

EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT: Democracy or Delusion?

by

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That the term ‘empowerment’ is so widely used today in ‘progressive’ management circles suggests not just manipulative intent but an awareness that even in periods of deep recession the boundaries of workplace control continue to be challenged by workers striving to attain a measure of power, security, and dignity.

- James W. Rinehart¹

Lord Bertrand Russell wrote somewhere that work is of two kinds: altering the position of matter at or near the surface of the earth, and telling others to do so. The first, he said, is unpleasant and ill paid; the second is pleasant and well paid. A more succinct statement of power relations in the workplace would be hard to find.² This essay is a reflection on one of the more interesting concepts in the contemporary management of human resources-employee empowerment. This innovation is considerably more complicated than it might at first appear, and its pedigree is rather longer, more convoluted and more controversial than some might expect.

Essentially Contested Concepts

This essay does not address the kind of question that is immediately susceptible to empirical inquiry and examination. The reason is that when we discuss concepts such as employee empowerment, we literally do not know what we are talking about or, more accurately, we do not agree about its definition. What we think about employee empowerment depends entirely on what we think employee empowerment means not only in factual terms and in particular cases, but also in sweeping historical, theoretical and essentially political terms. The idea itself is the subject of the dispute. It falls within a category that I have previously identified in this journal as an essentially contested concept.³ What matters most in any discussion of employee empowerment is what we construe the term to signify.

No less than four conflicting positions are immediately apparent. Employee empowerment may:

1. represent a cunning strategy by an insidious management to gull workers not only into acquiescing in their own oppression but also into coming up with clever new methods of intensifying that oppression;
2. exemplify a tradition of noble proletarian struggle for recognition, respect and the rightful sharing of power in the workplace;
3. be an important step in the evolution of organizational psychology which has the potential of building hugely more flexible and efficient corporate entities;
4. constitute the most recent stage in the development of humane and democratic social arrangements in which the worth of the individual is recognized not only in increased job

satisfaction but also in self-actualization and the acquisition of attitudes and skills necessary to be an exemplary citizen in a participatory society.

Plainly, among these options are fundamentally contradictory interpretations. Employee empowerment cannot *really* be all of these things.

The crux of the matter is semantics, but not “just semantics” as those who dismiss debate about language are sometimes wont to say. Language is rarely “just language.” Our words not only embody existing power relationships, but can also be infused with new meanings. Subtly redefined, familiar expressions can be used as instruments to subvert power relationships by people who perceive themselves to be inequitably treated. In the alternative, they can be used to preserve the *status quo* by people who wish to defuse dissent by co-opting their resentful subordinates. Accordingly, before being able to decide whether or not employee empowerment is “good” or “bad,” “practical” or “impractical,” “consistent” or “inconsistent” with the principles of public administration in a parliamentary democracy, it is first necessary to consider the meanings its supporters and opponents give it and what to think about what its political implications are intended to be. To do this, we must first listen attentively both to its advocates and detractors.

When looking at the history of the idea itself, we soon learn that its roots are located in two very different and contradictory domains of scholarship and of practical action. The concept of employee empowerment is embedded in two opposing ideological camps, and each one imparts to the idea its own assumptions, perceptions, judgements and reflections on the pragmatic ramifications of its advocacy and implementation.

Organizational Psychology and Political Economy

The first group can fairly be said to take a “psychological” approach. From their perspective, employee empowerment is intended to reduce the mental anguish, emotional fatigue and existential angst that workers experience when:

- they are treated with less respect than they believe they deserve;
- they are denied consideration as individuals;
- they are subjected to constant monitoring and exposed to arbitrary and capricious discipline;
- their experience is discounted;
- their opinions are dismissed;
- they have no “say” in their work routine;
- they are supervised by petty micromanagers who do not recognize their value as contributors to a common project.

Workers in such situations tend to be resentful, unmotivated and unproductive. To modify these attitudes and the resulting dysfunctional and fruitless behaviour, employee empowerment promotes shared responsibility between workers and managers, creating a working community with a positive organizational culture that fosters an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. Thus described, employee empowerment is advanced as a means to enhance the quality of the employee’s working life and simultaneously to increase collective efficiency in the workplace.

Employees who are highly esteemed will be happy in, and proud of, their work. The creation of a contented, competent and perhaps even enthusiastic organization depends on both its leadership and its subordinate staff being persuaded of the efficacy of employee empowerment in a corporate culture and possessing the will to see it through.

The opponents may sensibly be associated with “political economy.” In their account, the salient features of any human relationship are domination and control. Individual satisfactions and personal frustrations alike are deemed to be products of structural relationships. Thus, efforts to ameliorate working conditions are apt to amount to mere palliatives and soporifics which may make inherent oppression more bearable, but no less oppressive. Emphasizing the fundamental (though not always visible) and inexorable (though not always apparent) reality of “class conflict,” this approach tends to submerge subjective perceptions, moralistic concerns, and utopian aspirations beneath a “scientific” critique of existing conditions. From knowledge of “historical laws” of social change, a political program is deduced. Thus expressed, this view dismisses the “reformist” pretensions of strategies built upon liberal notions of, for example, distributive justice and human rights. Its supporters prefer to make the rallying cry not “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay” but the “abolition of the wage system” itself. “Their denunciations of ‘wage slavery’ and calls for ‘industrial democracy’ evince,” says Ramón Vera, “concern about power and authority.”⁴

Whereas the psychological outlook relies upon organizational experts eager to promote cooperation by bringing people together, the assumptions of political economy often lead to the acknowledgement of unavoidable friction and the management of conflict between groups. Thus, primary attention is given in the first case to human relations, individual personality and motivation; in the second, attention is focused on collective bargaining, labour laws the recognition of trade unions and, in its more robust form, political action bordering on the revolutionary. Both approaches, of course, are mainly intended to keep organizations working. Indeed, critics on the political left frequently argue that trade unions, the bane of early capitalists and contemporary neo-conservatives, are themselves no more than reformist impulses incarnate. Therefore, despite much prattle about unions being internally undemocratic, politically powerful and economically disruptive, the fact remains that “unions have come to accept the practice if not the principle of managerial domination and worker subordination.” So, argues James Rinehart, although unions “have improved wages and benefits, increased job security, and protected workers from arbitrary and discriminatory managerial decisions,” and “blunted the sharp edge of capitalist power, ... the essential core of capitalism remains intact.” Thus, unions are “paradoxical institutions: While they are the only effective vehicle workers have at present to advance their interests, they have also become a force for accommodating workers to corporate capitalism.”⁵

For those opposed to the mousy strategy of nibbling at the grand corporate cheese, an alternative exists in the form of a movement for workers’ control “initiated by workers for workers’ purposes. It encompasses,” as Rinehart continues, “workers’ struggles to restrain, challenge, assume, or seize traditional managerial authority. In its most advanced stage, workers’ control takes the form of a democratically planned economy and workers’ self-management at the point of production.”⁶ Inspired and inspiring, this conception seems somewhat premature in a world where the “third way” of “Blairism” is held out as the best the putative left has to offer in the

Anglo-American democracies and much of Europe as well. Meantime, prophets of the revolution are reduced to ironic shrugs and the recollection of the twelfth century Jewish sage, Moses Maimonides, who said of the Messiah: "he will come ... but he may tarry."

The Critical Tradition

Until the promised catharsis, the secular apocalypse and the building of the New Jerusalem, it is required of us to consider what useful ideas and opportunities exist or may emerge in the foreseeable future. To do so, we may turn to a capacious stream of thought that derives from working class theory and practice dating back at least to late eighteenth-century resistance to nascent industrial capitalism. It can be found in a host of competing political movements, factions and sects, not the least noble of which was the English Luddite movement that flourished around 1811. Discernable in the theory and practice of disparate groups, it is perhaps most purely represented in the traditions of anarcho-syndicalism. More recently, this interpretation of employee empowerment is cogently expressed in the struggle for "industrial democracy." In this view, employee empowerment is rooted in conflict and has as its immediate objective the acquisition of power over the labour process by the workers themselves.

Put starkly, what is at stake is the primal division between capitalism and socialism. Though many in authority may insist that the end of the cold war, the apparent triumph of market ideology, and the unrivaled military power of the United States have combined to render socialism obsolete, there is much to suggest that this is not quite so. Unresolved problems of poverty, racism, sexism, imperialism, militarism, ecological degradation and a general sense of social malaise compellingly suggest that all is not right with the world. Thus, the project of creating a coherent and systematic critique remains relevant. Though currently going through a bit of a bad patch, the ethical concerns and economic analysis conventionally associated with socialism remain pertinent. Accordingly, for the sake of what I hope will be a consistent (if inconclusive) argument, I must beg indulgence. I ask that smirks of disdain, snorts of derision, sighs of despair and a limitless sense of disbelief be temporarily suspended, and request acknowledgement that the status of the *status quo* is a trifle insecure.

In concrete terms, the generalized optimism that came along with the post-World War II boom has largely evaporated. In Canada, not only are personal incomes declining, but private debt is rising. In constant 1992 dollars, for example, the average Canadian household income had declined from approximately \$50,000 to \$41,943 by 1997; during the same period, household debt rose from about \$35,000 to \$42,038.⁷ Personal debt exceeded personal annual income at about the time that the federal government eliminated its deficit. Where did the money come from to ease national fiscal concerns? It was certainly not from the corporations. Between 1966 and 1996, the percentage of federal revenues secured through personal income taxes rose from 29% to 43%, while the share supplied by corporate taxes were reduced from 18% to 10%. Federal and provincial sales taxes, user fees and other regressive measures loaded heavily on the middle and lower classes, while exempting many prosperous companies from serious tax burdens. In 1996, for instance, Alberta Heritage Savings, Ford Motor Company, General Motors of Canada, Noranda Metallurgy, and Renaissance Energy paid no income tax despite a combined pre-tax profit of \$2,301,881,000.00.⁸

A critique that would summon up concepts of social class is, then, potentially potent. It could certainly reveal compelling data supporting such venerable Marxist homilies as the state being the instrument of the ruling class, capitalism being devoted to the exploitation of labour, and the mass media, education and ancillary instruments of ideological control being mechanisms of capitalist cultural hegemony. In short, it could fit nicely into the rhetorical description of polemics that was advanced by Alvin Gouldner a half century ago:

The conduct of a polemic focusses attention on the differences between two points of view to the neglect of their continuity and convergences. No modern polemic better exemplifies this than the controversy between the proponents of capitalism and socialism. Each tends to define itself as the antithesis of the other; even the uncommitted bystander, rare though he be, is likely to think of the two as if they were utterly alien systems.⁹

Though references to Karl Marx are considered *passé* by those who dictate what count as contemporary social problems (or “challenges” as they are now fashionably called), and despite the attention paid to such culture clashes as same-sex marriage and marijuana, especially among the more crotchety progeny of YHWH (Jews, Christians and Muslims), the “the shop floor” conflicts between owners and workers, whether in factories, offices or cyberspace, are abidingly salient.

The Conflict Perspective

These disputes appear meaningful to none more than those who claim a bond with centuries of working class heroes, who actually know the second verses of “*The Internationale*” and “Solidarity Forever,” and who have cut the Gordian knot of politics to see the world in elegantly simple terms of “them” and “us.” Such folk know by heart the sentence, “the working class and the employing class have nothing in common,” which opened the Constitution of the Industrial Workers of the World.¹⁰ Their simple slogan and plain-spoken commitment to a revolutionary workers’ movement resulted in North American corporate and political authorities advocating and perpetrating the violent repression of trade unionism in the decades of discord at the turn of the last century. While neither as theoretically sophisticated nor as politically effective as their European counterparts, the viewpoint of the IWW certainly possessed the virtue of clarity.¹¹

While their revolutionary ideals have been at least temporarily set aside, the conflict perspective which radical labour organizations embraced remains an essential element of worker militancy today. Tales of the dissolution of class consciousness, especially since the claims of the “*embourgeoisement*” of the “proletariat” no longer ring as true as they once did, now seem a little hollow. In the early 1960s, for instance, social scientists such as Daniel Bell affirmed the “end of ideology” and spoke comfortingly of an emerging postideological age in which the conflicts of the past would be resolved in the cheerful give-and-take of pluralist democracy.¹² Such confidence then seemed justified by the growth in prosperity and the gradual extension of basic civil rights throughout the western world. In developed countries, advances in the material quality of life for middle and working class people could not be gainsaid. Improved housing, food, education, transportation, communications, recreation, job security and real income were widespread. Moreover, even those who did not achieve the “middle class dream” were optimistic

that their children would. Thus, a sociologist like Seymour Martin Lipset could say with a straight face that political philosophy was obsolete since advanced democracies had produced “the good society in operation.”¹³ That optimism now presents itself as nostalgia.

Since about 1971, employee incomes have flattened in constant dollars. Two wage earners are now normally required to maintain a comfortable suburban existence, and the notion that automation would reduce individual working hours to the point where boredom would be a major social problem, is a cruel joke. North Americans now experience vulnerable living standards while being exposed to the ostentatious excesses of the “overclass.”¹⁴ Even unblemished suburbanites with SUVs, private schools, and lawns resembling miniaturized parkettes, suffer emotionally, experience family “dysfunction” and feel despondent about their private lives (they have no other): “The consensus among psychiatrists,” wrote psychologist Andrew James, “is that we are now anything up to 10 times more likely to be depressed than we were in the 1950s.”¹⁵ The result is that the confident assertion that we have reached “the end of history” and all that is now required is the maintenance of free markets seems grotesquely premature.¹⁶ The confidence of such neoconservative commentators is at risk, not only from international terrorists but also from endemic domestic failures in employment, education, health and the deteriorating environment.

The Theories of Andre Gorz

In reaction to the tenacity of economic inequities and increasing disparity of income, but in the absence of strong left-wing political parties to carry their demands into government, working people who resist cynicism, despondency or mindless diversion have experimented with novel ideas and strategies. Among the most influential intellectual leaders in this search for innovative alternatives is Andre Gorz. The evolution of his ideas on social change is representative of leftist writers seeking to understand what has optimistically been called “late capitalism” and to discover the seeds of political innovation within it.

In such early books as *Strategy for Labor*, Gorz outlined the new conditions confronting workers.¹⁷ His initial vision recognized the reformist character of modern industrial relations. The collective agreement was, in effect, a double-edged sword. It allowed workers to cut into the industrial pie and win a larger, more secure slice of its material benefits, but it also cut away any chance of social transformation. Gorz was dissatisfied with a limited political strategy that placed “workers as a class on the tail end of the ‘consumer society’ and its ideology [and did] not challenge the model of that society, but only the share of the wealth the society accords to the salaried consumer.”¹⁸ He hoped for a radical expansion of trade union activity that would deal with broader issues than wage rates and paid vacations. He sought structural changes through the socialization of investment, the internationalization of political life (he was anticipating an effective European Union), and the expansion of critical horizons to the point where labour could develop a comprehensive proposal for human emancipation. He urged mass action to confront the technology and social relations of capitalist production, and proposed an aggressive strategy of political mobilization across Europe. Heady stuff, but not necessarily the sort of project that the majority of workers were prepared to undertake, then or now.

Gorz's suggested that mere economic squabbles within advanced capitalism could never lead to revolution. They were subsumed within the industrial relations system and did not threaten the existing order. Instead, he noted that the shift from manual to mental labour and the growth of a highly educated workforce meant that alienation, not crass exploitation, was the key to social transformation. With their basic economic demands satisfied, Gorz argued, workers in the tertiary sector would incorporate employee empowerment into its socialist vision.

By the 1980s, Gorz had taken an even more comprehensive view of technology, its workplace effects and the resulting potential for political action. Technology both transformed work and rendered obsolete any notion of capturing the state apparatus by force. His most important shift, however, remained his recognition that the traditional working class was shrinking, that manual labour and factory work were being displaced by the service economy, and that most new jobs were neither unionized nor likely to be. Believing it was time to address a broader base, he bid "farewell to the working class":

Both the strength and weakness of the postindustrial proletariat lie in the fact that it does not have an overall vision of future society. There are no messianic or comprehensive theories to provide it either with cohesion or with continuity of action. The neo-proletariat is no more than a vague area made up of constantly changing individuals whose main aim is not to seize power in order to build a new world, but to regain power over their own lives by disengaging from the market rationality of productivism. It cannot be otherwise. Society cannot be reconstructed by decree, and a comprehensive vision has no meaning or purchase unless it is an extension of an already existing process.¹⁹

By 1990, Gorz had gone further. He proclaimed that work was merely a part of life and no longer the workers' dominant activity or concern. People were also consumers of goods and audiences for mass culture. They had families and private lives. They were almost ready for Marx's dream of the "development of the total universal man, man emancipated from the crippling influence of specialization." In a society "where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes ... [free] to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner," the unexploited labourer would transcend class limitations and, for the first time, be the beneficiary of a full and ample life.²⁰ Gorz went further and said that "for modern workers, socialist consciousness and the critique of capitalism do not usually have any direct connection with, or derive from, the lived experience of work."²¹ Equity issues including race and gender, social issues including health and education, and environmental issues from global warming to genetic engineering also occupy the dissident public imagination. Gorz, of course, did not ignore the fact that "the trade union movement is-and will remain-the best organized force in the broader movement." He insisted, however, that this position "confers on it a particular responsibility" to provide support and leadership for progressive groups. Without its mature and effective leadership, he warned, "minorities [will be] tempted to resort to violence."²² Still, his effort to broaden socialism's appeal when the traditional working class was declining quantitatively in absolute numbers, structurally in full-time vs. part-time jobs, and organizationally in terms of trade union membership, led critics to affirm that Gorz had joined the general apostasy of the left.²³ By conjoining "greens," feminists, "racial" and ethnic groups

and other marginalized and immiserated minorities with the traditional working class, Gorz was accused of depleting and diluting the left. The critics may have been correct. He appeared to have accepted capitalism's political parameters and to have allowed his socially transformative goals to "fizzle into piecemeal change which does nothing to challenge capitalist power."²⁴ The question seemed no longer whether or not to have capitalism, but what kind of capitalism to have.

Before the dust had any chance to settle on that debate, we collectively crossed the bridge to the twenty-first century to find yet a new vision. Most recently, Gorz announced that capitalist countries can use technology to reduce the average number of working hours from 1600 to 1000 per year with no loss in productivity; he also noted that this will not happen. Under capitalist domination, as Waterman predicted, "what is *likely* to happen is a division of the active population into 25 percent, permanent and unionized workers, 25 percent insecure and unskilled peripheral workers, and 50 percent semi-unemployed, unemployed or marginalised workers, doing occasional or seasonal work."²⁵ Instead of girding for the struggle for employment, however, Gorz takes off in another direction. It is, he says, time to abandon the entire work ethic as obsolete, to promote job sharing, and to engage in activities that are inherently fulfilling. This reclaiming of leisure time goes hand-in-hand with another new preoccupation, the natural environment. The ecological struggle, he writes, is "an indispensable dimension of the struggle against capitalism" but, a few sentences later, he admits that "socialism is not better than capitalism if it uses the same tools."²⁶ Plainly, in the words of the Buffalo Springfield's old peace anthem:

*There's something happening here
what it is ain't exactly clear.*

If an old theoretical hand like Andre Gorz can allow the hegemony of liberal ideology and the undisputed domination of global corporations to describe current material reality, he has certainly brought the left to a sorry place. Pessimism about postmodernity, a sense of futility about politics, and a scramble to cobble together disparate issues and diverse interests to construct a "coalition of the cranky" constituting a global proletariat of the mind do not augur well for social change. Meanwhile, any remaining optimism from the anti-globalization movement now surviving in internet chat rooms must outlive both the current American imperial agenda and the nasty resistance it will continue to provoke if it is to inspire a "fine old conflict."²⁷ "Let us bring to earth a new world from the ashes of the old," and all that.²⁸

Diagnostics and Therapeutics

If the left is to change the world, then it must also try to understand it. Understanding, however, seems as difficult as revolution. Increasingly esoteric language, fuzzy concepts and interminable discourse about discourse have disconnected radical academic writing from working reality; meanwhile, practical working class organizations are adrift in a confusing social and technological transformation. Meantime, it is hard enough to win reform, much less revolution. Resistance, however, is not impossible, nor is some comprehension. If there is no systemic therapy, there can at least be a tentative diagnosis, based on correctly identifying the symptoms of our malaise. First, however, we must recognize the reality of power relationships.

Limited as the industrial democracy of Fordist unionism may have been, most people are now even less able to have any meaningful voice in their own working lives. There has been a shift in the “correlation of forces” within the workplace and a recasting of historical structures in which capitalist production relations are instantiated. After decades of de-unionization, restructuring and layoffs, downsizing and outsourcing, and transnationalized production, workers ... are effectively disempowered and less able to lay claim to the fruits of their growing productivity.²⁹

Known in the bones by most employees, this condition contains all the objective elements needed for creative engagement with authority. Though revolutionary situations are not evident in industrial countries, there remains a legacy of spontaneous revolt and trade union militancy. Examples such as the Paris Commune of 1871, the Italian and German factory occupations of 1918-20, the spontaneous workers uprisings in Spain in 1936, the Hungarian insurrection in 1956, the rise of the “*soixante-huitards*” in France, and the “solidarity” movement in Poland in 1981 are all dramatic instances of quantitative anger becoming qualitative action. That such rebellions were normally crushed by the state does not deny the authenticity of the complaints, the enthusiasm of the complainants, nor the likelihood that such insurgencies betoken future episodes of uncertain strength and duration. Recent demonstrations against globalization may have been only temporarily side-tracked by 9/11 and the repressive responses to it.

While awaiting the propitious moment, however, activists are content to concentrate their energies on workplace struggles over local control of the labour process. Inspired by such analyses as Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital*,³⁰ and sensitized to the making of the modern working class by scholars such as Edward Thompson,³¹ a generation of feisty social historians, trade unionists and nascent social movements have maintained a yeasty rebelliousness both in and out of the workplace.

This insubordination has arisen in surprising circumstances, particularly in the development of surprisingly militant public service unions including blue-collar workers, white-collar workers and highly skilled professionals.³² This new dimension to the proletariat has resulted in an increasing awareness of the linkage between “bread and butter” economic issues and questions of power in the workplace:

With the United States reporting the highest levels of inequality in the advanced industrial world and the majority of U.S. workers experiencing declining real wages for 20 years, we might be tempted to think the problems of democracy in the workplace should be put on the back burner for more settled times. Maybe the labor movement should focus only on this growing economic inequality since one of its roles is to achieve decent wages and working conditions for unionists. Yet these goals are linked. Without greater levels of democracy in the workplace, and the nurturing of power that goes with it, further organization will be difficult to achieve and inequality is unlikely to decline.³³

Far from following Gorz out of the workplace, thought must be given to struggles in the workplace. The old Leninist question (appropriated from Tolstoy, who purloined it from Chernyshevsky): “What is to be done?” must continue to be asked. The left has some serious thinking to do. It has “twin objectives that are not easily reconciled: on the one hand, the need to critique capitalism, and on the other, to remain optimistic about its eventual transformation.”³⁴ Now pessimism prevails. What to do? What to do?

Other Voices, Other Options

The range of options is impressive. At one end of the scale lies Paragraph 97 of chapter 8 of the Australian Labor Party’s platform for the year 2000. It included:

- the right of workers to meaningful participation workplace decision making about industrial matters;
- the right of workers to be consulted before decisions that will significantly affect their employment are implemented;
- encouragement of employee share ownership programs;
- assistance for the development of cooperatives.

Of course, the party was careful not to promise to implement these policies if elected; it did, however, commit to a “fair industrial relations system policy” to assist labor in collective bargaining. This, laments Glenn Patmore, lecturer in law at the University of Melbourne, “can be described as a move back to the adversarial form of industrial relations” at a time when there is a need and an opportunity for “more democratic, more productive and more secure workplaces in the 21st century.”³⁵ It can, in the alternative, be applauded as a recognition that the barricades of class conflict cannot be dissolved by a “new age” leap of faith.

At the other pole were much-heralded experiments in worker control that promised change in the “former Yugoslavia.” Under Tito, Yugoslavia boasted remarkable forms of industrial organization. Workers’ collectives proved the benefits of self-management.³⁶ Unfortunately, after Tito’s death, the mendacious effects of nationalism and religion overcame the benign forms of socialist work organization. Like the Messiah, it was understood that “socialist man” may come, but “may tarry.”

In between, there are practical questions aplenty to answer. Standing large among them is whether or not to participate in participative management, to risk being empowered employees only to find that the rules are stacked and that just entering the field can mean losing the game.

Labour Process Analysis

To help out, it is useful to consider Harry Braverman’s seminal treatise that popularized labour process analysis. Concerned less with grand schemes of social transformation and tied to the concrete analysis of the world of work, Braverman sets up mid-way between the economic concerns of business-as-usual unionism and the political aspirations of mature worker self-management. Braverman’s main thesis was that twentieth-century technological innovations increased profits for investors by systematically deskilling, controlling, or eliminating human

labour.³⁷ Standardizing performance criteria, centralizing control, contracting out specific tasks, electronically monitoring work, and transferring “required knowledge and decision-making abilities ... to the computer” permit many work functions to be “reduced to simple information retrieval and translation.”³⁸ Anticipating Taylorism (or “scientific management”) for the information age, Braverman’s followers have described the increasingly apparent impacts of these changes on clerical work, banking and teaching, with law and medicine quickly catching up. The importance of his work is rooted in the amount of attention that he pays to power relationships within office and industry.

Such analyses can radically revise the conceptualization of social class. By concentrating on political domination rather than economic exploitation, Erik Olin Wright, for example, has attempted “to make theoretical sense out of the growing ‘middle class’ of nonmanual labor in contemporary capitalist societies.”³⁹ He distinguished between “postindustrial theory” which “sees work as becoming more humanized, more autonomous, less routinized” and neo-Marxist theory which sees work becoming more routinized and degraded, with less autonomy and responsibility for the worker.⁴⁰ With Joachim Singelmann, he predicted that a clear “process of aggregate proletarianization should appear in the next decades.”⁴¹

From the labour process perspective, the central issues are “class control and power, not seemingly abstract principles of organizational efficiency, neutral technological imperatives, or inevitable modernizing dynamics such as differentiation and specialization.”⁴² This applies to a wide range of workers in both the private and the public sectors. According to Shiela Cohen, “the voluminous body of work” that followed Braverman has “in common the assumption that ‘control’ constitutes the principal dynamic at work in the capitalist labour process.”⁴³

This assertion presents difficulties. First, in times of static wage rates and increasing costs of living, real workers’ struggles are “not about ‘bossing’ but about the relationship between effort and reward, labour intensification and work measurement. Such struggles ... constitute ... the principal way in which workers actually do resist capital.”⁴⁴ Given, then, the “economistic” nature of much real-life conflict, Cohen sensibly asks “where does this leave such struggles on the balance-sheet of political possibilities?” The answer challenges “the long-standing division between the ‘economic’ and the ‘political’ ...” Much as feminists successfully argued that “the personal is political,” so a case can be made that “office politics” is not about who gets promoted, but about understanding that *all* “the interactions of the labour process and job design take place within a larger *political* framework.”⁴⁵ Educating and persuading employees of the importance of these considerations is tough. It is no more persuasive to do so than to await the next spin of the business cycle in the hope that the return of “good times” will encourage workers to move beyond their minimal economic needs and fight for a panoply of progressive social measures, and perhaps even donate to the United Way.

Second, thought about politics is itself problematic. Modern leftist thinking has been hampered by the fact that Marx and Engels “notoriously left no clear guidelines for a distinct political theory.” So, despite much neo-Marxian writing on the role of the state, and despite the fact that Marx and Engels plainly “considered their politics a crucial component of their doctrine,” the best that can be said is that leftists generally “assume that in the long run, democracy-even

formal democracy-and capitalism would prove to be incompatible: sooner or later one or the other would have to go.”⁴⁶

Third is the extraordinary mess called Marxian class theory. Marx and Engels bequeathed no unambiguous definition of social class and no clear method to deal with this flaw in Marxist analysis. The flaw derives from the insistence that relations between classes and the means of production defined dichotomously (owners *or* workers), the expectation that intermediate classes (small vendors, independent artisans and professionals) will disappear, and the assumption that no forms of collective capital (mutual funds, pension funds) would emerge. The aggrandizement of owners and the impoverishment of the proletariat have not quite worked out in the way that was predicted; instead, constant revisions of class analysis have degenerated into “bourgeois” stratification analysis wherein summations of income tax receipts have been substituted for structural relations of production to the extent that Marxist thought is said to suffer from “theoretical schizophrenia” while allowing its empirical analyses to be compromised to the point where “the Marxist class concept” and the “bourgeois concepts of social stratification” have become virtually indistinguishable.”⁴⁷

With Gorz broadening the definition of socialism so that social class is reduced to one among many elements to be considered in the overall quest for human emancipation, and with Braverman’s focus on the workplace leaving connections to broader social alliances unclear, all that seems to remain is the central presupposition of “immanentism.” The Marxist assumption that class interests, and in particular the ‘objective’ interest of the working class in ‘socialism,’ are always *immanent* in social class formations and are thus in no way dependent on ‘utopian’ pictures of what socialism might actually look like may be adequate to keep the faith of the faithful. It does not, however, engage the sceptic who naggingly asks why the overwhelming majority of the working classes fail to grasp the standard of reform, much less of revolution. Proletarian indifference and sometimes overt hostility to leftist politics has remained a defining problem for the left. Yet, this allegedly objective affirmation is about all that is left of Marx’s original propositions concerning the scientific reality of social class. As a result, the left lacks the conceptual tools to frame the discussion of conflict in such a way as to understand its origin and contemporary nature clearly and to point to practical strategies that do more than dither about what kind of capitalism we are to have. Even the more innovative and exciting leftist theorists remain perceptibly out of touch with the workers they purport to lead.⁴⁸

The reality of the left, then, is that it must wait. Filling in time won’t be hard. The cruel and callous corporations and governments that carry on hideous and obscene policies of war, poverty, corruption and ecological madness give us plenty to occupy our time ... writing, protesting and satirizing. The moral sinkhole of political life invites all manner of quixotic responses. Meanwhile, the truth of a brief expression of one-time leftist Christopher Hitchens may yet outlive him:

Socialism was an idea before Marx. Democracy was an idea before Marx. Social revolution was an idea before Marx. What he argued was that you can’t have any of the above until you are ready for them, and that you can’t have one without the others.⁴⁹

For some, this insight is enough. As some Christians say, “the truth shall make you free.”

The Consensus Tradition

Those seeking visible, pragmatic, short-term innovations do well to abandon Marx. The alternative to critical and conflictual approaches, and the approach that currently dominates the discussion and exercise of employee empowerment schemes, emanates from twentieth-century industrial psychology, and from the research and innovations made in actual workplace organizations. It can be found in a host of complementary strategies adopted by corporations that have gradually learned that carrots are not only more useful than sticks in improving productivity but that there is a wide variety of carrots from which managers can choose. They may select from sundry psychological inducements as well as diverse financial rewards. Employee empowerment is one of those that is rooted in the spirit of classless cooperation and has as its immediate objective the maximization of employee involvement in, and commitment to, the labour process, which is to say to the support for overall management goals.

The most general observation that can be made is that under this model, the primary purpose of employee empowerment is to encourage the adjustment of the employee to the norms of the organization and conformity to its performance expectations. Empowerment, in essence, involves the internalization of the corporate culture. Phrases such as "buying in" to corporate values and "owning" a piece of the corporate plan (i.e., taking personal responsibility for personal achievement) are telling. Whereas, with a good union contract, a long-serving worker could have a measure of job security, the contemporary corporate preference is for workers to take responsibility for their own employability. This means more than meeting performance objectives. It entails ritual displays of enthusiasm, exhibitions of commitment and regular demonstrations of dedication by acquiring new skills, volunteering for new "challenges," and displaying a willingness to do more than is required or expected. Exemplary employees are inveterate overachievers; they have to be because doing "more than is required or expected" is precisely what is required and expected!

Managerial Innovations

The origins of the corporate human relations model can conveniently be traced back to "a dingy factory near Chicago. There, in the late 1920s, electrical equipment was produced for the Bell telephone system. This was the location of the far-famed Hawthorne experiments. One of the interesting details "discovered" by the researchers was a phenomenon well known to anyone who has actually "worked for a living." Workers have always had clever ways to control and restrict productivity. "A fair day's rate" was established informally and policed by the group; 'rate busters' were subject to ostracism, sabotage, and physical reprisals. There was also a political system of falsifying records ... These techniques were used to retaliate against supervisors and inspectors who played favorites, to cover up for certain workers, and to discipline others."⁵⁰ From the perspective of the workers, the entire history of organizational psychology can be read as a sustained attempt to undermine this culture of solidarity, and to replace it with a system of individualism based on a artful balance of positive reinforcement and fear. From the perspective of management, the motivations of the motivators are more complicated and may vary from those who cynically employ their "people skills" to maximize productivity to those whose concern for the personal development of the individual employee is

both genuine, ideologically consistent with the premises of liberal individualism and consonant with the achievement of corporate productivity goals.

Among the other discoveries of industrial psychologists and other observers of work over the decades was the mental fatigue and low self-esteem experienced by people whose working lives were controlled in exquisite detail by others. Historically, those who own and control the means of production might have given little thought to such issues and, when compelled to consider them, would have thought such mental states among their workers to be perfectly appropriate. Anything else might be evidence of workers who did not “know their place,” who were “uppity,” and whose latent discontentment might betoken potential insubordination. In the twentieth century, however, such worries came to be weighed against the growing recognition that silent obedience, blended with sullen resentment, was counter-productive. As work shifted from manual to mental, and more was required of an employee than merely “altering the position of matter at or near the surface of the earth,” managers came to understand that “the more a person is on the receiving end of orders ... the more a person’s got to think that he or she is really somewhere else in order to keep up self-respect.”⁵¹ Such “day-dreaming” may be a necessary auto-therapy for people on assembly lines, in psychiatric institutions, foxholes or prisons, but a quick-witted employer will soon realize that it is not apt to be helpful when work is complex, discontinuous and intellectually intense, when employees must react creatively to novel situations, and when direct engagement with clients or customers is part of the job.

Over the decades, any number of organizational strategies have been applied to work situations in order to maximize productivity among workers whose tasks have increasingly shifted from the exercise of his muscles to the exercise of her mind. With eager support from both academic research institutions and private consulting firms, managers have been treated to a lengthy and evolving series of strategic plans for increasing worker productivity. Some of these traded on the so-called Japanese model that, in fact, was a blend of Japanese cultural practices and already existing corporate innovations from North America. Thus, expectations of lifetime employment and membership in company fitness centres (with the IBM country club standing as among the finest examples) gave employees the sense of belonging and personal worth that was deemed necessary to foster loyalty, dynamism and success.

It was commonly recognized, especially in large corporations-both private and public-that employee frustration and disappointment have measurable production costs in terms of personality disorders, substance abuse, psychosomatic illnesses, absenteeism, malingering, defiance and what may generally be labelled poor “mental health.” Early on, the cure for these pathologies was thought to include “job enrichment,” usually tied to attempts to build “team spirit,” “esprit de corps” and a “we-feeling” that “puts people in a positive frame of mind, thereby activating people toward performance, action and achievement.”⁵² Drawing upon decades of scholarly speculation and theorizing that varied from the warm and fuzzy “self-actualization” concepts of Maslow to the cold and callous KITA (“kick in the ass”) principle of Frederick Herzberg, all manner of methods were floated, tested and subsequently subsumed by new fashions in organizational development.⁵³ Indeed, “organizational development” (OD) was a popular approach that stressed team building through tactics that focused on employee values and “feelings.” For a time, OD competed with “management by objectives” (MBO), an

alternative that emphasized quantitative measures of achievement and gave primary attention to the responsibilities of top management.

Although trends swung from the soft-hearted to the hard-headed and back again, a general drift could be discerned in which rigid hierarchies, unquestioned authority and disdain for, or a lack of interest in, the internal psychological states of workers were gradually discarded. Horizontal decision making, increased participation and the delegation of responsibility further and further down the administrative food chain gained support both on ethical and practical grounds. To treat people better was not only good; it was good for business.

Empowerment in Practice

Normally associated with Total Quality Management (TQM) or Quality of Working Life (QWL) innovators, employee empowerment has been an important part of the creative manager's tool-kit for about two decades. Organizational entrepreneur Johan Olsson puts the process succinctly on his website. In his view, employee empowerment involves simple but important changes in managerial attitudes.

"Ask and listen," he says. "Instead of providing your thoughts, ask the employee four business altering words: 'What would you do?' When you do ask this question, the employee has the opportunity to openly express ideas, dreams and passions. You may already have an answer, but if the answer comes from the employee you now have:

- delegated this opportunity to someone passionate about the issue;
- a champion within the business to lead the implementation and change;
- an employee who is making a difference to the business."⁵⁴

For Olsson, the result is "a win-win-win situation. ... You win by delegating, the business wins by improving processes and, most importantly, the employee feels like the primary winner because they have the opportunity to implement their own ideas to an issue and bring about resolution."⁵⁵ Plainly, a Christmas goose and a dusty Suggestion Box nailed near the foreman's door were no longer adequate. The time of change champions and exemplary followers had arrived. Amid all of this enthusiasm, however, it is important to recognize two enduring themes: in this approach: (1) empowerment is not about power; (2) empowerment is about productivity.

First, the sharing of responsibility for decision making within a less hierarchical structure than was traditionally to be found in organized work situations is largely a matter of perception (or "optics"). While it is true that employees are now frequently consulted, that their suggestions may be taken seriously, and that their contributions might be implemented in policy and practice, the choice of whether or not to follow employees' recommendations remains an exclusive management right. Consultation and participation are not the same as ownership and control. When, therefore, rhetoricians of reform speak of employees "owning" some part of the productive process or even their own jobs, the word is being used metaphorically. It implies responsibility or even stewardship, but it does not imply final authority.

Second, the criteria according to which newly empowered employees will have their recommendations adopted all come down to the ubiquitous "bottom line." Improvements in

working conditions, for example, will be embraced if they can be shown to increase profits for a private sector company or increase efficiency in the public service. This does not mean, of course, that mutually beneficial innovations cannot or do not exist. It only suggests that the overriding purpose of empowering employees is to encourage them to become self-starters, self-managers and self-disciplinarians in the ultimate interest of management. If, in the process, workers become happier and healthier, that is well and good but it is not the principal purpose of the exercise.

Empowerment as Therapy

For as long as there have been freemen and slaves, patricians and plebians, lords and serfs, guildmasters and journeymen, Sam Walton and Wal-mart greeters, owners of the means of production have had a sneaking suspicion that workers needed encouragement to put in an appropriate amount of effort. There was a time when sluggishness could be met with whips (if a slave was dawdling), or instant dismissal (if the loafer was a free labourer-i.e. a “wage slave”). Ordinary workers, as contrasted with their “betters” were plainly made of inferior stuff. Defective by nature, they needed to be driven to do their duty. So went the story from the days of Socrates to Simon Legree; but that was then, and this is now.

A couple of centuries of social reform have passed since Marie Antoinette gave her culinary advice to the poor people of Paris. During that time, workers have been redefined. No longer are they deemed inferior by nature or divine will; the best of them are merely culturally deprived, while the rest bear psychological pathologies that are in need of therapy. Good potential, but poor prospects so the story goes. To take advantage of their possibilities in support of their own individual happiness, the well being of the employers and the good of society at large, we need only explore the reasons for poor performance, improve communications and provide the organizational remediation needed to transform the lay-about into an earnest employee in pursuit of excellence.

The particular practice of employee empowerment flows from the general principle of participative management. Its aim is to achieve a positive link between employee participation and job satisfaction, motivation and performance, personal commitment and corporate achievement.⁵⁶ Typically, employee empowerment involves teams consisting of small groups of employees. They take responsibility for (“ownership of”) some aspect of the work process and endeavour to solve problems or improve performance in some specific way. They may undertake to co-manage a process or program or they may address a broader set of issues related, for example, to technological innovation in customer service. When they enjoy both employee and management support, they regularly achieve their goals, either by improving performance or by successfully introducing a quality-enhancing innovation. It is reported, as well, that in addition to solving problems effectively, they have helped improve employee morale and job satisfaction.⁵⁷

In fact, apart from cases of initial resistance arising from distrust of change, worry concerning new demands and fear of potential staff reduction, it is commonly found that the major resistance to employee empowerment comes neither from senior management nor from the employees themselves but from middle-level supervisors who perceive their positions of authority

threatened. Just as commonly, the answer to their insecurity is presented in the form of more intensive performance measurement of both the supervisor and the team.⁵⁸ No pain, no gain.

Additional obstacles arise from middle managers, who argue that employees have inherent shortcomings. They are unable to see the “big picture.” Their limited perspective and expertise are likely to contribute to disastrously short-sighted and probably narrowly self-interested choices. Such concerns have not dissuaded the change warriors, however, for many have fully accepted the ideas of delegation, decentralization and employee responsibility as effective weapons in the fight to keep organizations vibrant, responsive and up-to-date. Empowered personnel, writes Peter Turney, have “responsibility, a sense of ownership, satisfaction in accomplishments, power over what and how things are done, recognition for their ideas, and the knowledge that they are important to the organization”⁵⁹ Robert Johnson goes further. Productive employees, he says, are essential to a productive organization. Empowerment, he continues, enhances productivity. He then adds that empowerment should lead to a sense of belonging in which employees need their organization as much as their organization needs them. Nothing less than psychosocial dependence is implied for he insists that, at best, “the need is much more than a paycheck and benefit package.”⁶⁰ Put bluntly, Johnson is asserting that as long as the employer-employee relationship remains strictly economic (the dreaded “cash nexus” of which Marx so bitterly complained), the employee will contribute what is required and nothing more. If, however, the employee “buys in” to the notion of being “an integral part of the organization,” then the organization will be able “to fully utilize the capabilities of [its] employees.”⁶¹ This could easily be construed as an invitation that could generate unlimited and unpaid overtime as well, perhaps, as the suppression of the worker’s individuality by the imposition of a corporate superego that would be present “24/7.”

Of course, if the well being of the individual was truly at issue, more care and attention would be given to empowering the unskilled labourer. As Langer and Michael showed four decades ago, similar levels of work-related stress produce externalized psychotic behaviour in blue-collar workers and internalized neurotic behaviour in white-collar workers.⁶² As Archibald interprets this finding, “the structure of our society produces insanity by unequally distributing, not just stress, but the ‘inner resources’ for coping with it.”⁶³ The true believers in employee empowerment, it is true, proselytize on behalf of their dream and insist that it be extended to the most menial job categories. Some, in fact, go so far as to say that empowerment must proceed from the bottom up. Many managers, however, are sceptical and tend to believe (probably inaccurately) that little is to be gained by bringing unskilled workers into the decision-making loop. Accordingly, comparatively fewer empowerment experiments take place on the factory floor.⁶⁴

Notwithstanding the growing malaise among dual income middle class families who are compelled not only to do more with less but to do more for less, it is the blue-collar worker who experiences alienation in the workplace more severely: “That blue-collar workers are more likely to feel personally powerless over their lives in general is a well-established fact.”⁶⁵ Indeed, Archibald adds that “the learned helplessness of the ‘depressive’ or ‘schizophrenic’ is not unlike the situation of the adult worker.”⁶⁶ Thus, individual mental health can be seen largely as a product of social circumstance, with differences among individuals resulting from differences only in personal capacities to deal with common problems. At base, however, mental illness is a

symptom of the structure of work, not of the inherent instability of the worker. Management's diagnosis of frustration and the preferred treatment of employee empowerment reflect the fact that management seeks to provide a regimen for adaptation to a pathological system rather than a cure for an individual pathology. Moreover, its concern with effective adaptation arises mainly at the level of the skilled employee and above rather than at the level of the labourer who can, in the event of a psychotic episode, easily be replaced.

A genuinely emancipatory program would, in the alternative, set its sights on the nature of work in late capitalism, and would understand the fundamental restructuring of the contemporary political economy as a necessary precondition to a healthy human community. That, of course, is simply not about to happen. Therefore, we must understand that employee empowerment is a palliative intended to maximize productivity through co-optation, collusion and collaboration in a labour process than remains-for all its "feel good" veneer-structurally similar to the sweat shop systems that preceded it.

In practical terms, of course, contemporary work is cleaner, safer and more superficially tolerable in a well-lit, air-conditioned office than it was in a grimy factory. We have exchanged "dark, Satanic mills" for bright, Mephistophelean workstations. At the same time, we continue to sell our labour power in the same manner that Marx described as alienation.⁶⁷ That we allow our labour time to be purchased as a commodity is no less accurate a description of our working relationships merely because we have largely put down our picks and shovels and gained keyboarding skills instead. The matter remains fundamentally political. Moreover, if we are genuinely tempted to relate to the employer as an organic community in which we are privileged to be contributing cells, then something of rare ideological significance is taking place.

Whether or not this amounts to an example of the imposition of hegemonic discourse in a postmodern labour market is something I will leave to those adept in the arts of critical theory, semiotics, hermeneutics and the interpretation of the texts of Althusser, Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and whichever *intellectuel engagé*, has most recently been translated from French into English. In the meantime, it is possible to start sorting out what's what by referring to recent events.

Clearing the Way for Empowerment

A concrete case can be found in the legislative and administrative struggle over rules regarding employee empowerment in the United States. At issue was the question of whether or not employee empowerment programs that allowed workers to participate in company committees, teams or other internal bodies charged with responsibilities for developing and implementing policies and practices were legal. The first step concerned Senate Bill S295, the *Teamwork for Employees and Management Act of 1996*.

The American Civil Liberties Union spoke out strongly against the proposal:

This bill would amend the National Labor Relations Act to allow an employer to establish, for example, a joint employer-employee organization that could deal with any condition of employment and then name carefully selected employee 'representatives' to

that organization, provided only that the organization does not expressly claim to be the employee representative for collective bargaining purposes. Despite this prohibition on claiming to be the union, company-selected employees would be allowed under the bill to address, on behalf of other employees who had no role in selecting them, 'any matters of mutual interest'-including those matters that are subject to collective bargaining.⁶⁸

Despite opposition, the bill passed both houses of Congress. Nonetheless, President William J. Clinton vetoed the legislation saying: "This legislation, rather than promoting genuine teamwork, would undermine the system of collective bargaining that has served this country so well, for so many decades ... rather than encouraging true workplace cooperation, this bill would abolish protections that ensure democratic representation in the workplace."⁶⁹

The concern was that the employee empowerment innovations were or would soon become the functional equivalent of "company unions." Workers could be selected by management, appointed to committees and, by their participation, give tacit worker approval to initiatives that could call for production speed-ups, lay-offs, outsourcing and other measures that could undermine the workers. Though dressed in attractive language, the "sinister purpose" of the innovation was clear.

President Clinton's veto, however, did not end the issue. Early in the administration of President George W. Bush, a new tactic was used. Instead of introducing legislation to make the National Labor Relations Act more "flexible," an appeal was made to a more compliant National Labor Relations Board. On July 25, 2001, "The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ... decided that the seven employee committees used by Crown Cork & Seal Co., at its Sugar Land, Texas aluminum-can manufacturing plant, do not violate the National Labor Relation Act's ban on company-sponsored unions ... [I]f employee teams are truly empowered to implement their decisions about productivity, quality, performance improvement, safety and work place organization, they are legal in the United States."⁷⁰

By allowing the decision to turn on whether the empowered employees had the authority to implement their decisions and not on the process whereby such employees were chosen, the NLRB effectively empowered the companies to circumvent the collective bargaining process. The business-friendly *Wall Street Journal* reported approvingly that "[i]ndustry executives hailed the ruling, and predicted it would open the door to more companies using employees in major workplace decisions."⁷¹ No doubt it will.

Conclusion

So what are we to conclude? First, the material conditions of the general population in advanced societies are stagnant if not falling. Second, the gap between rich and poor is growing. "In 1973," for instance, "the richest 10 per cent of families with children under eighteen made twenty-one times more than the poorest 10 per cent of Canadian families. By 1996, the richest 10 per cent of families made 314 times more than the poorest 10 per cent of Canadian families. In 1973, 60 percent of families with children could be called "middle class," earning between \$24,500 and \$65,000 (in 1996 dollars). By 1996, that middle class had shrunk-only 44% of families now fitted into that category."⁷² The deep immiseration of the proletariat and the sharp contrast with

the wealth of the bourgeoisie may not have reached revolutionary levels, but things are not well. Unfortunately, the Marxian tradition, which is the most likely to provide a coherent analysis from a conflict perspective has not been overly successful in understanding, much less changing the world.

At the same time, the psychology of human relations, through many incarnations and currently through its mechanism of employee empowerment does not offer a solution to structural problems either. This does not mean that it will not gain wide acceptance and be touted as a way to achieve organizational excellence. No doubt superficial successes will continue. It is, however, a delusion to imagine that it has the capacity to transform the workplace in any way that will dramatically reduce structural alienation. It is not democracy; at most, it is a step back toward representative assemblies without responsible government.

Any sensible guide to the future must recognize the limitations of Marxian theory and bourgeois practice. Over twenty-five years ago, the independent left-wing magazine, *Canadian Dimension*, devoted an entire issue to what was then called “industrial democracy.” Its various commentaries were prescient. It quoted a Bank Canadien National’s lament that “dissatisfaction among Canada’s two million workers under thirty, absenteeism, wildcat strikes, refusal to work overtime and even sabotage are prevalent.”⁷³ It also quoted Gil Levine, research director of the Canadian Union of public employees, as stating: “I see the fight for real industrial democracy in industry as a process and a tactical goal, not only for transforming the worker-employer relationship, but as a means of transforming society itself.”⁷⁴ The lines in the debate are still clearly drawn.

This, of course, is the place where it would be appropriate to admit that “the jury is out” and that “only time will” tell which side triumphs, or whether some compromise will emerge, or whether a whole new set of prophecies will reconfigure what Max Weber even more presciently called the “iron cage” that would hold humanity captive in our time. I will be a little bolder.

Technological change and social class formations set the circumstances in which social and political struggles are fought. Insight into the nature and effects of those changes in the future are essential to understanding how our society, its work and its politics will evolve. In grappling with these questions, we are led astray by those who hold that the collapse of the USSR rendered Marx obsolete. As Marshall Berman points out, “What happened to Marx after 1917 was a disaster.”⁷⁵ The betrayal of his values, the misinterpretation of his ideas, and the misunderstanding of his most fundamental lessons in practical analysis combined to produce a negation of his philosophy and science as profound as any alternative held up by the capitalist societies. Marx’s praise for capitalism, we must remember, was “so extravagant, it skirts the edge of awe.”⁷⁶ Marx understood that capitalism “has brought immense real benefits, spiritual as well as material, and he wants the benefits spread around and enjoyed by everybody rather than monopolized by a small ruling class.”⁷⁷ The alteration in the composition of social classes in modern society has within it the possibility of creating what Marx hoped the modern working class would become, “an immense worldwide community” that is now just waiting to come,” though it might tarry.⁷⁸

For now, we wait and observe contemporary organizations as they desperately try to still the terminology of class and confrontation. We see them encouraging employees and managers alike to “buy in” to a common commitment to corporate goals. As we do, we would do well to recall that Benito Mussolini said somewhere that he regretted calling his political movement, party and government “fascist.” Because it created such a powerful combination of government and private sector powers into a single overweening authority, he would have preferred to have called it “corporatism.” As for the near future, I take solace in some words uttered by the classical pianist Alfred Brendel: “I am not just a skeptic, but a pessimist,” he said. “I therefore expect things to get worse. ... But at the same time, I like being a pessimist, because I like to be pleasantly surprised.”⁷⁹

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Endnotes

¹ Rinehart, J. 1996. *The Tyranny of Work: Alienation and the Labour Process*, 3rd ed. Toronto: Harcourt, Brace, v.

² Though I do not have the reference at hand, Russell frequently commented on the nature of work. See, for example, Russell, B. 1968. *The Conquest of Happiness*. New York: Bantam, ch. 14.

³ See, for example, Doughty, H. 1997. “Toward a Definition of Political Health and Pathology”. *The Innovation Journal*. 2(2).

⁴ Vela, R. 2001. “Industrial Democracy in America: A Liberal Tradition.” A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association. Las Vegas (March 15-17).

⁵ Rinehart, *op. cit.*, 183. It is noteworthy that Marx’s devotion to revolution accommodated a measure of “labourism.” He thought, for example, that winning a ten-hour day for factory workers “was a great victory marking a transition from ‘the blind rule’ of the supply and demands laws to the ‘political economy of the working class.’ ” Podmore, C. 1994. “Communication as Method and Radical Practice,” in Anselmi, W. and Gouliamos, K., eds. *Mediating Culture: The Politics of Representation*. Toronto: Guernica Editions, 195.

⁶ Rinehart, *op. cit.*, 185.

⁷ Naiman, J. 2000. *How Societies Work: Class, Power and Change in a Canadian Context*, 2nd ed. Toronto: Irwin: 121. For a useful statistical account of the growing disparity between rich and poor, see Jackson, A., et al. 2000. *Falling Behind: The State of Working Canada, 2000*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. For a brief but pointed critique of conditions in the US, see Gordon, D. 1996. “Underpaid Workers, Bloated Corporations”. *Dissent* (Spring). More recently, especially in the wake of diverse corporate scandals, even capitalist apologists such as CNN have broadcast a number of hand-wringing pundits who openly worry about excessive salaries and other benefits bestowed upon corrupt and incompetent CEOs.

⁸ Naiman, J. *Op.cit.*, 197.

⁹ Gouldner, A. 1955. “Metaphysical Pathos and the Theory of Bureaucracy”. *American Political Science Review*. 49(2), 496.

¹⁰ Cited more fully, it reads: “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the means of production,

abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the Earth. ... Instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work', we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wage system!'"

¹¹ Interest in labour history has grown enormously in recent decades. Among hundreds of relevant Canadian examples are such studies as: Robin, M. 1973. *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour 1880-1930*. Kingston: Queen's University; Avery, D. 1977. *'Dangerous Foreigners': Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart; Peterson, L. 1981. "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism," *Labour: Journal of Canadian Labour Studies*. 7; and Manley, J. 1986. "Communists and Auto Workers: The Struggle for Industrial Unionism in the Canadian Automobile Industry. *Labour: Journal of Canadian Labour Studies*, 17.

¹² Bell, D. 1960. *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*. New York: Free Press.

¹³ Lipset, S. M. 1960. *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*. Garden City: Doubleday, 403.

¹⁴ Lind, M. 1995. *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution*. New York: Free Press. A succinct review and evaluation of Lind's concept can be found in Rorty, R. 1996. "Sins of the Overclass". *Dissent*. Spring, 109-112.

¹⁵ Quoted in Alderson, A., and Woodhead, M. 1998. "We're richer but sadder, new study says". *Toronto Star*, 18 October and reprinted in Naiman, *op. cit.*, 131. For an excellent account of the relationship between mental distress and the pharmaceutical industry, see Healy, D. 2003. *Let Them Eat Prozac*. (Halifax: Lorimer).

¹⁶ Among many paeans to relentless peace and prosperity are Fukuyama's famous book: Fukuyama, F. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press and the recent articles of Charles Krauthammer in *The New Republic*. Unlimited free markets and limited freely chosen governments are still identified as the means to global happiness and American hegemony which are, of course, considered mutually reinforcing if not altogether synonymous.

¹⁷ Gorz, A. 1968. *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Approach*. Boston: Beacon.

¹⁸ Gorz, A. *op. cit.*, 26

¹⁹ Gorz, A. 1982. *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Postindustrial Socialism*. London: Pluto Press, 75.

²⁰ Fromm, E. 1961. *Marx's Concept of Man*. New York: Ungar, 42.

²¹ Gorz, A. 1990. "The New Agenda". *New Left Review* 184, 41.

²² Gorz, A. 1989. *Critique of Economic Reason*. London: Verso, 231.

²³ See Gorz, A. 1994. *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology*. London: Verso.

²⁴ Shannon, P. 1997. "As tasty as three-day-old bread". <www.greenleft.org.au/back/1997/261/261p28.htm>

²⁵ Waterman, P. 2003. "Work: From 'Decent Work' to 'The Liberation of Time from Work' - Some Reflections on Work after Capitalism". *Z Magazine* <www.zmag.org/watermanwork.htm>

²⁶ Gorz, A. 1980. *Ecology as Politics*. Boston: South End: 20. For a sensible discussion of Gorz's growing attachment to environmentalism, see Kilmister, A. 2002. "Andre Gorz and the Ecological Critique of Political Economy," a paper presented to the annual meeting of the Political Studies Association, University of Aberdeen (April).

²⁷ As a child, Jessica Mitford thought the line from the "Internationale" was "a fine old conflict"; it was, of course, "the final conflict." See Mitford, J. 1977. *A Fine Old Conflict*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 3.

²⁸ A line from the old union hymn, "Solidarity Forever."

²⁹ Rupert, M. 1998. "Democracy, peace; what's not to love". <<http://webdev.maxwell.syr.edu/merupert/Democracy.html>>

³⁰ Braverman, H. 1974. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

³¹ Thompson, E. P. 1968. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

³² This development was anticipated by French communist theorist, Roger Garaudy, whose unorthodox ideas promptly got him kicked out of the party and vilified for his modification of the received dogma. See Garaudy, R. 1970. *The Turning-Point of Socialism*. London: Collins. His enemies are well represented by Momjan, H. 1974. *Marxism and the Renegade Garaudy*. Moscow: Progress.

³³ Bernard, E. nd. "Workplace Democracy through Labor Law". <http://www.the-ville.com/scn/november/labor_law.html>

³⁴ Tanner, J., Davies, S. and O'Grady, B. 1992. "Immanence Changes Everything: A Critical Comment on the Labour Process and Class Consciousness". *Sociology* 26(3), 441.

³⁵ Patmore, G. 2000. "Industrial Democracy for Australia". *Workers Online* 72, a paper delivered to the 'Unchain My Mind' forum organized by Pluto Press, Australia and the Australian Fabian Society, 27 July, 2000.

³⁶ Such benefits are not unknown in capitalist societies such as Canada where farmers, credit unions and condominium owners appreciate that seeds, loans and accommodations are cheaper and more efficient without merchants, banks and landlords.

³⁷ Shalla, V. 1997. "Technology and the Deskilling of Work: The Case of Passenger Agents in Canada". Duffy, A., Glenday, D., and Pupo, N. *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs, No Jobs: The Transformation of Work in the 21st Century*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁹ Meiksins, P. 1989. "A Critique of Wright's Theory of Contradictory Class Locations", in Wright, E. O., ed. *The Debate on Classes*. London: Verso, 173.

⁴⁰ Wright, E. O. and Singelmann, J. 1982. "Proletarianization in the Changing American Class Structure". *American Journal of Sociology*. 88 (Supplement), S176. See also Wright, E. O. 1985. *Classes*. London: Verso.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Smith, V. 1994. "Braverman's Legacy: The Labor Process Tradition at 20". *Work and Occupations*: 21(4), 403.

⁴³ Cohen, S. 1987. "A Labour Process to Nowhere?" *New Left Review* 165, 35.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Van den Berg, A. 1993. "Creeping Embourgeoisement? Some Comments on the Marxist Discovery of the New Middle Class". *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 12, 299. Of special interest here are books that link theoretical and practical interest. Excellent examples are Teeple, G. 1984. *Marx's Critique of Politics: 1842-1847* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), and Teeple, G. 2000. *Globalization and the Decline of Social Reform: Into the Twenty-first Century*. (Aurora, Ontario: Garamond Press).

⁴⁷ Van den Berg, A. *op. cit.*, 295.

⁴⁸ Always interesting are Michael Moore's opinions on such matters. See Moore, M. 1997. "Is the Left Nuts? (Or Is It Me?)". *The Nation*. (November 17).

⁴⁹ Hitchens, C. 1983. "The Old Boy". *The Nation*. April 2, reprinted in Hitchens, C. 1988. *Prepared for the Worst*. New York: Hill and Wang, 242.

⁵⁰ Perrow, C. 1986. *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 81.

⁵¹ Sennett, R., and Cobb, J., *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. New York: Knopf, 94.

⁵² Rashid, S., and Archer, M. 1983. *Organizational Behaviour*. Toronto: Methuen, 63.

⁵³ See Maslow, A. 1943. "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50(4); and Herzberg, F. 1968. "One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?" *Harvard Business Review* 46(1).

⁵⁴ Olsson, J. 1996. "Employee Empowerment: A Crucial Ingredient in a Total Quality Management Strategy". <www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/1848/index.html>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Hollander, E. and Offerman, L. 1990. "Power and Leadership in Organizations." *American Psychologist* (February), 179-188

⁵⁷ Bartol, K. and Martin, D. 1991. *Management*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 650.

- ⁵⁸ Keighley, T. 1993. "Creating an empowered organization." *Training and Development in Australia*. December, 7.
- ⁵⁹ Turney, P. 1993. "Beyond TQM with Workforce Activity Based Management." *Management Accounting* September, 30.
- ⁶⁰ Johnson, R. 1993. "TQM: Leadership for the Quality Transformation." *Quality Progress*. April, 47.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶² Langner, T. and Michael, S. 1963. *Life Stress and Mental Health*. New York: Free Press, 412-413.
- ⁶³ Archibald, W. 1978. *Social Psychology as Political Economy*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 182.
- ⁶⁴ A frequently cited exception is the American automobile manufacturer, Saturn. According to its supporters, Saturn has "empowered its employees by turning assembly lines into dedicated process oriented work stations solely managed by the work team. Even the design process involves a high degree of employee participation. ... In an Empowered organization," it is said, "employees feel responsible beyond their own job, since they feel the responsibility to make the whole organization work better. Olsson, J. *Loc. cit.*
- ⁶⁵ Archibald, W. *Op. cit.*, 174.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.
- ⁶⁷ Insight into Marx's ideas on alienation come mainly from a reading of his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, which are accessible in Easton, L. and Guddat, K., eds. 1967. *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*. Garden City, NY: Anchor, 287-301.
- ⁶⁸ Murphy, L., and Haines, D. 1996. "The TEAM Act Violations of Free Speech". <www.aclu.org>.
- ⁶⁹ Quoted in Heathfield, S. 2001. "True Empowerment Wins!" *About Human Resources* <www.humanresources.about.com/library/weekly/aa072901a.htm>.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ Chen, K. 2001 "NLRB Rules Crown Cork & Seal Panel of Employees, Managers Is Within Law," *Wall Street Journal*. (July 26).
- ⁷² Naiman, *op. cit.*, 144.
- ⁷³ Anon. 1977. "Discovering Industrial Democracy". *Canadian Dimension*. 12(3), 28.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.
- ⁷⁵ Berman, M. 1998. "Unchained Melody". *The Nation*. (May 11), reprinted in *The Best of the Nation*. , 522.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 523.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 529.
- ⁷⁹ Quoted in Kimmelman, M. 2003. "Piano Portraits". *New York Review*. 50(10), 30.
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