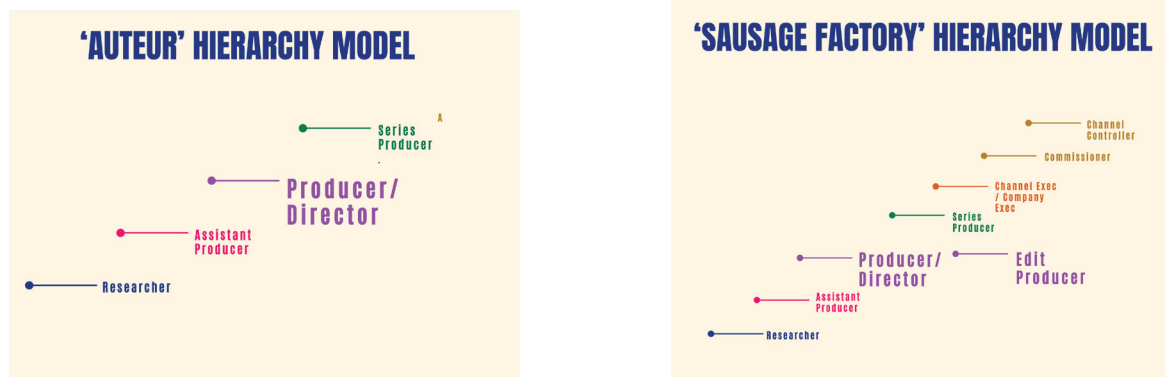


Figure 3: Hierarchical structure in linear and multi-linear production cycles

work that are widely associated with the specificity of media work. That is, firstly, the comparatively high level of freedom and control, and secondly, the collaborative nature of media production. Focusing on these aspects considers the specificity of cultural production and thus demonstrates the value of studying process in cultural production contexts.

Creative Autonomy

A central argument for the specificity of cultural labor is the relatively high degree of autonomy available for some (but not all) workers, which relates to what Ryan (1992) describes as “loose control” in the creation stage of cultural production. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) further specify the types of autonomy particular to cultural production and helpfully distinguish between workplace and creative autonomy. Workplace autonomy refers to the degree of self-determination of an individual or a group of workers in the organization of work tasks. Creative autonomy, on the other hand, concerns the degree to which work tasks and decisions related to art, knowledge or culture can be carried out independent from other influences (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011, 40).

While creative autonomy is a key characteristic of media work in general, it has a particular relevance in unscripted factual programs, which focus on and are shaped by real-life developments. Although an initial script idea and potential storylines are created during the pre-production stage based on research about program contributors and content, these pre-conceived ideas may differ from the final program as production teams need to respond to unknown or unanticipated conditions and developments during filming. This means that creative decisions about storylines, locations and protagonists are required throughout the production process and often on short notice. In this genre, conception, to use Braverman's terms, needs to be flexible and respond and adapt to developments arising during execution, that is, the filming and editing stages. In other words, factual TV production requires the interaction between conception and execution. However, the rationalization of the production process toward a multi-linear production model with greater managerial control, on the one hand, and attempts at standardization such as

formatting, on the other, reduce the opportunity for such creative adaptation. This development mirrors Braverman's claims of reduced worker autonomy and increased managerial control due to the separation of conception and execution.

As highlighted above, in multi-linear television production only program executives have complete oversight and knowledge of the whole series while the different practitioners working on location and in the edit are only familiar with and informed about the storylines they are working on. This situation increases top-down creative decision-making and reduces opportunities to shape the creative evolution of the program. At the same time, workers expressed concern about the extent to which executives are aware of program specifics and whether they consider such detail in their creative vision and decisions. This includes, for example, knowledge about what is being filmed, where and why, or the quality and range of footage that is available for editing. All interviewees perceived management as reliant on preconceived program ideas and less open towards amending them: “I think a lot of times, the story is decided, before it's even made. The commissioner has it in her head, and we have to go along with this narrative” (EP1).

Respondents called for more involvement in creative conceptualization and decision-making, saying, for example, that “Producer-Directors should be working with the Series Producer and the executives to steer the productions creatively and narratively” (PD4). Top-down managerial control further manifests in excessive micro-management and interpersonal tensions that have been reported as typical for TV work (van Raalte et al. 2023; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011). Interviewees expressed frustration at a prescriptive approach to execution, which “exhausts” and “demoralizes people” and often leads to overspending that undermines the supposed efficiency of a rationalized workflow (EP1). Workers reported how their attempts to diverge from this approach were often rebutted with the justification that viewers needed more explanation, or in industry parlance, “hand-holding,” rather than executives admitting that the real reason for their rejection was the deviation from their creative vision: “How many times have you heard the phrase hand-holding? So, then you go in

and you're writing explicitly the narrative they want. And it becomes the narrative they've had in their head, before it even got shot" (EP2).

Producer-Directors are in a contradictory position when it comes to autonomy. As multiskilled single shooters, PDs often work alone. While this creates challenging working conditions and can be an isolating experience, as we discuss in the next section, several respondents appreciate the freedom and control that working alone provides on location. PDs value the autonomy of working alone, which allows them complete control over timing and quality standards (PD1). One respondent noted:

I love the autonomy, I don't like too many bosses on location, who can maybe mess with things sometimes, because sometimes it can be more difficult to manage other people in those scenarios, if they aren't experienced enough (PD3).

On the other hand, the pressure of occupational convergence and having to do several work roles single-handedly and often simultaneously set unachievable objectives, because "if you're constantly fighting to manage too many things solo, there is only so much you can do, and you cannot deliver to the same standard" (PD3). PDs often face situations where, due to context challenges and time, they are unable to fully exercise their creative and technical skills:

The thing that made me not able to do more wasn't a lack of skills, it was a lack of support or time or dodgy gear. Almost every job I've done, I haven't felt like I was working at full capacity nailing it, and I was having to let stuff slide, but almost never has that been, because I didn't know any better. There are active choices I've had to make, where I've gone: 'Yeah, I would love to be doing that. But we don't have the time to do that, because my kit is breaking', and I have to, bottom line, have sound and have picture (PD3).

Such context challenges come into conflict with the textual expectations by management, and managerial ignorance of on-the-ground developments can lead to idealized or even unrealistic expectations of what television workers should deliver in their respective role, contrary to what "unscripted"

programming as a genre requires. While program content still reflects real-life developments, television workers in this genre find themselves increasingly in a position of having to fit execution to conception. EPs describe how during a shoot "the reality isn't what they thought it was, what the program has been sold on, or what the story is supposed to be. But you have to then make it" (EP1). As a result, workers frequently find themselves trying to fit their work around the creative vision of others with less opportunity for input and less recognition of their contribution.

The experience of their role-specific skills being constrained or not valued was common among interviewees. As a result of occupational convergence and smaller teams working in a tight timeframe, they also felt their time was often wasted on low-skilled tasks rather than on what their specific skill set was:

If you could cut down the logging³ time that would give you more time to be creative. But you know what will happen? They will just use it to cut down the overall production time. There's never a sense of, 'let's give them more time to think and write beautifully'—it's more, 'let's just shrink the whole process down and make more money' (EP3).

Our findings indicate that the shift in creative control because of multi-linear production increases managerial oversight and reduces the autonomy of PDs and EPs. Workers feel that production-specific circumstances are not recognized or considered in executive creative decision-making. This practice encourages feelings of making less of a contribution, of one's skills not being valued, and it can lead to creative frustration.

Inter-Departmental Collaboration

Beyond managerial tensions and reduced creative autonomy, the procedural transformation especially affects inter-departmental relations. Like many forms of media production, making television programs is a project-based collaborative process, in which creative authorship is shared between a team of workers. The shift towards multi-linear production creates chal-

³ Logging refers to the viewing and organizing of the raw footage before selecting the clips to be included in the edited program.

allenges for this collaboration. Producing different episodes at the same time with multiple shooters and editors working in parallel but separately creates a stricter division between the different departments and a fragmentation of the overall production team. Following industry convention, we distinguish here roughly between the production team, location crew and edit team, as explained above. The different production departments are separated not only by their activities but also spatially between production office, shooting location and edit suite.

Although interaction is frequent, it is often limited to a small circle of co-workers and is predominantly mediated through emails, texts, chat messages and phone calls rather than face-to-face. Most prominently, respondents complained about a lack of knowledge in other departments concerning their own work role and processes. This can be attributed to the increased fragmentation of production teams and lack of inter-departmental experience and training. As a result, interviewees felt that colleagues in other departments did not sufficiently understand the activities, process and requirements of respondents' work roles and consequently provided insufficient support, thus impeding successful collaboration. Respondents felt that changes in the division of labor combined with freelance contracts contribute to a decline of collaboration and responsibility in the production process: "There's also a sense that no-one has ownership, because we're all hired to do our own little bit, and it doesn't connect with anyone else's—I remember when we were staff at the BBC, it was all interconnected and we all talked, and it made much more sense" (EP1).

For PDs, this especially concerns the collaboration with the team in the production office, who research and organize shooting days. They consider it the production team's job to "support the people who are out on the road."⁴ That is their most important job, and it happens less and less" (PD2). This perceived lack of support concerns, firstly, practical organizational tasks, including irrelevant or insufficient information about location or contributors, which PDs depend on to prepare their shooting days.

Secondly, PDs complain about a lack of visual thinking among production staff and an overdependency on preconceived storylines in the preparatory notes with little consideration of how the story could be told in images.

For EPs, material delivered by PDs has the biggest impact on their work. EPs depend on the footage shot on location to do their job and the quality of those rushes directly affects the quality of the edited program an EP can create. One EP, who used to work as a self-shooter, compared editing to making a cake and shooters as the people providing the ingredients: "So now I'm sitting in an edit suite, and I haven't got flour, I haven't got sugar, I can't make this cake, and I've got to think about how I make a different cake. Or I might make a biscuit. I normally make biscuits now, because I never get the cake" (EP5).

EPs directly attributed such shortcomings to the division of labor and lack of inter-departmental experience:

I think, that's the downside of this whole splitting-the-roles thing, that now you have a whole generation of PDs out there, who don't know how to put a sequence together, because they've never sat in an edit and had to put it together. And it's not their fault, and it's not our fault. It's just the way the system has gone (EP4).

At the same time, PDs are concerned that the footage they create is judged without consideration of the context developments they experience on location:

When they look at those rushes, it comes down to the person who shot them, and they won't be being told you are managing a lot of things, they won't be being told the person with you was really junior, they won't be told, you know, one of your contributors decided to walk out midway through the day and so you're just at that point trying to get them to stay there. They won't be told you were doing all that stuff, they will just be watching the rushes and going: 'Did they get it or did they not? Did they get it well, or did they not' (PD3)?

The lack of inter-departmental knowledge concerning the range of activities involved also results

⁴ This industry expression refers to the filming period, during which shooters travel to a range of filming locations, usually by car, and stay in local accommodation.

in organizational problems in the planning of production processes, especially concerning filming and editing schedules, and contributes to excessively long working days, especially for Producer-Directors. The intense work schedules and long workdays in British television production have been widely evidenced in recent years, usually attributed to flexible and insecure employment (Ross 2009; Ursell 2006; Blair 2001). Swords et al. (2022), for example, report an average of ten hours per day for British television workers, which corresponds to the minimum 10–12-hour workdays reported by respondents. Working on location in unscripted factual program production tends to involve especially long hours for various reasons. Filming involves setting-up and packing-up time as well as responding to events on location, which may require delays or changes to the schedule. Workdays also include travel to, from and between locations and at the end of the day, there is paperwork, backing-up footage and preparation for the next day. Yet, PDs felt that production team members, who plan shoots, rarely allocate sufficient time—if any—for all these activities:

No time is given to prep, and no time is ever given to notes, and you always have to do them, and it's never built into your day. Your schedule starts when you start shooting and it ends when you're finished shooting, and often they are like 12/14 hour days and then you're kind of like, I also have to get there, guys, and I also have to do an hour or two hours' worth of notes or call all my contributors, or prep for the next day, and none of that time is given (PD3).

This lack of consideration in scheduling and planning concerning the “silent work that’s done” (PD1) makes PDs feel undervalued and their efforts underappreciated. This demonstrates the outcome-driven nature of production where “[the production team] just expect that the rushes will get wrangled⁵ and the notes will get written by the magic fairies” (PD4). These experiences confirm van Raalte et al.’s observations of poor communication and time management in British TV production involving “impossible schedules,” last minute changes and

unrealistic expectations (2023, 7). Similarly, EPs feel ignored about challenging working conditions, especially concerning deadline pressures. One respondent mentioned that although executives might express some understanding about working conditions and claim to understand pressure such as time constraints, “they still want what they want” (EP4).

PDs claim that they have reported back to production teams about the challenges they experience and the necessary changes to scheduling but usually without much effect: “And that stuff [wrangling, notes, preparation] that happens in the evening is the part that, no matter how many times you tell the production management teams, they don’t realize that you’re doing that” (PD1). This experience shows a persistent problem in inter-departmental communication and listening despite greater industry awareness of the need for such feedback processes—expressed, for example, in the Freelance Charter. The Charter was published in August 2021 by the Coalition for Change (a collaboration between broadcasters, independent production companies and industry bodies) and aims to improve the working practices of freelancers built on the principle of collective responsibility. It highlights the responsibility of productions to ask about worker requirements, to enable workers to “speak up” and to respond to worker feedback (Coalition for Change, 2021). In most cases, however, respondents confirmed van Raalte et al.’s finding that whistleblower schemes and employer guidance are insufficient in addressing the “systemic risks” of their workplace (2023, 14).

Consequently, respondents feel misunderstood or ignored when critiquing production support and clarifying their requirements. As a result, they call for more inter-departmental exchange to improve collaboration and bridge the division of labor. In other words, PDs want production office staff to gain location experience and EPs want PDs to learn about editing requirements to “see what happens and seeing how things work” (EP5). Those interviewees who have experience in working roles across different departments stress the value of inter-departmental knowledge for better collaboration and conditions, as they better understand the requirements and the constraints that workers face in their respective roles.

5 Wrangling refers to the backing up of the footage shot on the day.

For example, a PD who also works as Series Producer (SP) takes great care when working in this role to provide the shooting team with the best support, including planning realistic schedules with shorter shooting days, offering time off in lieu and allocating additional time for additional tasks after the shoot (PD1). An EP who also works as a PD stressed how they understand the challenges shooters encounter on location and consequently take care to give feedback to and mentor early career PDs about requirements from an edit perspective (EP2).

However, such effort and consideration between departments are not typical. Instead, workers often feel they are not being listened to when they explain their requirements or give feedback about their experience at work. This feeling can contribute to a sense of isolation and lack of sociality in media workplaces, which has been linked to a flexible and casualized labor market and is considered a contributing factor to alienation in cultural work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). This is heightened especially for PDs, who largely work alone because of occupational convergence, while EPs experienced an increased sense of isolation due to working from home (during and after Covid-19 lockdowns) or being confined to an edit suite. Respondents described how being “on the road” during filming can be extremely isolating: “I did a series, which took me to France, and I did 40,000 miles in five months and just driving six hours a day on top of your working day. It’s crazy when you’re on your own” (PD2). Such solitary work presents a health and safety risk “not having someone to watch your back, or seeing what’s behind you, when you’re walking backwards, or just driving the car after a long day” (PD2), which adds to the challenges of long working days discussed above.

Our findings show how processual change has led to a stricter departmental division and a reduction in inter-departmental knowledge of processes and work roles, which in turn can lead to problems in the planning and organization of production and encourage exploitative conditions including longer working hours, unsafe conditions and unnecessary work tasks. In addition, inter-departmental challenges lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion. Workers perceive their work roles as insufficiently understood and

undervalued, adding to the effects of constrained creative autonomy outlined in the previous section.

Implications For Exploitation, Deskilling And Alienation

These workplace experiences reveal deeper connections to Braverman’s theoretical framework. In this section we consider to what extent our findings validate or contradict Braverman’s claims. We argue that the reorganization of the factual TV production process, motivated by cost rationalization and labor productivity, has similar effects on exploitation, skill and alienation as have been claimed by Braverman, but they differ in form and extent due to the specific characteristics of media work.

Exploitation

The experiences and conditions described in the preceding section confirm the exploitative practices that have been widely reported as typical for cultural production under capitalism in general and in television production in particular. Reports surveying workers in the British TV industry have frequently highlighted poor conditions in the sector including long hours, low pay, impact on mental and physical health and workplace bullying (van Raalte et al., 2021; Swords et al., 2022; Evans & Green, 2017). Such exploitative practices in television production have been largely explained by the flexibilization and casualization of labor and the related pressures of financial insecurity, reputation-based recruitment, networking and permanent job hunting (e.g. Ursell, 2000; Ross, 2009). The “huge reservoir” of labor in the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, 19) combined with the constant risk of unemployment create pressures like Braverman’s “reserve army” of laborers.

Our findings show how creative micromanagement and problems in inter-departmental collaboration further increase the potential for exploitative practices. As established workers in the industry, working predominantly in a professional context at independent production companies, respondents do not feel pressure to work for free or very low pay as is a widespread experience on entry level in the cultural industries (Siebert & Wilson, 2013). They

felt reasonably secure in finding work, but all suffered from excessive working hours and poor work-life balance typical for the TV industry. As described above, excessive demands and lack of support by other production departments because of departmental fragmentation as well as unrealistic expectations by management because of the separation of conception and execution contribute to these conditions. We, therefore, argue that processual change, aiming for cost rationalization and standardization, combined with the pressure of flexible employment increases the potential for exploitation in media production.

Deskilling

Like Braverman we also observe the impact of process reorganization on labor skills. However, rather than a shift towards unskilled labor, skill demands in television production remain high. In fact, multiskilling and being able to work across a range of production roles are presented as a necessity to be employable in the contemporary television labor market (Ward et al., 2000). However, as explained above, multiskilling carries its own challenges as became visible especially in the case of self-shooting PDs, who frequently find themselves unable to fully exercise their skills within a given time frame or location context. We further highlighted how the increase of managerial control and micromanagement in relation to creative decision making and program conception can negatively affect workers' ability to fully apply their skills in the execution phase, which is exacerbated in productions with high degrees of textual standardization and formatting.

Overall, the shift to multi-linear production makes the production process less dependent on individuals, making them replaceable components rather than essential specialists, which echoes Braverman's observations about the erosion of specialization and craft. We highlighted a decline in skill related to knowledge and understanding of the overall production process, that is, the activities and occupational roles involved in the different parts of the process. This decline is not solely because of processual change but, like exploitative conditions, facilitated by the impact of the flexibilization of the British television labor market, which transformed

the industry from permanent employment and comprehensive in-house training at broadcasters to the predominance of insecure short-term and freelance labor, who are responsible for their own training as we described above. Recent reports of skills shortages in the British television sector (Ozimek, 2021; BFI, 2022) highlight the impact of both the multiskilling demands of the industry and the individualization and commodification of training and call for significant and continued industry investment in skills.

While we see some evidence of deskilling, cultural production generally requires skilled workers and we see rising demand for multiskilled workers as crew sizes are reduced, suggesting that Braverman's deskilling argument requires adaptation when it comes to cultural production. The changes in the labor process in factual TV production contribute to a shift in skills expectation, which tends towards multiskilling, and in skill execution, which workers can experience as constrained or limited. Most importantly, we have seen a decline of skills and knowledge in relation to other production departments and occupational roles, and evidence of a growing devaluation of specialist skills. As in the case of exploitation, these developments are exacerbated by the temporary nature of flexible employment.

Alienation

Braverman further argues that exploitation and the prominence of repetitive, unskilled work because of the reorganization of labor processes leads to alienation in the workplace. While our findings confirm a similar relationship between alienation and the reorganization of the production process, the reasons for this differ. We argue that reorganization negatively affects characteristics that are specific to cultural production and that are usually associated with low levels of alienation, namely, attachment and creative autonomy. Our understanding of alienation builds on Braverman's Marxist perception of alienation being the result of objective structural conditions. In our case, this includes the reduction of creative control and an inter-departmental disconnect due to processual change and separation of conception and execution in factual TV production. At the same time, we agree with Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011)

and recognize that workers have a subjective response to these conditions.

A high degree of attachment to work, both in terms of process and product (in our case television programs), and therefore, a comparatively low level of alienation has been identified as a central characteristic of cultural work (Lee, 2012; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Ross, 2009). In other words, workers care about what they do, which makes them highly motivated. Our research confirmed these claims and showed that this attachment can be diminished by constraints of creative autonomy and the experience of exploitation and deskilling. As we described above, increased top-down control and micromanagement combined with inter-departmental tensions in a multi-linear production system led to experiences of powerlessness, isolation and creative frustration, which correspond to forms of alienation identified in cultural labor (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). The separation of PDs and EPs in the reorganized execution (Figure 2) can reduce attachment to the final text. On the one hand, PDs care about how the contributors, whom they have established relationships with, are represented, but they have little or no power over how this representation is put together and are usually not involved in this process. EPs, on the other hand, may feel less emotional attachment to the “product,” as they lack deep relationships with contributors.

Although diminished, respondents do experience and value autonomy in and attachment to their work. Our interviews confirmed claims that relatively high attachment and low alienation in cultural labor can in turn facilitate exploitation (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). In our study, participants expressed feeling “complicit” by rising to production challenges and “delivering” high-quality content despite extremely short timeframes and insufficient financial and labor resources, because success implies that resources will remain insufficient and may be squeezed even further. The successful completion of an underfunded and understaffed production relies on substantial self-exploitation including unpaid overtime, which can be explained by participants’ attachment to their work:

[O]n a program, you will do everything you can to deliver it, because you care, like you really want

to do it. Personally, you want to do a good job. You don’t want to send crap rushes to the edit, and then go: ‘Well, you didn’t give me enough time, I’m really sorry I didn’t get everything.’ So instead, you stay late, and you do five hours extra or you don’t overnight or whatever, because you also have invested in the project, so you don’t want the project to do badly. (PD3)

This quote further demonstrates that despite the alienating consequences of processual reorganization highlighted above (especially the limited control over the creative process and creative decision-making) interviewees still feel a sense of ownership, even authorship, towards the programs they create. In the case of unscripted factual program production, this includes a feeling of responsibility towards the contributors and subject matter represented in the program, which can be exploited by productions. Respondents “want the contributors to be able to author their own story” (EP1), and they will work extra hard to “do them justice” (PD3) in the program.

Overall, our results confirm Braverman’s claims that rationalization of labor and reorganization of process can lead to alienation and reduced attachment to work due to constraints of creative autonomy and inter-departmental disconnect. They further showed how reorganization and rationalization can contribute to exploitation, poor working conditions and negatively affect the development and application of skills, adding to the pressures of a competitive, flexible labor market. All interviewees attributed economic conditions, especially budget reductions, as the reason behind the transformation of their television labor including the shift to multi-linear production and multiskilled self-shooters. Having witnessed the continuing decline in the funding for factual productions during their years in the industry may explain a sense of resignation, a feeling of “that’s just how it is,” among respondents. They have no expectation that the funding of the sector will improve in any way or at any point. However, they feel that change is possible and desirable when it comes to inter-departmental communication and experience, and the planning/organization of a production. To this end, we can observe efforts at resistance and activism in the British television industry.

Resistance

While, in contrast to Braverman, class struggle was not the focus of our study, we want to briefly address workers' attempts to respond to (and ideally improve) the challenging conditions they experience. Unions such as BECTU (formed from the merger of ACTT, BETA and ABS) enjoyed great strength through the 1970s and most of the 1980s. However, the 1990s Broadcasting Act and industrial disputes weakened union power at broadcasters BBC and ITV and created a largely de-unionized sector. BECTU has remained the main union for television workers, but with the change to a largely disparate freelance workforce its power to influence working conditions is limited.

Reduced union power has not silenced the debate about poor working conditions in the TV industry and over the last two decades non-union activism emerged to raise greater awareness and promote industry change. There is growing critical debate of conditions in industry and public discourse that is in stark contrast to celebratory discourses about creative work typical for the early 2000s (Banks, 2007). The conditions of freelance TV workers in the UK, for example, gained wider media attention during the Covid-19 pandemic, which highlighted especially the financial insecurity of their work in news discourse. Today, several groups and organizations are dedicated to spotlighting and tackling exploitative working conditions in the British television industry.

These include established industry organizations, which represent, advise and support TV workers, for example, the Unscripted TV Union, a branch of BECTU, which represents over 40,000 workers in industry negotiations over pay and conditions (UTVU, 2024). Other examples are the Film and TV Charity, which is committed to improving mental health and diversity and inclusion in the TV sector (Film and TV Charity, 2024), and the pan-industry group Coalition for Change, which is dedicated to improving working conditions for freelancers (Coalition for Change, 2024). However, many TV workers are not members of these organizations for various reasons, which may include a lack of awareness, membership costs, individualization of labor struggle, or a general lack of faith in the value of these organizations.

In addition, more informal and non-traditional groups have taken up resisting exploitation. Several grassroots organizations and campaigns have evolved, which were founded by members of the television workforce and are often dedicated to specific members of the labor market. For example, Viva La PD evolved from a grassroots Facebook group to represent over 1,200 PDs and EPs (Directors UK, 2024) in the struggle for better pay and contracts. We Are Doc Women is dedicated to achieving gender parity and better support for parents and carers (We Are Doc Women, 2024), and the Women's Camera Collective Manchester provides peer-to-peer support and equipment to locally based women and non-binary adults (Women's Camera Collective, 2024). TV Watercooler evolved from an online pay and conditions discussion board to a dedicated website supporting freelance workers with advice on pay rates, employment rights and companies to avoid (TV Watercooler, 2024).

TV Watercooler achieved one of the rare successes of industrial grassroots activism in the British TV industry that highlights the value of online networks for workplace politics. In January 2005, inspired by anonymous reports of workplace abuse and exploitation appearing on the website they had set up, the group launched an online campaign and petition called TV Workers' Rights Advocacy Programme ("TV WRAP") asking the government to enforce industry employment rights. Applying John Kelly's mobilization theory, Percival and Lee (2022) have detailed how the non-unionized campaign successfully mobilized freelance workers through online "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), allowing workers to mobilize across horizontal networks without bureaucratic constraints. The campaign gained significant media coverage, caused companies to change policies and sparked a Department of Trade and Industry investigation into the TV industry, which led to new guidelines being issued. Industry publication *Broadcast* found 16% of workers believed it had changed their job for the better (Percival & Hesmondhalgh 2014).

Groups and organizations like these—campaigning for better working conditions, providing peer support and advice, and offering important spaces

for community support in a fragmented and individualized labor market—face significant barriers to be effective. Sustainability of their activities presents the biggest challenge due to a lack of resources, especially time and money, to fund their work. Group activities including campaigning, advising and maintaining an online presence usually depend on member volunteers, which is hard to reconcile with the long working days in the industry and the need to earn a living, while reduced membership has made funding a concern for paid union labor and activities. Another challenge concerns the coordination and communication with a fragmented and overworked workforce, who in the case of PDs are out on a range of locations and in the case of EPs, confined to edit suites, a fragmentation that is heightened by the reorganized division of labor and the resulting inter-departmental disconnect we have discussed in this article. Each production involves collaboration with different people at different sites and often for different companies, lacking mechanisms for effective labor organization. As McRobbie commented, “[m]aybe there can be no workplace politics when there is no workplace” (2002, 522). The fragmentation of the work force is not only spatial and temporal in nature but also concerns ethical attitudes, as Percival and Hesmondhalgh’s (2014) investigation of TV workers’ views of unpaid work revealed. Nevertheless, Percival and Lee’s (2022) analysis of the TV WRAP campaign suggests, on a more hopeful note, that the use of online and digital technology as well as networked media campaigns and anonymized contributions could provide an alternative model of resistance from direct workplace industrial action.

For now, considering the number of campaigns and initiatives, there is limited evidence for significant positive industry change as a result. Industry reports and academic research about working conditions fail to note significant improvements, calling instead for a more active approach from industry to manage the risk factors involved in the organizational and leadership culture of television production (van Raalte et al., 2023, 14). In a concerning development, shortly before the time of writing a marked downturn in factual unscripted TV production across the UK occurred due to a reduction in the BBC license fee

settlement and an advertising downturn in the commercial sector. This resulted in a BECTU survey in July 2024 detailing 57% of the workforce in unscripted TV were currently out of work, and 53% said they were planning to leave the industry (BECTU, 2024). In response to this, the industry adopted a mantra of “Survive to 25” (Sweeney, 2024)—the hope is that production will pick up in 2025 and freelancers do whatever is needed to stay in the industry until then. At the time of writing in Spring 2025, this is not yet evident. Overall, we see repeated campaigning activity but no significant industry change, and there is little evidence to support Standing’s predictions of a radicalization and rise of media workers as part of the “Precariat” (2011). Further investigation of activist efforts would be valuable to better understand the barriers to effectiveness and sustainability of efforts to resist and improve contemporary conditions in the media industries.

Conclusion

In this article, we set out to investigate how applicable Braverman’s argument is when studying industry change in a cultural context and a flexible labor market. We confirmed capitalist motivations for the reorganization of process and the separation of conception and execution and found that these changes create additional challenges and constraints that, combined with the pressures of flexible and short-term employment, can increase the potential for alienation and exploitation. This impact is not as severe as described by Braverman, which can be ascribed to the characteristics of media work, including especially a comparatively high level of creative autonomy and the combination of what Braverman calls “mental” and “manual” work tasks during execution. Nevertheless, our research confirms the reduction of creative autonomy and attachment because of the separation of conception and execution in multi-linear production. It further revealed the influence of genre specifics on the process and conditions of media work.

Although the degree to which structural conditions are experienced as alienating is subjective, as expectations, experiences and circumstance differ from one person to the next, recent research among

British television workers confirms our findings of worker discontent and complaints about current conditions (e.g. van Raalte et al., 2023; Swords et al., 2022). Although not discussed in detail here, our research further revealed not only an impact on labor conditions and experience but also indicated negative consequences for the quality of cultural texts created in this system, confirming concerns about the negative impact of marketization/commercialization and commodification of cultural production in general (e.g. Ryan, 1992; Keat, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2019) and in factual production specifically (Lee, 2018; Zoellner, 2022). There are additional influential factors that contribute to the dynamics we have described here including technology and training. While we have briefly signposted these issues in our article, further investigation of the way in which digital technology and skills training (or lack thereof) facilitate managerial control or contribute to its effects is needed.

Overall, our research demonstrates the value of reflecting on Braverman's claims in a cultural production context similarly to other—arguably rare—applications in the cultural sector such as Leslie and Rantisi's (2019) analysis of the *Cirque du Soleil*, which demonstrates deskilling and loss of autonomy as a result of corporatization and standardization, or Yoon's (2019) study of the Korean animation industry, which highlights how corporate strategies can control creative labor in similar ways used to control industrial labor. Our attempt to apply Braverman's thesis to media production demonstrates the consistency and significance of capitalist efforts to rationalize production and shows the value of studying process and process change in cultural production. To do so productively, we propose an approach that relates the labor process to the subjective experience of workers and considers industry- and genre-specific particularities. Such an approach acknowledges the specificity of cultural production in the study of the labor processes and allows for more nuanced findings that recognize the contradictory and complex nature of media production. We further argue that, while Braverman's distinction between manual and mental labor does not apply in cultural production, his emphasis on the separation of conception and

execution as managerial strategy remains relevant and deserves investigation. Its implications for autonomy and control are particularly relevant in cultural production, as the potential for creative freedom and self-expression is considered a central motivator for seeking out this kind of work (Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Finally, cultural production differs from the work context of Braverman's Fordist factory system when it comes to the result of this labor. Although there are elements of standardization of both work procedures and cultural product, it does not involve the repeat production of identical goods but requires new creative conceptualization for each production. We, therefore, suggest expanding the scope of research and considering the impact of the labor process not only on labor but also on its products, the resulting cultural text, against the context of industry and genre trends. As this study demonstrates, understanding the reorganization of creative labor under capitalism requires examining not only market structures but the granular processes through which autonomy is constrained and exploitation enabled.

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Real Subsumption and AI: Braverman's Labor Process Theory in the Age of Algorithmic Management

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ABSTRACT: This paper reframes Harry Braverman's labor process theory as the practical manifestation of Marx's concept of real subsumption of labor under capital. Building on Braverman's analysis of Taylorism, I argue that management functions as the mediator of real subsumption, depriving workers of production-related knowledge to facilitate capital's control. However, the introduction of AI fundamentally transforms this dynamic. Drawing on examples from Japanese manufacturing, I demonstrate that AI enables capital to appropriate workers' knowledge as data without encountering resistance, thereby eliminating the need for management as mediator. In this sense, AI represents real subsumption itself—embedded directly within the production process. I conclude by examining workers' resistance movements around algorithmic control and argue, following Kohei Saito and André Gorz, that reclaiming ownership of knowledge is insufficient; workers must transform the very nature of production-related knowledge to overcome capitalist relations of production.

Introduction

Recent scholarship has extensively examined employment changes resulting from AI introduction. Generally, these studies have focused on the “quantity” of employment (Frey and Osborne 2017). That is to say, which jobs will be lost due to AI. Conversely, Benanav (2022) argues that automation theorists overstate automation's extent and that global unemployment stems from stalled economic growth rather than technological displacement, not technological innovation itself.¹ Less considered is AI's impact on the quality of employment. In other words, how will the introduction of AI affect the labor process?

Analyzing how human labor has been organized under AI requires returning to Braverman's labor

process theory. This article deals specifically with the introduction of AI in the Japanese manufacturing industry because the subsumption of management is particularly important for our understanding of recent changes in the labor process. Braverman clearly demonstrated the characteristics of the labor process in the capitalist mode of production. However, many criticisms directed at Braverman have focused exclusively on his idea of the “degradation of labor”. While critics have emphasized Braverman's concept of “deskilling,” this interpretation oversimplifies his contribution. For example, John Bellamy Foster, although not in the context of criticizing Braverman, explains that the emphasis is on the polarization of labor: “Braverman's analysis then is not simply about ‘deskilling’ in some generalized, abstract sense, but about the polarization of working conditions. He is especially concerned with the degradation of work

¹ Automation theorists say that automation will free humans from punishing labor and also that it will lead to mass unemployment as more advanced machines replace workers. However, the technologies that are preferentially adopted by capital strengthen its control over the labor process.

as it affects the working class, not the entire society” (Foster 1994, 9). Indeed, deskilling characterizes capitalist labor organization, but Braverman’s deeper significance lies in his analysis of real subsumption and management as its mediator.

The first section explains Marx’s real subsumption of labor under capital and shows how real subsumption is essential to the completion of the capitalist labor process. The second section considers Braverman’s analysis of Taylorism and scientific management. For capital to achieve real subsumption, management is employed to respond to workers’ resistance to changes in the labor process. From this perspective, this paper shows that management is positioned as a mediator for real subsumption. The third section discusses what qualitative changes the introduction of AI will bring to the labor process. By introducing examples from the Japanese manufacturing industry, this paper will demonstrate how AI functions as real subsumption. The final section examines workers’ resistance to the growing state of knowledge deprivation through AI. It shows that what is needed is not simply for workers to seize knowledge, but a transformation in knowledge itself related to production.

Labor and Monopoly Capital and Marx

Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1998) address a deceptively simple yet radical question: Braverman’s purpose was to study how capitalist property relations form the labor processes of capitalist society in the specific manner (Braverman 1998, 16). His research methodology deliberately limits analysis to the “objective” content of class, omitting the “subjective” dimension (*ibid.*, 19). This approach aimed at portraying the working class “as it exists,” shaped by capital accumulation processes (*ibid.*, 19).

Critics like Paul Thompson (1989, 87) argue that Braverman’s “deliberate exclusion of the dimension of class struggle and consciousness” led him to neglect worker resistance’s effects.² However, Braverman’s objective analysis that the labor process in the

capitalist mode of production is transformed into a valorization process, not a process directly aimed at creating use value, is important. This is because in the valorization process the laborer is subordinated to the logic of capital accumulation. As Braverman notes, capitalists purchasing labor power acquire “an undefined quality and quantity”—infinite in potential but limited by workers’ subjective states, previous history, social conditions, and the enterprise’s technical setting (Braverman 1998, 39). This indeterminacy necessitates real subsumption.

To accurately understand Braverman’s labor process analysis, we must have a clear understanding of Marx’s theory of the labor process. Specifically, two concepts prove essential: formal subsumption and real subsumption of labor under capital in an unpublished manuscript, the *Economic Manuscripts of 1861–1863* (MECW 34, 424–439). In capitalist labor processes, capitalists must impose their own designs for valorization on the workers. This means subjecting workers to capitalists’ command and order, which Marx called the “formal subsumption of labor under capital” (MECW 34, 424).

Although workers work and engage in production, they have little control over the production process and instead are subordinated to capital to generate maximum surplus value. As a result, workers are positioned as objects, rather than subjects, in the production process.

[I]n the labor process which is at the same time a capitalist production process the means of production make use of the worker, with the result that labor appears only as a means whereby a certain amount of value, hence a certain amount of objectified labor, absorbs living labor in order to preserve and increase itself. (MECW 34, 415–416)

In the valorization process, the relationship between workers and the means of production reverses. Workers do not use the means of production, but the means of production use workers. In skilled occupations, as exemplified by the guild’s artisans, the traditional knowledge and skills necessary for production lay in the hands of workers who maintained control of production. Independent peasants, artisans, and guild craftsmen treated the

2 “The root of the problem is seen as stemming from Braverman’s deliberate exclusion of the dimension of class struggle and consciousness. While this is prioritized by him as a means of painting a picture of the working class in work ‘as it really is,’ it is argued that this involves a neglect of the important effects of worker resistance and organisation on technology and labour processes” (Thompson 1989, 87).

means of production as their own property. However, in the capitalist production process, the technical elements of production (knowledge, skills and experience), which were originally resources for workers, were shifted under the wage relation and remade in subordination to capital. Thus, capitalists were able to maximize surplus value.³ In this case, knowledge related to production is only given to workers to the extent that they need it, because the possession of knowledge by the producers themselves is a positive obstacle to the capitalist mode of production.

The deprivation of workers' knowledge and skills is what Marx called the "real subsumption of labor under capital." Consequently, the capitalists gain control of the labor process and "give the very mode of production a new shape and thus first create the mode of production peculiar to it" (MECW 30, 92).

What is generally characteristic of formal subsumption remains valid in this case too, i.e. the direct subordination to capital of the labor process, in whatever way the latter may be conducted technologically. But on this basis there arises a mode of production—the capitalist mode of production—which is specific technologically and in other ways, and transforms the real nature of the labor process and its real conditions. Only when this enters the picture does the real subsumption of labor under capital take place. (MECW 34, 438-439)

To strengthen the command-and-order relationship between capitalists and workers, real subsumption is required, stripping workers of knowledge related to production. What is important here is that the capitalist mode of production can only be firmly established through the deprivation of workers of knowledge and skills. Moreover, capital constantly attempts to take the technical mode of labor into its

own hands. Otherwise, the command-and-control relationship is not even established. As a result, labor is effectively subsumed under capital, and capitalists come to directly control the labor process.

Braverman's Critique of Taylorism

Real subsumption is not easy to achieve because workers do not readily surrender their knowledge and skills. Even under real subsumption, workers' resistance arises. In the face of resistance from workers, management is employed to suppress it. In other words, management is a means of shifting control of the labor process from the hands of workers to those of capital. Braverman explains this relationship with the analogy of horse-training: just as jockeys try to control horses with carrots and whips, capitalists try to control workers through management. If workers control the labor process, capitalists cannot impose the maximization of surplus value on workers. Therefore, in the capitalist mode of production, capitalists always try to control workers' work through management. Following Braverman, we can understand management as the mediator of real subsumption.

In general, real subsumption is understood to follow formal subsumption. However, these processes maintain a reciprocal relationship. Formal subsumption achieves completion only through real subsumption. Unless workers' knowledge is appropriated, they retain autonomy and formal subsumption fails. Frederick Taylor's idea of scientific management must be viewed in this context to accurately grasp the nature of the capitalist labor process.

Taylor (2011) distinguished scientific management from ordinary management. Before the introduction of scientific management (i.e. ordinary management), management began by gathering workers in one place, imposing regular working hours, and supervising them. Distractions such as talking and smoking were also restricted. It prohibited workers from working at their preferred pace. However, with the introduction of Taylor's scientific management, workers came to be controlled and ordered, not merely managed:

3 Braverman also pointed out the following: "(t)he coin of labor has its obverse side: in purchasing labor power that can do much, he is at the same time purchasing an undefined quality and quantity. What he buys is infinite in potential, but in its realization it is limited by the subjective state of the workers, by their previous history, by the general social conditions under which they work as well as the particular conditions of the enterprise, and by the technical setting of their labor. The work actually performed will be affected by these and many other factors, including the organization of the process and the forms of supervision over it, if any" (Braverman 1998, 39). This quote, contrary to Thompson, would indicate that it is unlikely that Braverman was ignoring the aspect of workers' resistance.

Taylor raised the concept of control to an entirely new plane when he asserted as an absolute necessity for adequate management the dictation to the worker of the precise manner in which work is to be performed. (Braverman 1998, 62)

Here Braverman refers to the transformation from the ordinary management dimension, in which workers simply work according to rules and instructions, to absolute and necessary control over the worker and the labor process. Taylor insisted that management “could be only a limited and frustrated undertaking so long as it left to the worker any decision about the work” (*ibid.* 62). From valorization’s perspective, ordinary management remained uncertain and inadequate. This was because management, in setting working hours and production quotas, did not intervene at all in the “way” workers work.

Workers who are controlled only by general orders and discipline are not adequately controlled, because they retain their grip on the actual processes of labor. So long as they control the labor process itself, they will thwart efforts to realize to the full the potential inherent in their labor power. To change this situation, control over the labor process must pass into the hands of management, not only in a formal sense but by the control and dictation of each step of the process, including its mode of performance. (*ibid.* 69)

These circumstances necessitated that the concept of control be raised to the dimension of real subsumption, meaning “direct interference in the worker’s mode of performing [tasks]” (*ibid.* 62). Taylor’s scientific management sought to leave no decision-making power to workers. This is why Braverman considered Taylorism so important. That is, Braverman positioned Taylor’s scientific management as a means of achieving real subsumption.

Braverman did not focus on the phenomenological aspects of scientific management, such as the “stopwatch” and “speed-up” methods, but rather extracted from Taylorism the elements that are indispensable in establishing the capitalist relations

of production.⁴ That is, if capitalists merely hired workers and set quotas and rules, the labor process could not fully function as a process of valorization.

Thus, Taylor derived three principles that form the basis of the management in remaking the labor process and controlling workers, fending off resistance from workers: the first principle is the dissociation of the labor process from workers’ skills. The second principle is the separation of conception from execution. The third principle is the monopolization of knowledge to control every aspect of the labor process: what to do, how to do it, and when to do it (Braverman 1998, 82).

According to the first principle, to remake the labor process into a valorization process, the workers’ knowledge must be stripped from them. Before the introduction of scientific management, workers possessed the knowledge and skills necessary for production, while managers possessed less than one-tenth of such knowledge (Taylor 2011, 38). So, as a first step, in changing the relationship between managers and workers, the labor process is divorced from the skills of workers.

In turn, regarding the second principle, we must first assume the following. Unlike instinct-driven animal labor (such as spiders building webs, which cannot be transferred mid-process), human labor’s conscious and purposive nature permits separating conception from execution. Marx defined this conscious mediation of human-nature interaction as “metabolism,” emphasizing that “in laboring, human beings first have a concept of what needs to be done, based on which action is taken to realize the concept” (Sasaki 2021, 135). This intellectual dimension distinguishes human from animal labor. The separation of conception and execution is the cornerstone of scientific management:

4 However, the scholars who criticize Braverman do not see his analysis of Taylorism as described above. As illustrated by the below criticisms, the critics focus on the phenomenological aspect of thorough monitoring and supervision when capital separates conception from execution. For example, Andrew Friedman argued that “Braverman too must be criticised for confusing one particular strategy for exercising managerial authority in the capitalist labour process with managerial authority itself” (Friedman 1977, 80). “Certain strategies” refers to Taylorism. Friedman then criticized Braverman, as “Taylorian scientific management is not the only strategy available for exercising managerial authority” (*ibid.* 80).

[I]f the workers' execution is guided by their own conception, it is not possible to enforce upon them either the methodological efficiency or the working pace desired by capital. The capitalist therefore learns from the start to take advantage of this aspect of human labor power, and to break the unity of the labor process. (Braverman 1998, 78)

Thus, the destruction of the unity of the labor process (i.e., the separation of conception from execution) is crucial for capitalists in their quest to acquire control. This is because it prevents the labor process from being organized under the workers.

However, since conception and execution are always required in production, they must be combined again. How then does capital reconnect conception and execution? Once production is organized under the control of a capitalist who oversees "conception," "execution" by the workers is planned in advance by the manager as to what steps, at what speed, and by what means it should be carried out. Taylor's third principle operationalizes this through the concept of "task":

Perhaps the most prominent single element in modern scientific management is the task idea. The work of every workman is fully planned out by the management at least one day in advance, and each man receives in most cases complete written instructions, describing in detail the task which he is to accomplish, as well as the means to be used in doing the work... This task specifies not only what is to be done but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it. (Taylor 2011, 29)

Through the concept of tasks, capital predetermines all the elements of the labor process under which the workers carry out production. Capital, having taken control of the conception, uses tasks to control individual workers and their execution. Thus, the capital-driven labor process becomes a valorization process. The principles of scientific management indicate how the labor process can be controlled by capital.

AI as Real Subsumption

As demonstrated, Braverman revealed how real subsumption practically manifests in capitalist

labor processes—through management-mediated knowledge deprivation. This transfer continues today through AI.

AI has been used to optimize the vast amount of data accumulated to make inferences and decisions for specific purposes. AI using this technology has already been introduced in a variety of fields. This section examines two examples of firms in the Japanese manufacturing industry that have introduced AI to the labor process. In both cases, workers are replaced by AI technology in manufacturing, but this does not mean that they are simply being replaced by machines. From the perspective of real subsumption, we can see that AI functions to make some of the knowledge accumulated by humans unnecessary.

The first example is Nichirei Foods Inc., the largest frozen foods company in Japan, which introduced a new system that uses AI technology from Hitachi Ltd. (Nichirei Foods 2020).⁵ This system can automatically allocate the personnel needed for production. Previously, experts planned worker placement based on their experience, but with the introduction of this system, the time required for such work was reduced by one-tenth. The AI system takes data from past production plans and decisions to derive optimal placement plans. For example, managers can easily make production plans without relying on the knowledge of experts when the temperature, humidity, and number of workers are the same as in past data.

AI similarly transforms non-routine manufacturing tasks. When production lines stop, AI searches past records to identify causes of breakdown, eliminating the need for experienced technicians. In such circumstances, workers do not require new knowledge or skills and may be replaced by non-regular workers (Milanez 2023).

The second example is Kirin Brewery Company Ltd., a large alcoholic beverage manufacturer with global operations. This company has developed an AI-based automated production planning system in collaboration with Mitsubishi Research Institute. The process of preparing and fermenting raw materi-

⁵ Hitachi, which deals with railways, power stations and manufacturing plants etc., is also in the process of replacing skilled workers. Experts perform their work based on years of experience and knowledge, but training them is not easy. (Nikkei Asia 2023)

als for beer products is complex and relies on some amount of craft knowledge. Ordinarily it takes a decade or more to train a professional brewer. Kirin Brewery tried to change this situation by interviewing skilled workers at each factory and developing an AI system that incorporates the know-how of skilled technicians (Nikkei Asia 2017b). Managers use AI to collect and analyze past production records to determine the optimal combination of beer ingredients and fermentation times. In the past, production plans were made by skilled workers based on their own knowledge and experience.

Prior to AI, real subsumption had already advanced through microelectronics and internet technologies, enabling labor process subdivision performed by unskilled workers. Capital always seeks to take control of knowledge in the labor process; however, capital cannot completely accomplish real subsumption. Therefore, capital allocates skilled workers within their sphere of influence. In the above case studies, the introduction of AI has made both traditionally skilled workers' and management presence relatively unnecessary by taking charge of "conception" in the labor process. Compared to previous technologies, AI is accelerating the transfer of knowledge as designed by the principles of scientific management. By using the above AI systems, past productions are recorded as data just by running the operation, and AI can also make production plans based on these data. AI aims to provide a solution to a given problem using accumulated datasets; therefore, the repetition of operations ostensibly results in the enhanced accuracy of AI decisions.

A similar trend can be understood by looking at the work of cab drivers. As cabs equipped with dashboard cameras drive, data is accumulated on the time of day, weather conditions, and the types of passengers they pick up. By analyzing these data, drivers can determine where to pick up their next passengers. In other words, production plans are made by AI. By having cabs drive repeatedly, the predictive accuracy of the data (next period and placement demand) improves (Nikkei Asia 2017a).

Crucially, AI transforms real subsumption's mediating structure. Where capital previously required management to appropriate workers'

knowledge—risking resistance—AI enables direct, automatic knowledge transfer through data accumulation. Capital no longer needs this mediator. The organization of labor processes using AI means that the production itself absorbs the knowledge in the form of data from workers. In this respect, unlike previous technologies, we can see that AI is making greater strides in real subsumption.

With the use of AI, capital can plan production without the help of skilled workers. This fact means that AI technology replaces not only workers who assume "execution" but also managers who monopolize "conception" (only as far as capital will allow). Furthermore, the use of AI for production allows capital to take control of every facet of the labor process. By using AI, data is inevitably absorbed by capital, allowing capital to avoid conflict with workers who might resist. Here, real subsumption can be accomplished with relative ease. In the capitalist labor process, capital needs management as a mediator to mitigate conflicts in the transfer of knowledge. However, if we look at the inevitable migration of knowledge because of the use of AI, we can see that real subsumption is achieved without that mediator. In other words, AI, which functions in a way that eliminates the need for workers' skills in production, is the real subsumption itself. Since this situation means that capital has more of a monopoly on conception in the labor process, we can say that real subsumption is becoming more pronounced.

Not a Shift in Ownership, but a Change in the Nature of Knowledge Itself

As a result of recent changes in the labor process, the labor movement must resist the inevitable deprivation of knowledge through AI. Among platform workers, recent strikes have demanded algorithmic control rights (Mateescu and Nguyen 2019). The core of the problem lies in the fact that capital has a monopoly on the right to manage the algorithm. For example, Michael Hardt emphasizes the significance of delivery workers' demand for control over the algorithm rather than its abolition (Means et al. 2020). Similarly, labor union movements demand algorithmic transparency. The UNI Global Union, an international

trade union that organizes workers in the service industry, has proposed requirements for employers to be transparent, fair, and offer access to data in response to the increasing use of algorithms in hiring, performance management, and everyday decision-making in the workplace. These requirements for information disclosure include a public record using plain language explaining how decisions are made about criteria (UNI Global Union 2020).

It goes without saying that these movements regarding algorithmic control rights and information disclosure are significant efforts in terms of countering real subsumption. However, it is not enough for workers to take back knowledge or manage it themselves because knowledge itself is transformed under capital. Kohei Saito has pointed out that Marx reconsidered the negative implications of the “productive forces of capital” through his study of late Marx. Through late Marx studies, Saito argues that productive forces’ development under capitalism is “not purely formal and quantitative, but deeply rooted into the transformation and reorganization of the labor process.” Therefore, socialist revolution cannot simply replace production relations while maintaining capitalist productive forces—the “productive forces of capital” that emerge through real subsumption “are materialized and crystallized in the capitalist mode of production” and must be transformed alongside it (Saito 2022, 155–156).

This creates knowledge’s contradictory character under capitalism: workers must reclaim knowledge appropriated by capital, yet this knowledge has been fundamentally transformed by capital. As Sasaki (2021, 96–97) notes, Marx emphasized technological education as an “enzyme of social transformation,” recognizing that even insufficient education could enable workers to regain productive capability. However, capital necessarily limits such education to prevent workers from fully controlling production. The productive forces developed under capitalism are closely tied to capitalism’s own methods of production. Therefore, this problem will not radically be solved if workers regain ownership.

Moreover, knowledge is not inherently proprietary. Marx also described knowledge as “common”.

Knowledge is not originally attributed to a specific individual but is socially accumulated. While it is problematic that knowledge related to production is monopolized by capital, seeking to shift its ownership is not at the heart of overcoming the capitalist relation of production:

[T]he productive forces developed under capitalism are tightly connected to the uniquely capitalist way of organizing the collaborative, cooperative and other social aspects of labor. If so, the transcendence of the capitalist mode of production must be a much more radical and thoroughgoing one than the mere abolition of private property and exploitation through the re-appropriation of the means of production by the working class. (Saito 2022, 156)

As Saito pointed out, knowledge itself in capitalistically organized production must be changed. At this point, the distinction made by André Gorz based on the nature of the technology is instructive. Gorz (2018) pointed out the dangers of technology developed under capitalism. He defined the Internet and other technologies that facilitate communication with others as “open technologies,” while technologies that divide people are defined as “locking technologies.” The latter is also a technology that can enable monopolization of the supply of products and services. Locking technologies like AI therefore, by their very nature, do not lend themselves to democratic control. Even if workers were to take control of such technologies, which are monopolized by capital, there are limits to how workers can organize them well. As Gorz indicated, productive forces developed within capitalism cannot directly transition to post-capitalism:

In other words, the development of productive forces within the framework of capitalism will never lead to the gate of Communism, since the technologies, the relations of production and the nature of the products exclude not just the durable, equitable satisfaction of needs but also the stabilization of social production at a level commonly accepted as sufficient. (Gorz 2018, 110–111)

Furthermore, as we have already seen, workers are deprived of their creativity and conceptual power in production through real subsumption. Considering

this disadvantageous situation for workers, there needs to be not only a shift in ownership, but a transformation of knowledge itself.

Conclusion

Braverman demonstrated a practical manifestation of real subsumption in Marx's labor process theory. For capital to transform the labor process into a process of valorization, it must make workers follow capital's orders (formal subsumption). However, if workers engaged in production themselves were to possess knowledge related to production, the labor process would be led by workers who do not necessarily aim for valorization. Therefore, capital must take away the knowledge and experience possessed by workers and consolidate knowledge under its own control; this is real subsumption. Thus, in capitalist relations of production, the capitalist must lead the labor process and subdue workers to maximize surplus value. This inevitably calls for a transfer of knowledge.

This is where the importance of Braverman's analysis emerges. He clearly pointed out that even in real subsumption, workers' resistance arises, and that capital needs its mediator: management. Indeed, real subsumption changes both the technological elements and social relations of production. However, the core of Braverman's argument is not that deskilling results in a uniformly low-skilled workforce. Thus, we should understand that the degradation of labor is brought about by the transfer of knowledge from workers to capital as elucidated in Braverman's analysis of Taylorism, which showed that real subsumption requires the mediator (i.e., management).

In line with Braverman's analysis, the introduction of AI has led to significant changes in the labor process because it allows production to be siphoned off as "data" and accumulated under capital. In other words, AI is real subsumption itself. In AI-mediated labor processes, once capital-worker power relations stabilize, management becomes largely obsolete. The change in real subsumption also changes the nature of management. Management is specified by a manifestation of real subsumption. Management is just a mediator and cannot be considered independently. Through the introduction of AI, management is embedded inside real subsumption of the produc-

tion process. However, new management may emerge in the labor process using AI. For example, we can forecast the appearance of a new management to subordinate workers to AI. It will be necessary to pay attention to future developments of management.

In response to this situation, workers will develop new forms of resistance to the transfer of their knowledge through AI. This is important because it can counter real subsumption. However, it must be pointed out that production-related knowledge resists individual ownership. Skills and experiences are nurtured and passed on through interactions between people. Therefore, knowledge does not belong to any individual, whether they are the capitalist or the worker. In the first place, knowledge is not something that can be owned like objects physically. Knowledge cannot be bought with money, nor can it be owned as an object.

Furthermore, even if the ownership of the machines (as representatives of knowledge) was taken away from capital and transferred to workers, would workers be able to organize production differently than capital does now? The current labor process has been entirely reworked into a valorization process. The knowledge used therein exists to control and subordinate workers. The machinery used in production is systematized for valorization. Therefore, 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. From this perspective, it is not enough to demand that capital disclose information about knowledge related to production or to demand ownership rights to knowledge. We must change the very nature of production-related knowledge itself—not merely its proprietor, but its fundamental character and purpose.

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Reproduction, the Care Sector and the Question of Unproductive Labor in Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*

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ABSTRACT: Braverman's (1998) *Labor and Monopoly Capital* offers a seminal account of the processes that shaped the labor process in modern capitalism. Since the 1970s, expanding low-wage productive labor has coincided with increasing demand for care work, a consequence of women's integration into the workforce and consequent pressure on families as sites of reproductive labor. Developing Braverman's observations about the changing composition of the labor force and his discussion of the universal market and unproductive labor, we argue that exponential expansion of "unproductive labor" has circumvented the potential barrier, identified by Braverman, to the expansion of low-wage work. Our goals are threefold. First, we offer a discussion of the category unproductive labor to explore shifting patterns of paid and unpaid care work in modern economies. Second, we combine Braverman's underdeveloped discussion of unproductive labor with Marxist feminism to make sense of how care work has become critical to the valorization of capital and subject to processes of value production. Finally, we argue that Braverman's deskilling thesis pre-empts aspects of the literature on precarity as it applies to care work. Service workers in already undervalued occupations are pushed into barely survivable conditions even as their work becomes indispensable to capital valorization and labor reproduction.

Introduction

Harry Braverman's seminal *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (LMC) opens with a problematic drawn from the conventional opposition between manual and service work, in North American terms, the difference between blue- and white-collar labor. Braverman's commendable contempt for mainstream sociology makes his volume readable and enduring. It was not a product of passing fads, resisted affiliation with Stalinism, and predated the turn toward French skepticism that began in the 1970s and would lead to interpretive dead ends in much theorizing for several decades, until the resurgence of interest in Marxian political economy in the late 2000s. The richness of Braverman's analysis is clear when one considers that his work is still widely cited fifty years after it was written (e.g., Chapman 2023) and that it can easily be brought into dialogue with modern literatures about precarity, social reproduction and

care, digital Taylorism, global supply chains, and a great many more. We argue that Braverman's work identifies issues that were developing into a social crisis in the early 1970s but have moved to the forefront of struggle since then in ways Braverman could not have anticipated. It is implicitly clear that LMC, in keeping with the Marxist tradition generally, imagined that working-class consciousness was likely to form in the deskilled and deskilling sections of the industrial proletariat (Braverman 1998, 314–15).

In the 2020s the conditions of labor in Western countries have changed unrecognizably from the situation Braverman knew and analyzed, yet nonetheless conform to many of his predictions, requiring us to think with and beyond Braverman to make sense of contemporary processes of deskilling and the marketization of reproductive labor. The first section takes as its starting point Braverman's discussion of

unproductive labor in LMC's final chapter, providing a discussion of the controversy surrounding the concept and explaining how massive expansion of unproductive labor has occurred in reproductive sectors Braverman did not anticipate. The second section examines how Marxist feminist work has developed arguments about social reproduction and the labor process that complement and extend portions of Braverman's work through a discussion of a "missing link" between Braverman's discussion of unproductive labor and family structure in his chapters on the Structure of the Working Class and the Universal Market. In the third section we examine empirical changes to the nature of the care sector through a discussion of commercial care in the United Kingdom, drawing on insights from LMC and the work of Marxist feminists. Finally, we argue that, taken together, these trends explain a developing situation where service workers in already undervalued occupations are pushed into barely survivable conditions even as their work becomes indispensable to capital valorization and labor reproduction.

Unproductive Labor: A Suspect Legacy

Braverman's discussion of productive and unproductive labor is one of the least developed but most potentially suggestive portions of his analysis. Given the sensation caused by the release of the late David Graeber's (2018) *Bullshit Jobs*, interest in unproductive labor (of which Graeber's bullshit jobs concept captures one subjective aspect [Soffia, Wood, and Burchell 2022]) has not gone away. Gough (1972, 47) noted that the concept of unproductive labor was "one of the most suspect legacies of classical political economy." What, then, is unproductive labor and why does it potentially retain importance for re-readings of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* fifty years after it was written? To answer this question, we will first explain and define the term and the controversy surrounding it before linking it to the chapters "The Universal Market" and "The Structure of the New Working Class and Its Reserve Armies" in the second half of LMC. According to Marx (1968), productive labor, from the perspective of capital, is waged labor that produces surplus value; unproductive labor is any form of labor that does not.

Along with classical political economists, notably Adam Smith, Marx makes a distinction between labor exchanged against capital and labor exchanged against revenue. However, contra Smith who claims that only physical commodity production and not services can be considered productive (Mohun 2012), Marx (1968, 304) argues that the nature of the product of the labor is immaterial; "[t]he use value of the commodity in which the labor of a productive worker is embodied may be of the most futile kind." The classic example given by Marx (1968, 303) is that of a "jobbing tailor who comes to the capitalist's house and patches his trousers for him, producing mere use-value for him." In other words, the essence of the controversy around productive and unproductive labor is about the degree to which activities do or do not produce surplus value for the capitalist, rather than whether the labor is useful, since a great deal of extremely useful labor may be considered unproductive in terms of its relation to surplus value. This is also the definition of unproductive labor found in LMC: "to put the matter from the point of view of the capitalist, to hire gardening labor to maintain his family's lawn is unproductive consumption, while to hire the very same gardening labor in order to realize a profit from its work is to set in motion productive labor for the purpose of accumulating capital" (Braverman 1998, 285).

Unproductive labor was a subject of particular interest in the 1970s and 1980s for two main reasons, one theoretical and one empirical. Theoretically, the Sraffian (1960) critique of the labor theory of value caused significant adjustment to trends in Marxist economics (Steedman 1977). Sraffa's neo-Ricardian critique in some ways embedded the Marxian notion of labor further in the historical conditions in which labor is performed and away from a naturalist conception of labor's role in the labor process (Screpanti 1993), but it also decentralized the critical role of money in the analysis of capitalism in favor of creating a system of technical coefficients for understanding the relationship between wages and profits (Arthur 2004). Perhaps the best-known response to this critique is value-form theory, which offered an avenue out of this theoretical impasse by refocusing the question away from productive and unproduc-

tive categories and towards Marx's division of labor under capitalism into abstract and concrete (Pitts 2018). A second, roughly contemporaneous literature focused on the expansion of finance, the rentier economy, and outsourcing in the United States and United Kingdom in the mid-1980s. This empirical development presented a challenge to the orthodox account of the split between productive and unproductive labor, triggering interest in the expansion of unproductive labor and its potential implications for the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (Savran and Tonak 1999). The main source of this interest was the ballooning financial and advertising sectors (Tarbuck 1983; Barba and Vivo 2012), both of which constitute unproductive labor in the sense in which the term is used in classical political economy and Marxian economics.

In keeping with the surge of interest in unproductive labor around the time LMC was written, Braverman shows perceptive appreciation of a nascent tendency in the capitalist economy of the 1970s that would intensify significantly over the next five decades, and his choice of domestic work as an example is particularly apposite. While the concept unproductive labor was primarily a means by which Marx attempted to understand the distinction between production and circulation activity in the capitalist economy, it is empirically clear that as the quantity of labor invested in commercial forms of unproductive labor was rising, so too was the quantity invested in reproductive activities of various kinds (Mohun 2014), something by no means lost on scholars engaged in the debate on unproductive labor from the 1970s onward, including concerns that excluding reproductive labor might appear sexist. Mohun (2012, 11–12), for instance, offers this justification of the exclusion of care and housework from productive labor:

To call such activities unproductive has been interpreted as an example of the way in which a patriarchal theory systematically ignores the activity of women. A response might be that this confuses the reproduction of capitalist relations of production with the reproduction of wider society. There are all sorts of complex inter-relations between the two, structured by the evident truth

that children (and thus future workers) are not produced under capitalist relations of production. ... But the reproduction of capitalist relations and the reproduction of wider society are not identical, and the theoretical categories used to analyze the one are inappropriate for the other.

He continues, "If all activities that indirectly contribute to surplus value are considered productive, the term loses any focus and precision, for it is hard to conceive of any activity that cannot be so interpreted" (Mohun 2012, 15). Indeed, this view is still represented among Marxist feminists. Bhattacharya (2017) and Fraser (2017), working in a tradition now often referred to as Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) (Munro 2021), maintain that reproductive labor is productive of labor-power but not surplus-value, for instance. As we shall see, this is not an uncontroversial position, but the argument about the status of unproductive labor in the capitalist economy is essentially a question of whether reproductive labor in the round produces surplus value.

Wages for Housework, Care, and the Universal Market

While not explicitly gendered, the unproductive labor literature implicitly positions the (historically male) production worker as the central creator of surplus-value in the labor process. This, however, is by no means to suggest that Marxist economists were unaware of the importance of reproductive labor to the functioning of the capitalist economy, and it is notable that the status of paid and unpaid caring work is thorny from the perspective of Marxist economists. The critical importance of reproduction, both of capitalist relations and society generally, is repeatedly acknowledged in this literature. Consider Miller:

Capitalism depends on productive labor, but reproduction can be sustained on the basis of production labor. Contradictions between these two spheres, hidden by the uniformity of appearances in a capitalist exchange economy, emerge concretely in the political and social struggles surrounding the state and the household. Attacks on big government and support for the sanctity of the family are part of a desperate struggle by capi-

tal to ensure that the priorities of accumulation dominate over those of reproduction (1984, 152).

Economists in the orthodox Marxist tradition have tended to focus on the traditional split between productive and commercial activity, understanding the former as productive and the latter as unproductive, in other words, as a net drain on surplus-value creation. Reproduction here is understood as two distinct though related spheres: reproduction of capitalist relations and reproduction of wider society. The first of these is specific to capitalist society, while the second is a general precondition of all societal forms (Izquierdo 2006).

Marxist feminists have long argued that social reproduction in capitalist society is conditioned by historical development specific to capitalism and therefore form-determined in just the same way as reproduction of capitalist relations (Federici 2009). Contrary to the orthodox Marxist position that “children (...) are not produced under capitalist relations of production” (Mohun 2012, 11–12), Marxist feminists refocus the Marxian approach to “the circuits producing the most extraordinary commodity of all under capitalism; namely, the worker” (Mezzadri 2019, 36). Nonetheless, there are important distinctions between feminists working on this issue. SRT broadly argues that “reproductive, unpaid labor is essential labor, and hence important for capitalist accumulation, but itself is unproductive in that it does not produce surplus-value” (Bieler and Morton 2021, 13).

By contrast, “wages for housework” feminists assign a productive character to women’s reproductive work because “domestic labor produces commodities and surplus value” (Arruza 2013, 90). Descended from the domestic labor debate (Dalla Costa and James 1975; Smith 2013), this argument rests on the position that, without the reproductive labor undertaken primarily by women, the most important value-producing commodity in the capitalist economy—labor power—would not be (re)produced (Picchio 1992), refuting Mohun’s aforementioned concern that expansion of the notion of productive labor robs the concept of “focus and precision.”

Meléndez (2013, 136) argues that reproductive labor is properly neither productive nor unproductive, but notes that “in an indirect manner the reproduc-

tive labor does contribute to the valorization process, not only through the reproduction of labor-power but also through the indirect production of surplus value for capital.” Therefore, within the capitalist system, reproductive labor is indirectly productive labor. This contrasts with the argument of SRT, which classifies reproductive labor as essential in the creation of labor power but unproductive in its relation to surplus-value, and the orthodox view, which largely brackets the gendered aspects of social reproduction, seeing it instead in terms of its role in the reproduction of capitalism.

In the rest of this article, we adopt a definition of social reproduction largely derived from the work of “wages for housework” feminists. We view reproductive labor as always indirectly productive of surplus-value. Indeed, an essential component of the argument made here is that the boundary between paid and unpaid reproductive labor is becoming increasingly porous as capital seeks to extend valorization directly into the reproductive sphere. For this reason, “the reproduction of labor power in capitalist society is not virtuous ‘life-making’ but rather one aspect of a larger process that perpetuates the capitalist organization of society” (Munro 2021, 3). The central contradiction that needs to be grasped for analysis of the capitalist system, then, is that between production and reproduction. Here again, LMC dovetails with an important preoccupation of scholars of social reproduction. Braverman’s observation of the difficulties that would confront the family as a reproductive unit proved extremely prescient, not only his observation that the increasing workforce integration of women was the leading driver of the expansion of the working class in both industrial and non-industrial settings (1998, 274), but also that the universalization of the market and the creation of the dual-earner family as the standard unit of capitalist social organization would force families to

go to market and only to market, not only for food, clothing, and shelter, but also for recreation, amusement, security, for the care of the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped. In time not only the material and service needs but even the emotional patterns of life are channeled through the market. (Braverman 1998, 191)

Although Braverman clearly envisages unproductive labor as primarily commercial activity, he makes (1998, 287) the highly suggestive comment that

It is now clear that while unproductive labor has declined outside the grasp of capital, it has increased within its ambit. The great mass of labor which was reckoned as unproductive because it did not work for capital has now been transformed into a mass of labor which is unproductive because it works for capital, and because the needs of capital for unproductive labor have increased so remarkably [emphasis in original].

What is missing in Braverman's discussions of unproductive labor is a direct link between this expansion and his discussion of the universal market that produces the conditions under which significant portions of this expansion can take place, something clearly identified by Marxist feminists.

LMC's discussion of the universal market is closely linked to Braverman's understanding of the changing structure of the working class. Federici (2020) notes that in North America during the 1970s the expansion of the service sector reflected women's increasing rejection of housework and the tendency for this work to be redistributed outside the home and waged. This is undoubtedly part of the story, but it is also clear that the stagnation identified by Braverman in mass industrial occupations; access to new industrial reserve armies in the majority world (Global South) and formerly closed Soviet bloc (Harvey 2019); and the falling real value of the male wage created an increasing social requirement for some women, especially women of color and migrant women, to work for wages rather than to work unwaged in the home, often in insecure or poorly paid work, with significant wage differentials compared to men (Hooks 2000). This is even more acute in the majority world where women's "labor 'circulations' are shaped by productive and reproductive temporalities and pressures based on individual/collective caring responsibilities and debt" (Mezzadri and Majumder 2021).

The burden of unmet care needs has not disappeared but been displaced from the family, which was the enforced site of most reproductive labor since

the beginning of capitalism, to the private sector. In other words, when presented with a potential barrier of its own creation to continued accumulation in the reproductive sphere, capital has found a way to circumvent it through a mixture of private, family, and limited social access to caring resources (Federici 2020). This has had profound implications not only for the social division of labor and the composition of the labor force but also for the reproductive labor process.

Indeed, Braverman's prediction that a universal market was likely to emerge has proven correct, at least in the minority world (Global North). Increasingly significant quantities of reproductive labor are now commoditized on the market. In the case of the United Kingdom, the social care sector is thought to have accounted for between four and six percent of the UK labor force by 2008 (Moriarty et al. 2008). By 2023, the number of employees in adult social care in England was estimated at around 1.5 million (King's Fund 2023), with a further 325,000 employed in early years childcare settings, of whom 98% were women (Dawson, Williams, and Nancarrow 2023, 39). This second statistic does not even include the number of (primarily women) working in paid informal and casualized childcare (Gebrial and Bettington 2022) nor does it capture UK society's reliance on unpaid elderly and childcare.

What is striking is the speed and scale of the transition to market reliance, which was uncommon in the 1970s among all but the wealthiest to a situation of mass participation in commoditized reproductive labor either as producers or consumers. Whether we understand domestic work as productive of surplus value or as unproductive labor, it is quite clear that the reproductive sphere has been transformed into an important site of valorization of capital.

In the case of the UK social care sector, it is particularly critical to note that many of the practices Mezzadri et al. (2021) identify as permanent features of work in the majority world apply to largely female workers in the UK care sector, many of whom are from working-class or migrant backgrounds, with migrants, now largely from the majority world, comprising around 20% of the sector's workforce

(Emberson and Trautrimis 2019). In other words, in the UK, social reproduction has become not only a site of valorization but also, because of the low profit margins and the preponderance of wages as a share of costs, a site of intense exploitation. Conditions in the social care sector in the UK, in which many people from the majority world are employed, increasingly approximate the kinds of pressures historically placed on all types of workers outside the minority world even during the high era of the welfare state (Munck 2013). Reproductive labor therefore remains undervalued because of the introduction of additional productive pressures as part of the accumulatory regime of contemporary capitalism. In the next section we will consider more fully how the reliance on commoditized reproductive labor has produced a distinctive labor process that systematically pushes workers into barely survivable conditions even as their work becomes indispensable to capital valorization and labor reproduction.

Home from Home: The Expansion of Reproductive Labor and the Care Sector

We develop arguments made in previous sections about the reproductive sphere as a site of capital valorization through a discussion of the development and conditions in the paid social care sector in England. First, we briefly sketch out the structure of social care in England before discussing the size and composition of the social care workforce to illustrate our contention about the acceleration of valorization in the reproductive sphere and the critical importance of superexploited migrant labor to the English care sector and therefore wider social reproduction in England. We also acknowledge the critical function that the undervaluation of care work, both in financial and ideological terms, plays in sustaining super-exploitative conditions. The Department of Health and Social Care (2015) in England defines “care and support” as “the help some adults need to live as well as possible with any illness or disability they may have.” The demand for paid social care work (excluding informal care) is usually defined as the “range of activities to help people who are older or living with disability or physical or mental illness [and their carers] live independently and stay well

and safe” (King’s Fund 2023), and is growing globally (International Labor Organization 2018). This reflects increasing life expectancy, a global aging population, declining birth rates, and the rising prevalence of disability among the adult working-age population (Department for Work and Pensions 2024). Consequently, there has been an expansion of the labor market and a reorganization of reproductive labor away from the family toward a mixture of for-profit and not-for-profit care homes. These developments can be understood using Braverman’s notions of proletarianization and the universal market, but they exceed his articulation of these ideas in important ways.

The Structure of Social Care and the Social Care Workforce in England

The UK social care system, though under devolved authority across the four nations, differs significantly from the universal and free at the point of delivery National Health Service (NHS). Social care has historically been commissioned and funded to some extent by local authorities but has been subjected to means testing and out-of-pocket expenditure since the establishment of the welfare state after 1945, with its origins tracing back to the nineteenth-century Poor Law. Since 1948, the social care system shifted from institutions to the community and local authorities, and from the public to the independent sector (voluntary and for-profit organizations) (Thane 2009). Since the 1980s, however, public services have experienced sustained fiscal retrenchment, while social care provision by local authorities has become a minority of the total amount of social care provision (Brown 2021). More recently, as the digital economy has evolved and, in an attempt, to address the care deficit, there has been an increase in digital platform-mediated home care labor and the unstable and precarious working conditions that accompany it (McDonald et al. 2023; Khan et al. 2023).

Fraser (2017) argues that reproductive labor experienced three distinct phases in the minority world that map directly to the development of the UK social care sector. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, care was considered entirely the preserve of the family; from 1945 to the mid-1970s,

reproductive labor was socialized and to some degree subsidized by the state. From the 1980s onward, the state and capital began to reject the logic of socialized reproduction and instead attempted to re-enforce the division of productive and reproductive labor. As Braverman points out, this has led to the increasing exposure of families to the market for basic reproductive needs.

Moreover, the degree of need for reproductive labor is steadily increasing. In 2021–22, the total expenditure on adult social care in England was £27 billion, over £3 billion more than in 2010–11 (King's Fund 2023), and it is expected to rise by £2.8 billion between 2022–23 and 2023–24 (Institute for Government 2023). In 2021–22, there were 1.79 million adult social care posts in England, of which 152,000 were vacant, with the highest vacancy rate in London, reflecting the ongoing workforce crisis (Skills for Care 2023; King's Fund 2023). The number of people working in the sector was estimated at 1.52 million in 2022–23 (Foster 2024). In 2022–23, this sector added £55.7 billion to the economy in England, 8.5% more than in 2021–22 (Skills for Care 2024). The need for care remains higher than supply, and therefore, in 2022 the government added social care staff to the Shortage Occupation List (SOL) (Department of Health and Social Care 2021).

The same trend can be identified across the minority world, where long-term care (LTC) (institutional and home-based) spending has been growing since the Coronavirus pandemic and is expected to overtake health spending soon (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2023). In 2021, 1.8% of gross domestic product (GDP) was allocated to LTC across OECD countries, demonstrating that Braverman's contention about the potential for expansion of the market into many areas of basic need is borne out across Western countries. In line with LMC's predictions and in keeping with the historic preferences of many minority world governments (Jessop 2002), it is the market that has been identified as the potential solution to the reproductive crisis confronting capitalism. Starting from a relatively low base, the expansion of the for-profit social care sector has been significant, and this growth shows signs of acceleration, with a greater

share of reproductive labor integrated into the market as a means of generating surplus value directly rather than indirectly in the family (Fraser 2017).

During the Coronavirus pandemic, social care workers were designated essential workers. Autin and Ezema (2023) describe the essential worker category as paradoxical, noting that the roles considered most essential are also the most economically and socially undervalued. This devaluation of reproductive work is closely related to the demographics of the adult social care workforce, which comprises paid formal carers who represent a large portion of social care employment, volunteers working for charities or voluntary organizations, and unpaid informal carers such as family, friends, or neighbors (Brown 2021). The social care workforce is diverse, and the great majority have traditionally been women (Skills for Care 2023; Foster 2024). Skills for Care (2023) estimates that 81% of the adult social care workforce (excluding unpaid carers) in 2022–23 was female. The gendering of care work illustrates that market exposure has yet to alter the traditional gendered division of reproductive labor. This phenomenon is now evident not only in informal but also in formal care work, meaning an extension of work from home to care homes, the family to the labor market, and from the domestic sphere to the sphere of capital. It underscores the continued reproduction of gender inequalities and the expansion of low-wage productive labor, as well as the double burden of female care workers permanently overloaded by paid and unpaid work commitments (Lallement 2023).

The adult social care workforce is on average older and more ethnically diverse than the overall English workforce (Foster 2024). In ethnic composition, individuals of white background comprised 74% of the workforce, contrasting with 83% of England's population. Individuals of Black/African/Caribbean/Black British ethnicity constituted 14% of the workforce, much higher than the 4% found in the overall population (Foster 2024). The pandemic had unprecedented and disproportionate consequences for minority ethnic social care staff, who had higher death rates than any other group (House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee 2020a, 2020b).

The disproportionately minoritized composition of social care is likely to intensify due to the international recruitment plan implemented by the Johnson government, which is likely to strengthen the feminized and racialized nature of the workforce, as well as the exploitative conditions and negative perception of care work. Furthermore, it highlights the transition from domestic and home-based care to not only care homes but also the exploitation of existing labor inequalities, given the substantial international and foreign recruitment of migrant workers to the UK.

Regulation and Super-Exploitation of the Care Workforce

While Braverman accurately predicted the expansion of marketized reproductive labor, he was largely concerned with proletarianization processes in the minority world. The creation of the Health and Care visa regime was designed to expand the English social care workforce through the recruitment of staff from overseas demonstrates a regulatory commitment to valorization in the reproductive sphere and a tacit acknowledgment that reproductive needs in England can only be met through the superexploitation of the British working class and migrant care workers, principally from Eastern Europe, West Africa, and South Asia. Areas with large social care workforces have often experienced significant rates of deindustrialization, where social care work replaces previously secure, relatively well-paid jobs in manufacturing (Winant 2021). In 2021–22, a quarter of care staff were employed on zero-hour contracts, compared to 3.4% in the wider economy, including 54% of home care workers (Skills for Care 2023; Foster 2024). Social care wages are among the lowest in the UK economy and average hourly wages of residential and home care workers were below the OECD average (OECD 2023). According to Skills for Care (2023), care workers' real median hourly pay in March 2023 was £10.11, down 35p from March 2022.

An enduring challenge in social care is staff shortages and recruitment, intensified by the 2008 financial crisis, Brexit and the end of freedom of movement from the EU/EEA in December 2020, and the Coronavirus pandemic. This problem has been resolved largely through the internationalization

of the labor market in social care and concomitant proletarianization processes among workforces in the majority world. In 2021, the Department of Health and Social Care (2021) announced the “biggest visa boost for social care” with changes to the Health and Care Visa scheme for care workers, care assistants, home care workers, and support workers for a 12-month period. Introduced in August 2020, the Health and Care Worker visa allows care workers and other medical practitioners to either migrate to or remain in the UK for employment with the NHS, an NHS supplier, or within adult social care. The visa offers a 50% reduction in visa fees, exemption from the Immigration Health Surcharge, and accelerated processing of applications.

Such measures have helped fill the UK's reproductive labor deficit with immediate and visible effect on the number of vacant posts in adult social care between 2021–22 (10.6%) and 2022–23 (9.9%) (Department of Health and Social Care 2021; Skills for Care 2023), with 40,416 visas granted in 2022–23 alone (Institute for Government 2023). These measures have contributed to the expansion of transnational care work and reflect that social care is an increasingly global labor market. Patterns of movement point from the majority to the minority world with carers, predominantly women, migrating to rich nations to provide care and love to family members of other people. As Hochschild (2014, 261) puts it, “the low value placed on caring work is not due to the absence of a need for it, or to the simplicity or ease of the work, but to the cultural politics underlying this global exchange.”

Despite relatively easy workforce recruitment following implementation of transnational recruitment policies, the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) stated in 2023 that the cause of the enduring challenge within social care work of staff shortages and recruitment remains the underfunding and undervaluation of the sector, and expressed concern about the current overreliance on the immigration system for the recruitment of care workers and the “increasing reports of exploitation and abuse on the route” (MAC 2023). According to the MAC (2023), 99.9% of care workers sponsored through this new Health and Care Visa scheme now originate from countries

outside the European Economic Area, chiefly India, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Ghana. Although government-to-government agreements exist for the first two countries on health and social care workforce recruitment, the World Health Organization's (2023) Workforce Support and Safeguard List, which promotes ethical international recruitment and employment of health and social care workers, classifies the latter four countries as "red list" countries, indicating that recruiting social care workers from these countries should be avoided due to their own pressing workforce needs.

Evidence does not support the commitment set out in the Code of Practice for International Recruitment of Health and Social Care Personnel in England stating that health and social care recruitment organizations and agencies should not actively recruit from these countries (Department of Health and Social Care 2023). Some accounts of exploitation include potential modern slavery and human trafficking through long working hours or document falsification. Unseen (2023), the UK's Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline, recognizes the higher risk of abuse and exploitation of workers in the care sector in comparison to other workers, due to their poor working conditions and overreliance on temporary employment contracts. They reported 712 cases of potential victims of modern slavery and 106 cases of modern slavery in the care sector in 2022, a staggering increase from previous years (in 2021, for example, there were 63 cases of potential victims of modern slavery and 15 confirmed cases of modern slavery in the care sector). Reflecting the composition of the sector, most of the victims were female adults, originating from the aforementioned "red list" countries. Cases of high levels of debt, many times to cover the sponsorship certificate costs, which should be covered by the employer, alongside cases of illegitimate, non-related care sponsors, have also been reported to Unseen. Finally, unethical recruitment methods using false promises and statements, and labor abuse, such as financial control, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, induced substance abuse, threat to harm, threat to destroy documents, poor and crowded accommodation, and many more, have all been reported to Unseen. As Justine Carter, Unseen's

director, put it, "the issue with care workers experiencing exploitation is that very vulnerable people are being employed to care for vulnerable people" (Unseen 2023).

Some migrant care workers are qualified professionals in their home countries but undergo deskilling by migrating to and integrating into the labor market in the UK. In response, Skills for Care (2024) announced in October 2023 their plans to develop a new adult social care workforce strategy that will identify this workforce's needs and find solutions for the sector's chronic and long-standing challenges, including appropriate professionalization of social care workers and learning lessons from the other three UK devolved nations. Although tentative movements have been made toward the organization of platform workers and domestic workers (Jones 2021), these movements have largely not extended to social care, leaving a significant gap in attempts to organize reproductive workers who also lack a professional body that regulates the terms of their work. The increasing flexibilization of the social care market further demonstrates the exploitation of traditionally female reproductive activities by capitalist production systems, which assign public caring tasks to women outside the private household sphere with the minimum professionalization requirements at low wages and with little employment protection.

In addition to international recruitment policies, the rise of digital platform-mediated work for health-care workers has also become problematic. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) (2021), the UK is one of the top countries requesting online labor, while lower- and middle-income countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have the highest labor supply. Fairwork (Howson et al. 2021) has also stated that the number of digital platform workers (including healthcare workers) has risen from 6% to 15% between 2016 and 2021 in the UK and has urged for stronger regulation on what is now known as the platformization of labor (ILO 2021). Khan et al. (2023) and McDonald et al. (2023) demonstrate how paid domestic care workers who have used these platforms in Australia have seen the traditionally marginalized, undervalued, and exploitative nature of their work reinforced, despite

these platforms' claims to give greater freedom and autonomy to workers classified as self-employed or independent contractors. Clients, acting as proxy employers, constrain workers' ability to secure fair payments for their services and because workers access these platforms through layered membership, their access to certain types of information is limited, forcing workers to compete among themselves, and as a result accept lower pay rates, which reinforces their exploitation (McDonald et al. 2023).

The English case demonstrates new forms of proletarianization in minority world economies. Amin refers to the "generalized proletariat" to describe the phenomenon of different forms of working-class formation across the world:

The shaping of the societies of peripheral capitalism produced forms of proletarianization specific to each region according to the functions that were assigned to them, and hence different from the forms of proletarianization found in the dominant centers, yet nevertheless complementary to them (Amin 2014, 32)

The integration of a large industrial reserve army—which has been proletarianized under very different conditions in Asia and Africa—into the reproductive labor force in the minority world has shaped the sector and the behavior of capital and the state. When understood in terms of the law of worldwide value (Amin 2010), the importation of workers into the minority world demonstrates another marker of super-exploitation (Marini 2022); dynamics of exploitation operate between core and periphery, within the core and the periphery. The expropriation of reproductive labor to maintain labor-power in the minority world, in Hochschild's (2014) terms, the inequitable redistribution of love across the globe, mirrors dynamics long observed in land and natural resources, capital, and labor. This inequality constitutes a double dispossession: first as the expropriation of workers in the majority world, and second as the imposition of poor socioeconomic conditions in the minority world with limited prospects of stability, organization, freedom, and security. The transition from familial to semi-social and back to privatized means of assuring reproduction of labor in the

minority world has characteristically been achieved through processes of exploitation and proletarianization of women and the domestic and international working class.

Conclusion: The Universal Market and the Care Sector

This article began with a discussion of Braverman's observations focusing on the underdeveloped link between unproductive labor and the extension of the universal market in LMC. We then considered the long-standing literature on "wages for housework," arguing that changes to the structure of the family and its reproductive function identified by Braverman have been dealt with by capital through turning reproductive labor into an activity that takes place through the universal market. Empirical evidence about the growth of the commercial care sector in English-speaking countries points toward the creation of a large, predominantly female, and increasingly migrant workforce. The English care sector was considered here as a primary example of how Braverman's predictions about the universalization of the market to meet the reproductive needs of families have been borne out. Braverman's work on the changing nature of the labor process and how more and more social activity is subject to exploitative valorization offers a way to understand labor that is critical to the reproduction of contemporary capitalist social relations and labor-power generally in modern capitalism. Further empirical research exploring the specific nature of what might be termed the reproductive labor process under intensifying conditions of valorization would be a valuable addition to the traditions of Marxist studies of the labor process and feminist approaches to the concept of social reproduction.

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

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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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psychological Justice after Mayo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Blind Spot

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

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

But before doing any of these, it is important

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

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

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

could have sensitized him the problematic idealization of craftsmanship.

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

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

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

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

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

Returning to Braverman

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

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

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

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

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

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This Site Cannot Be Reached: Braverman and Academic Labor's Digital Decomposition

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Introduction

In May 2024, UC Santa Cruz moved classes online for the first four days of the UAW 4811 graduate student strike in solidarity with Gaza, following violent attacks on student encampments by campus and local police. The “stand up” strike was called on six campuses of the UC system (UAW 4811 2024). The UCSC student workers were acting alongside the weeks-long encampment from which hundreds of students shut down the campus several times since Fall 2023 (Students for Justice in Palestine at UC Santa Cruz 2024).

The use of online education, as with Boston University's proposal that faculty use generative AI to scab on the work of striking graduate workers in March (Tran 2024), is only one recent university effort to deploy online education and generative AI as weapons against organized academic workers. Online education was also used at Cal Poly Humboldt to break the student Gaza solidarity encampment in April to May 2024 (Vaziri and Linton 2024). While we academic workers increasingly recognize the strategic use of these technologies to undermine, or decompose our power, we have yet to fully examine why they were developed.

Contrary to widespread edtech and campus administrators' claims, online Learning Management Systems (LMS) and generative AI do not exist to

further student learning or “student success.” Rather, these are technological weapons for university administrators to impose their power over faculty and students. Edtech refers to the section of the tech industry that develops software and platforms targeted specifically at education. The largest LMS provider, Instructure (Canvas), is valued at \$3.5 billion, followed by Moodle, Blackboard, and Google Classroom (CNBC 2024).

Drawing on Harry Braverman's analysis of the role of technology in the changing division of labor in his classic 1974 book *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Labor in the Twentieth Century*, I see LMSs and AI as Taylor's “digital stopwatch”—designed to rationalize, deskill, and automate academic labor, thereby decomposing our growing power while standardizing work to restore control and increase productivity of both waged and unwaged academic workers. Generative AI predicts patterns in existing data to generate new data and create something, in contrast to AI that merely completes tasks by interpreting existing data and adapting its actions based on new information. By carefully understanding Braverman's key ideas in his now fifty-year-old study, we can inform academic workers to organize new tactics, strategies, and objectives.

Taylor's Digital Stopwatch: The Rationalization of Academic Labor

Over the past few years we have seen a massive upsurge in academic workers organizing, strike threats, and strikes. The 2024 UAW 4811 strike was preceded by the largest academic strike in history in 2022 when graduate student unions UAW 2865, UAW 5810, and SRU-UAW (now merged as UAW 4811) struck, shutting down the entire UC system. This strike was preceded a year earlier by the UCSC wildcat strike that was curtailed by the March 2020 pandemic closure. The 2022 strike is the latest peak in a two-decade-long upsurge in worker organizing among contingent and tenure-line faculty, graduate and undergraduate student workers, academic staff, and researchers. There has been a tenfold increase in the number of new unions of undergraduate workers formed each year between 2021 and 2023 (Milkman and van der Naald 2023, 7–8).

In 2024, 20,000 student assistants voted to join CSUEU/SEIU Local 2579 in the CSUs, making it the largest union of undergraduates in the US (Associated Press 2023). This upsurge follows decades of neoliberal restructuring since the 1970s (Ovetz 1996). Organized academic workers challenge both the erosion of academic governance and the exploitation of underpaid student workers and contingent faculty, who now compose about 70 percent of all faculty. Unfortunately, we have only slowed but not stopped or reversed the entrepreneurialization of higher education.

In response to the potential power of academic workers to disrupt neoliberal higher education, administrators first expanded precariousness among the faculty and more recently embraced first the LMS and now generative AI as tools for rationalizing academic labor. The LMS was becoming embedded in higher education but experienced its most accelerated growth during the pandemic when every student was forced into online “remote learning.” Although the National Center for Education Statistics has not updated its reports since Fall 2021, it is likely that a large minority of higher education instruction has been permanently moved online (NCES 2022).

The ubiquity of the LMS had the obvious effect of doubling the academic workload. Hardly

a labor-saving device, the LMS has forced faculty to duplicate in-person classes by moving some class content into the LMS with additional requirements due to standardization or replacing it with entirely “new” online classes. The consistent rise in online class sizes creates further pressure to raise in-person class sizes. The arrival of generative AI, coercively pushed onto faculty daily in streams of emails from administrators, campus centers for teaching, edtech companies, and publications, is certain to further increase our workload. The LMS is a tactic for increasing faculty productivity by rationalizing, standardizing, and stripping control from faculty over our labor and transferring it to administrators. Standardization of higher education is a century-long strategy first developed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which began the effort by inventing the interchangeable academic unit and trying it to faculty vesting rights in its TIAA-CREF faculty retirement investment scheme.

We can draw on Braverman's class analysis of the three principles of scientific management to understand the role of the LMS and generative AI to strip academic workers of control over our mental labor so that it can be rationalized, controlled, and more intensely exploited. Braverman showed how the boss uses surveillance to collect and classify workers' knowledge to achieve “the separation of conception from execution” and thereby “control each step of the labor process and its mode of execution” (Braverman 1974, 112–19). As he explained, mental labor undergoes the same fragmentation as manual labor: “mental labor is first separated from manual labor and, as we shall see, is then itself subdivided rigorously according to the same rule” (Braverman 1974, 114). This process of rationalization of all labor serves the purpose of stripping it from the workers' control, breaking it down into its component parts, distributing those parts either to the boss or augmenting or automating it with technology, and intensifying management control over the work. In the process, it deskills workers by transforming their labor into discrete interchangeable tasks and thereby transforming the division of labor.

The rationalization process continues taking place in higher education with the use of the LMS

and generative AI built into it as plug-ins. The very design of the LMS serves to both rationalize faculty academic labor while training the student to work without direct supervision. The virtual architecture of the LMS channels, controls, rationalizes, and breaks down academic labor into its component parts in the form of modules which are arranged in a fragmented sequence through which the student must now proceed as they engage in their unwaged schoolwork. Students move through each step in the LMS panoptic “learning machine” under ubiquitous surveillance—what Foucault termed “the eyes that must see without being seen” (Foucault 1995, 147, 171)—while the system collects extensive data about student activity, analyzes the productivity of their labor, and standardizes it for comparison to each other both in the same and all classes.

Students self-discipline themselves to proceed through the LMS by learning to labor, always knowing they are observed without ever experiencing it directly. The LMS becomes a tool for producing self-disciplined workers who will submit to the algorithmic management of the black box of the platform, gig app, or biophysical surveillance devices found in service and warehouse labor at Uber, Starbucks, and Amazon, to name only a few. By producing self-disciplined labor power, the LMS illustrates how the new technical composition of capital (the specific technologies and organizational forms capital employs) in higher education serves the emerging technical composition of capital in the rest of the economy (Ovetz 2020a).

Following the turbulent global wave of class struggle in the 1960s to 1970s, there was an imperative to restore control and reimpose work. The rationalization of academic labor has become a critical component of the strategy for producing self-disciplined labor power of university-educated workers. The LMS serves as a tool of the first principle of scientific management, of Taylor’s digital stopwatch. It does so by rationalizing the skills of teaching from the facilitation and guidance of learning into a series of discrete tasks sequenced as online assignments in the LMS through which students must move to complete the course and graduate. Faculty labor is rationalized, or, in the words of

edtech, “unbundled,” into course design, delivery, and assessment (McCowan 2017, 738). These are further fragmented and the pieces redistributed to non-faculty academic staff such as content experts, counselors, course designers, technical support, programmers, and outsourced to textbook and software companies. This fragmentation has spurred rapid growth in non-faculty distance education “instructional staff” to run the LMS and train faculty, but also the layer of administrators to oversee it while also opening a beachhead for edtech penetration into higher education.

The faculty worker becomes what Marx called the machine’s “appendage” (Marx 1867, 481–82), no longer facilitating learning but rather tending the system that assesses, classifies, disciplines, and monitors student labor. No longer is teaching about the facilitation and guidance of learning; rather, faculty are transformed into the machine’s appendage that guides students through the structured virtual architecture of the LMS to demonstrate “competency” to pass the class and graduate. The technical composition of industrial work, Marx explained, shows that “not only is the specialized work distributed among the different individuals, but the individual himself is divided up, and transformed into the automatic motor of a detail operation” thereby transforming the worker into an “appendage” of the machine and the factory (Marx 1867, 481–82). Each moment the student spends in the LMS is timed, analyzed, and assessed for the student as well as faculty so that the labor power of both become comparable, interchangeable, and standardized.

To borrow Mario Tronti’s term, this is the new “post-Fordist mass worker” that is self-disciplined as well as interchangeable. To see this requires, as Tronti urged us, that “we go from the struggle to the class: from the mass struggle to the massification of the class, but through the new reality, the new discovery, the new capitalist concept of collective contract” (Tronti 1971, 267–311). The rationalization of academic labor begins as a reaction to the organized disruptive power of academic workers. The objective of this rationalization is to restore control over that academic labor. Maintaining our disruptive power requires that we recognize the LMS as management’s

strategy to decompose the power of academic labor by fracturing control of the faculty over teaching and the assessment of learning.

“The separation of conception from execution,” as Braverman showed, takes place when “the first step breaks up only the process, while the second dismembers the worker as well” (Braverman 1974, 114). For Braverman, this “means nothing to the capitalist, and all the less since, in destroying the craft as a process under the control of the worker, he reconstitutes it as a process under his control” (Braverman 1974, 78). Faculty, departments, and programs no longer control the content or design of teaching as it is rationalized into standardized, interchangeable discrete tasks that can be delivered by non-faculty, administrators, “subject matter specialists” such as online technology staff or textbook companies providing canned course content, or even automated with generative AI.

The extreme end of this rationalization appears at Rio Salado College of the Maricopa Community Colleges, which offers staggered Canvas modules taught entirely by contingent faculty or “subject matter specialists” (Ovetz 2015b). Academic labor has become so fragmented and deskilled that the college class exists only as interchangeable modules deliverable by virtually anyone.

Capital Follows: Technology as a Weapon Against Academic Worker Revolt

While Braverman illuminates how technology rationalizes labor, his analysis has limitations. He can be faulted for overlooking why rationalization of labor is undertaken in response to disruptive class struggle. However, he provided us with a bright light to shine on how technology is introduced into the work process as a tactical weapon used against workers. As Marx put it, “machinery...is the most powerful weapon for suppressing strikes, those periodic revolts of the working class against the autocracy of capital... It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working class revolt” (Marx 1867, 562–63).

While the history of class struggle is missing from Braverman, it’s up to those of us facing the introduction of new technologies into our work to

understand how and why it is intended to rationalize, break up, control, and further exploit our labor. To do that we can draw on class composition theory to carry out a workers’ inquiry to understand how these technologies are intended to decompose workers’ power, restore control, and impose a new composition of capital. The rest of this essay will explore how a workers’ inquiry can be used to examine the role of the LMS as a strategy for countering the power of academic workers. While a workers’ inquiry is specific to the organization of work of the workers that use it, this essay will identify why it can be invaluable in understanding how the technology is used to develop new tactics, strategies, and objectives.

A vivid illustration of the way in which the LMS has been used against organized faculty and student academic labor appears in the examples above at the UCs and Boston University. Online education was likely first used to break academic strikes in South Africa during the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student strikes in that country in 2015–16 (Ivancheva et al. 2020). South Africa was thus a local trial run for the global shift from in-person teaching to online education that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, an innovation that is now becoming a tool to attack student and other academic worker struggles.

While online education is a new tactic of the academic boss, academic worker organizers ignore it at our own peril. When one of my unions, the California Faculty Association, carried out its first systemwide strike in decades in January 2024, there was no plan to disable the Canvas LMS to prevent online work during the planned five-day strike that was abruptly called off in less than twenty-four hours (Quinn 2024). It’s extremely unlikely that our strike shut down the system because many students kept working using the faculty labor previously entered the still-active Canvas LMS.

Any administrator can access the LMS of striking faculty and finish the course during a strike. During the five-month Graduate Employees’ Organization strike at the University of Michigan, administrators ordered faculty to enter missing grades from striking graduate student faculty, thereby forcing faculty to cross a virtual picket line (Anderson 2023). However,

when UC attempted to pressure lecturers in my other union (UC-AFT) to finish the grading of striking graduate students in 2022—which was outside our work requirements in the collective bargaining agreement—the union legally refused to do struck work (UC-AFT 2022). The failure to address the use of technology to rationalize academic labor will certainly result in increasing use of AI to scab on striking workers. Since assorted AI plug-ins are already built into many LMSs, administrators can simply turn them on to fully automate the LMS and break a strike.

An even bigger threat to the power of organized academic workers is our fragmentation into an extremely large number of unions on single and multiple campuses of the same system and state, creating almost insurmountable barriers to taking coordinated collective action. For example, there are five faculty unions and many other staff unions in the California community college system, one of the largest systems of higher education in the world with about 1.9 million students in 116 campuses organized into 73 districts. The extreme fragmentation is an impediment to coordinated collective action by academic workers.

The California State University system has eight different faculty, staff, graduate, and student unions, while the UC system has fifteen. That means when one set of workers strike, no-strike clauses and staggered contract expiration dates force all the other workers to scab. When UAW 2865, UAW 5810, and SRU-UAW struck the UCs in 2022, contingent lecturers and librarians of UC-AFT were forced to keep classes going even without graduate student readers and GSIs, although they could not be forced to do the struck work. To avoid having to literally cross a physical picket line, nearly all lecturers moved their classes online, thereby crossing the virtual picket line as virtual scabs.

Recomposing the Power of Academic Workers

Braverman's study of the use of technology to rationalize academic labor offers us some obvious and not-so-obvious tactics and strategies. First, we need to purge the ubiquitous no-strike clauses in our con-

tracts so that we can strike, both for ourselves and in solidarity with other workers, at any time even while still under contract. Second, we must align our contract end dates and ultimately merge our unions into wall-to-wall unions (unions encompassing all workers regardless of job classification) of all academic workers across campuses, systems, and even geographical boundaries such as states and provinces. The impact of doing so can be seen in the successful April 2023 Rutgers University strike of the full-time faculty, adjunct faculty, student employees, and graduate students of the American Association of University Professors (Pope 2024). Finally, we need to organize the growing army of online instructional staff and content specialists who are running the LMS, producing content, and training faculty. Having these and other skilled campus staff who keep the lights on in the same union is essential to keeping both physical and virtual classrooms empty and locked up tight during a strike.

To recompose our power, we need to return to Braverman's study of how capital introduces technology in response to our previous cycles of struggle to rationalize, break up, and strip us of what control we have over our work to restore control and reimpose work. This requires engaging in what Lorenza Monaco calls Tronti's "Copernican revolution," which repositions the working class as determining capitalist development's trajectory, with capital strategies emerging as mere "reactive formations" to labor struggles. For Monaco, "an irreconcilable dialectical conflict is triggered by the working class not simply in setting the development trajectory, but in posing a limit to capital. In his view, capital follows, to the extent that its moves are, in their essence, nothing but political attempts to control labour" (Monaco 2015, 244–45).

What Braverman has shown us is an ongoing dialectic between capital and workers. When we organize and fight, capital responds with new technology to erode our power, restore control over work, reimpose accumulation, and lessen its reliance on our labor. To escalate, academic workers can use a workers' inquiry to carefully study these new technologies and the changes to our work to identify new tactics, strategies, and objectives so that we can organize at

vulnerable choke points to disrupt academic capital. This dialectic will continue to spiral in increasing intensity of struggle as capital and workers exchange blows until at last we are so well organized and powerful that we can rupture this dialectic, as Harry Cleaver called it, and transcend capital's domination on all life (Cleaver 2017).

By understanding these technologies as weapons deployed against organized labor—as Braverman illuminated—academic workers can develop the tactics needed to recompose our power and reach the destination of genuine educational autonomy.

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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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Theorizing Care: Braverman, Labor Process Theory, Gender, and Care Work

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Theoretical Resources

Braverman's (1998) seminal text, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, precipitated discussions around the globe that helped move generations of scholars toward a closer understanding of the pressing issues facing labor today. Equally importantly, as an activist researcher, the Braverman debates shed light on ways to successfully understand, challenge and resist the many faces of capital. Debunking the myth that class struggle was no longer relevant, Braverman drew attention back to the dynamics underlying the capitalist model of production, namely the ongoing struggle for power between workers and capital, or in the case of emerging white-collar workplaces, between management and skilled employees. In the tradition of Marxism, Braverman (1998) showed that when capital (or their agents) employs workers, it employs their capacity to produce. Under capitalism, this capacity needs to be activated through the organization of work processes and enforced through supervision. To successfully maximize profit, the employer must keep the costs of labor extraction and activation at their lowest, which involves controlling all possible costs and imposing discipline and productivity measures on the workforce.

In contrast to many studies of work at the time of the writing of *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Braverman (1998) showed that rather than being lib-

erated from exploitation, the often highly educated, technical and white-collar workers of the time were subject to the same deskilling and degradation of work as blue-collar work. This propensity towards degradation lies principally in the tendency for scientific advances in the labor process to separate conception and planning of work from its execution (Carter, 2021). This marked separation leads to a deskilling as the execution of the work becomes increasingly standardized to control costs and extract the maximum profit. Standardization requires less skill and experience and permits employers to hire lower waged and lower credentialed workers to do the same work for lower wages. The work is intensified alongside ongoing and often increasing profit-making. Through deskilling and standardization, the work is degraded with workers experiencing not greater emancipation, but increased proletarianization.

Though a pivotal advance, various gaps in Braverman's theory remained to be further theorized and debated. This included: subjective factors in the labor process, principally worker agency including misbehavior and resistance; gender; and service work. These three elements will be discussed briefly here and returned to for analysis in relation to care work. Early critiques of Braverman's work often pivoted around his focus on the objective conditions of labor

processes as wholly separate from the subjective conditions of production (Davies, 1985; Knights and Willmott, 1989; Marks and Thompson, 2010). However, the labor extraction process necessarily involves the interactions of workers, managers and other agents of capital and are inseparable from the so-called objective conditions. A considerable body of literature emerged aimed at understanding the subjective conditions of the labor process including worker agency and identity, as well as the constantly shifting individual and collective power struggles between management and workers (Burawoy, 1978; Carey, 2007; Carter and Choonara, 2022; Marks and Thompson, 2010).

This led to an extensive literature analyzing resistance and misbehavior within workplaces, and further debates about the ever-changing dynamics of power between management and workers (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022; Knights, 1990; Previtali and Fagiani, 2015). Worker resistance involves the struggle for worker autonomy and some degree of self-determination in the face of management's attempts to exert workplace control. Resistance can be formal or informal, it may be collective or individual self-organization (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022; Knights, 1990), and is frequently referred to as the autonomous organization of workers, outside of management control and approval (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022).

Marx (1867; 2019) argued that the labor process never happens in the abstract but in the social relations of specific societies. Not surprisingly, the society Braverman (1998) studied was highly gendered as reflected in gendered workers, gendered work, gendered work organization, gendered organizations, and gendered resistance (Acker, 1990; Beechey, 1987; Bruegl, 1979). Unfortunately, neither Braverman nor most of his critics or colleagues engaged with gender.

Instead, it was the early work of feminists and post-structuralists that brought gender into the labor process analysis (Beechey, 1987; Knights, 1990; Bruegel, 1979; Pollert, 1981; Williams & Lucas, 1989). These contributions highlighted subjectivity, power, identities and resistance. Post-structuralists formed a distinct strand of labor process (Knights, 1990; Knights and Willmott, 2016; O'Doherty and

Willmott, 2001), while a larger group continued to explore the structural aspects of gender and work (Armstrong and Daly, 2016; Baines, 2016; Bolton, 2009, 2000; Glucksman, 1995; Martain, 2023; O'Neill, 2015; Rubery and Hebson, 2018; Van den Broek, 2004, 2017). The balance of this commentary addresses itself to the latter.

Theorizing Care Work

Care work, as an obviously gendered and exploitative enterprise, demanded further theorization within the Braverman tradition and beyond. Labor extraction within care work hinges on naturalized assumptions that women will provide endlessly expanding care regardless of whether they are at home, work or the community, and paid or unpaid (Charlesworth and Malone, 2017; Daly and Armstrong, 2016; Kaine and Ravenswood, 2019). Indeed, care work is a highly gendered form of work with women forming most service users, workers, and volunteers, who are often expected to meet the gendered assumption that they will provide care for low or no pay, and will work under difficult conditions, including workplace violence and abuse. These inequitable assumptions makes the pay and conditions difficult to improve as the work is so closely aligned with normative expectations of female caring, however labor process theory has been an effective way to explore and expose norms, systems and structures that perpetuate exploitation within this arena of work, as well as the ways that workers and their unions resist.

Service Relationships and Power Dynamics

Within the labor process tradition, the further theorization of public and nonprofit service work was an important entrée into understanding the dynamics of care work. Cost-savings and efficiencies in public and nonprofit services play a similar role to profit making in private firms, as both provide employers a strong incentive to control costs and the labor process. Rather than a two-way power struggle between workers and employer, the service relationship involves a three-way or often four-way dynamic. In private sector service work the service triangle involves shifting power between the employer, the worker and the customer (Subramanian and Suquet,

2018). In the case of public and non-profit service work funded and regulated by the state, a four-way struggle for control involves the employer, the worker, the service user and the state (Baines, 2012; 2016). These three- and four-way power dynamics have been closely analyzed in care work, or the many forms of work required to provide care to humans across their lifetimes.

Deskilling and Degradation in Care Work

Braverman's foundational concepts of degradation and deskilling have been vital to studies of care work, permitting a fine grain analysis of ongoing changes in the care labor process, particularly under neoliberalism and permanent austerity and various forms of managerialism associated with New Public Management (Baines, 2014; Cunningham, 2008; Rubery and Urwin, 2011; Van den Broek, 2017). Managerialism and other pro-market management models tend to standardize work in order to reduce or remove inefficiencies and prevent cost overrun (Cunningham, 2008) thus contributing to the degradation and deskilling of the work.

Increased work intensity leads to a reduction in higher-level care skills as each step of the labor process is broken into the smallest possible component pieces. Speed up leads to increased worker injuries and workplace stress, which leads to higher levels of staff absenteeism and turnover (Baines and Cunningham, 2011; Kaine and Ravenswood, 2019; Martain, 2023). The tendency to deskilling and proletarianization has been observed and analyzed across a range of care workers including social work (Carey, 2008; O'Neill, 2015), aged care (Charlesworth and Malone, 2017; Daly and Armstrong, 2016; Martain, 2023), home care (Kaine and Ravenswood, 2019), and nursing (Bolton, 2009; Van den Broek, 2004, 2017), with higher pay, higher-skilled professionals being replaced by lower pay, lower-skilled workers, or even replaced by unpaid workers and volunteers.

Workplace Violence in Care Settings

This deskilling plays a role in workplace violence, a highly common feature of care workplaces, as vulnerable service users react to a changing sea of unfamiliar care givers who may inadvertently trigger challenging

behaviors and cannot be expected to know the best ways to dissipate tensions or keep themselves and other service users safer (Baines and Cunningham, 2011; Martain, 2023). Overworked care providers are frequently put in the position of rushing and controlling service users to meet tightly scripted time frames and key performance indicators. In the process, they struggle to meet complex and difficult-to-service needs and may leave some needs unmet (Banerjee et al., 2012; Martain, 2023). These dynamics repeatedly produce angry and desperate service users, who sometimes lash out at their female care providers (Brophy et al., 2019).

As with violence in the home, workplace violence is gendered with the majority-female victims being blamed or self-blaming for the violence, and required to interact again with the perpetrator(s) soon after the abuse (Baines, 2006; Banerjee et al., 2012). These effects are magnified by bureaucratic and inadequate institutional responses and an ongoing lack of effective preventive strategies (Brophy et al., 2019; Martain, 2023). Labor process analyses have shown that though the state does not directly commit these acts of violence and abuse, the state sets minimal funding levels and requires the adoption of pro-market managerial models thus setting up the highly retrenched and rationalized conditions under which the violence happens and solutions are not found (Baines and Cunningham, 2011; Baines and Van den Broek, 2017). In effect, neo-liberal states and the care organizations they (under)fund reproduce systemic injustice and violence against workers in the form of a societal tolerance for the neglect of those in need of care and of violence against the largely female workforce who are expected to continue to provide ongoing care under conditions of work intensification and abuse (Baines and Van den Broek, 2017; Banerjee et al., 2012).

Resistance and Emotional Labor

Concerned not only with oppression and exploitation, but also with worker agency, labor process theory has generated a robust literature on individual and collective resistance among care workers (Baines, 2016; Daly and Armstrong, 2015; Martain, 2023; O'Neill, 2015; Reininger et al., 2022). Some

of this theorization drew on Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor, a management strategy for speeding up the service encounter in which workers are required to use emotional content to control the service user or customer. In the gendered arena of care work, emotional labor is a form of management control as well as the main source of meaning and satisfaction for workers (Bolton, 2000, 2009). Management in care work regimes encourage employees to incorporate a vocational calling approach to their work and identities (Daly and Armstrong, 2015; Martain, 2023; O'Neill, 2015) and care workers often value the emotional content of their work.

As Bolton (2000, 2009) argues, care workers often contest management control in this part of the labor process, viewing emotional labor as an open-ended, altruistic gift that cannot be quantified and rationalized (Bolton, 2000, 2009). Baines (2016) argues further that forms of formal resistance (for example, social unionism) and informal resistance (for example, bending rules, encouraging service users to advocate for themselves, performing unpaid work in the workplace) constitute a particular form of resistance unique to care work or a 'gift-solidarity'. Gift solidarity is simultaneously a form of emotional labor as well as a way to challenge management control of the labor process. Unpaid care work in the workplace is endemic to care work, with workers providing many hours of unpaid work and in effect subsidizing the workplace with no recognition or increase in pay. However, when this unpaid work is accompanied by oppositional identities, shared or individual dissenting narratives, and may lead to collective action, it is a form of self-exploitation as well as a conscious moral choice on the part of workers, and a unique form of gendered resistance, peculiar to the social organisation of care work (Baines et al., 2024; Martain, 2023; O'Neill, 2015).

Moral Economy and Future Theoretical Developments

In terms of further directions in labor process and care work, a fruitful inter-weaving of moral economy and feminist labor process theory successfully captures the complexity of care workers' personal and

shared norms and values at play in the dynamics of work, resistance and solidarity. Bolton and Laaser (2020) argue that moral-economy forms of solidarity humanize the labor process and challenge unjust workplace regimes by encouraging social connections between and among workers and those they serve. This theorizing permits an analysis of how leaning into the work, for example by providing additional unpaid hours of work, can be a form of solidarity and oppositional practice that nurtures social connectivity, pro-social values, and dissenting identities and shared emancipatory narratives. This dynamic operates in a liminal space between self-exploitation and resistance, and generates further opportunities to challenge employers and a larger uncaring society (Baines, Brown & Cabahug, 2024). Further research and analysis are required, but early outcomes are promising.

Future Directions for Theorizing Precarious Employment and Global Care Work

The expansion of precarious employment in care work has also benefitted from the Braverman tradition and subsequent labor process theorizing. Precarious work expanded rapidly in the global north following the introduction of individualized funding programs for disabled people and older people. These government-funded programs aggressively restructured social care labor markets, promoted the expansion of precarious employment and precarious service organizations, and pitted the rights of service users to self-determination and human rights against the rights of workers, in a zero-sum game (Baines et al., 2021; Baines and Young, 2020). The insecure, low pay conditions of work resemble those of the global south where care work has long been privatized and largely outside of academic inquiry (Hammer and Ness, 2021) with much more work needing to be done on gender and resistance in these contexts (Reininger et al., 2022).

Racism, Coloniality, and Global Care Chains

Similarly, further theorizing is necessary in the areas of racism and coloniality in the care workplace and labor process. Work-based struggles around shared and individual identity and culture intensify and

expand in the context of global care chains and globalized care corporations. Care workforces in the global north are increasingly racialized, which intersects with struggles around gender, class, immigration status, and ongoing coloniality. This demands the kind of complexity that labor process theory can provide and be strengthened by. Understanding how racialized workers experience deskilling, workplace violence, and exploitation differently from their white counterparts requires careful attention to intersectionality within labor process analysis. Similarly, the colonial legacies that shape care migration patterns and create hierarchies within care workplaces need explicit theorization that connects historical patterns of exploitation to contemporary labor processes.

As the social relations of specific societies continue to confront capitalism's destructive tendencies and the privatization of social reproduction in all its forms, a labor process analysis of care and care work will be of increasing importance to struggles for equity and social justice both within and well beyond the workplace.

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