Harry Braverman and the Working Class

By Dr. Frank Elwell
Rogers State University
This presentation is based on the theories of Harry Braverman. A more complete summary of his and other macro-social theories can be found in *Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems*, by Frank W. Elwell.
In 1974 Harry Braverman published *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*, an analysis of the impact of capitalism on work in twentieth century America.
In Brief

A large part of Braverman’s argument centered on the “deskilling” of jobs in a capitalist economy in a systematic effort to more efficiently control and coordinate the labor force to maximize profit.
Marx

Braverman’s problem—a study of the objective conditions of the working class—is identical to the task Marx set for himself in the first volume of Capital.
Work, Marx (and thus Braverman) asserts, is central to the human animal. It is through work that men and women realize their humanity.
The value of all goods and services (all commodity value) is created by human labor. Capitalism is a system built around the drive to increase capital. In order to expand his capital, the capitalist invests in the purchase of labor.
Work

For the purchase and sale of labor power to become widespread in a society, three conditions need to be met:

1. Separate workers from the means of production.
2. Free the worker from serfdom or slavery, allowing them to sell their labor.
3. Establish an economic system in which individuals strive to increase their investment.
Work

With the establishment of a labor market the worker enters into employment because there are few other options to make a living. The capitalist enters into the relationship to make a profit.
The Problem of Management

The problem of management begins as soon as workers are gathered together in significant numbers, employed by a single capitalist.
The Problem of Management

“What the worker sells, and what the capitalist buys, is not an agreed amount of labor, but the labor over an agreed period of time.”
The Detailed Division of Labor

The earliest and perhaps most important principle of the capitalist mode of production, Braverman states, was the detailed division of labor.
The Detailed Division of Labor

The increase in productivity caused by the detailed division of labor, Smith surmises, is due to three independent factors:

- Increase of dexterity in performing a simple operation repeatedly;
- Saving of time that is generally lost in passing from one type of work to another;
- Invention of machines to assist in performing simple tasks.
The Detailed Division of Labor

The fact that the resulting jobs are mind numbing, devoid of variety, human initiative and thought, and any sort of skill save, perhaps, manual dexterity does not enter into the equation.
The Detailed Division of Labor

The detailed division of labor has organized the labor market according to the interests of the purchasers of labor power, not the sellers. It significantly boosts productivity, lowers wages, and greatly extends the capitalists’ control over the pace and process of labor.
The Detailed Division of Labor

Even today the process continues in areas far removed from manufacturing. Jobs are continually broken up into simple tasks. Special skills, knowledge, and control are reserved for those at the top of the hierarchy.
The Working Class

The process of turning workers into commodities is continually being extended into more areas of the economy.
The Working Class

The process leads to the polarization of American society, Braverman claims, with a few at the top of the hierarchy having tremendous power, wealth, and control and the great mass of workers at the bottom, with few skills, resources, or prospects.
## Working Class (in millions)

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1920</th>
<th>1940</th>
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<th>1970</th>
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<td>11.5</td>
<td>14.4</td>
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<td>18.1</td>
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<td>5.6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.4</td>
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<td>9.6</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serv./Sales</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Workers</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. Force</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Workers</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>69.1%</td>
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</table>
Working Class

Work in the American economy has become very polarized, with a few people having all of the technical expertise and managerial control over a largely unskilled and uneducated workforce.
## Working Class (in millions)

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<td>18.1</td>
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<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Serv./Sales</strong></td>
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<td>10.6</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>29.7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong># Workers</strong></td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>80.8</td>
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<td><strong>T. Force</strong></td>
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<td>64.6</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>100.1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>% Workers</strong></td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>69.1%</td>
<td>69.1%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
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So, for the first 70 years of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century Braverman found that the percentage of the American workforce engaged in essentially rote manual and clerical occupations, with little skill, educational requirements, autonomy, or decent compensation has been growing each decade. However, this trend has been halted and reversed in the latter third of the century.
Managerial & Professional Occupations

The bulk of the growth in U.S. jobs since Braverman is mainly attributable to the rapid growth of “Managerial and Professional Specialty” occupations.
Technical Specialists

In all, Braverman estimated that only 3% of the 1970 workforce consisted of technical specialists such as engineers, architects, draftsmen, designers, and natural scientists.
Conclusion

The workforce of hyperindustrial society is not completely congruent with that of the industrial society analyzed by Braverman.
Bibliography

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