Comments by Donald Swartz

When the organizers of this symposium gave me a copy of Michael Burawoy's stimulating examination of Braverman's LABOUR AND MONOPOLY CAPITAL, I found myself in a quandary as to whether I was expected to address Michael's paper or Braverman's book. As the time allocated didn't permit me to do both, I have decided to focus on Michael's paper as I found some of his arguments quite questionable. My remarks will concentrate on three of Burawoy's assertions which are, I believe, central to his critique of Braverman. Firstly, Burawoy argues that the separation of conception and execution is an outcome of the division of labour and the scientific-technical revolution whereas Braverman sees it as a consequence of the application of Taylorism. Secondly, Burawoy disputes Braverman's view that it was with the development of monopoly capital that it was possible to institutionalize this separation. Instead, Burawoy advances the periodization of capitalist development which essentially sees Taylorism in its failure, giving rise to a scientific and technical revolution. The third assertion, which I will address myself to quite briefly, is Burawoy's claim that Braverman's analysis is pessimistic, as "he takes for granted the capacity of capitalism to survive class struggles and dismisses them as ineffectual outbursts". Burawoy refers us to Chapter six, "The Habituation of the Worker", with the comment "his title mirrors its content".

In brief, I'm not persuaded by Burawoy's analysis. It is important to note that part of the confusion stems from a certain weakness

in Braverman's treatment of Taylorism, which Burawoy correctly picks up on. (I'll elaborate on this point in the course of my remarks). In general Burawoy's argument seems based on the view that Braverman has not paid proper attention to working-class struggles in the course of American history (and elsewhere, insofar as Braverman is talking about the development of monopoly capital generally). Specifically, Burawoy's analysis rests heavily on worker resistance to Taylorism. Burawoy defines Taylorism as the specification of task performance. He notes that it certainly gives rise to a management conception of the labour process but precisely because labour power can not be physically separated from labour, workers' conceptual faculties remain. Thus Burawoy asserts that Taylorism simply results in a management as well as a worker's conception of the labour process. Effective worker resistance historically to management's attempts to specify task performance means that the separation of conception and execution cannot be identified with Taylorism.

Secondly, building on Braverman and Marx's argument that technological change is an attempt to increase efficiency and hence surplus value in the face of competition, Burawoy argues first that efficiency, not control, is management's prime motive. To equate the two is to assume that Taylorism generates efficiency, management knows this, and management has the power to impose Taylorism on the work force. Burawoy disputes these three assumptions. Then, adding that the impetus to technological change can also come from class struggle (i.e: successful wage claims which render labour saving machinery profitable), suggests that Taylorism, by intensifying class struggles, spurred the technical-scientific revolution which led to monopoly capitalism. Taylorism is to be seen not as the hand-maiden of monopoly capitalism as Braverman

suggests, but as its mid-wife. And of course, the separation of conception and execution is a tendential result of the scientific-technical revolution and the division of labour.

Now, it is important not to deny the control that workers exercise both over the method of performing their tasks and the pace at which it is performed, but to see Taylorism only as the specification of task performance as Burawoy does, is to misconceive, I think, what Taylorism and scientific management were all about. As Brian Palmer has noted, referring to the United States, as late as the Progressive Era capital still lacked decisive control over the basic processes of work. What this lack of control involved is illustrated very well in the study by Katherine Stone of steelmaking prior to the Homestead strike of 1892, which is an example contrary to many of those cited by Montgomery, where the workers were decisively defeated. (Among progressive historians seeking to reinterpret U.S. labour history, I think there is probably a tendency to confuse substantial and sustained working class resistance with victory). In essence, prior to that strike, the employers of the steel mills contracted with the unions to produce steel on a rate per ton basis. The organization of the labour process, the division of labour, the pace, manpower requirements, recruitment, wage differentials and training, were determined by the unions virtually unilaterally. Quality levels, tools and techniques were substantially controlled by the union as well, and I quote from Stone's study: "changes for the improvement of the mill required the consent of mill committees". The ground capital has covered since then is reflected in the public amazement when the postal workers demand the right to veto technological change.

The key point here is that the scientific-technical revolution,

just like Taylorism, had to confront the control of workers over the production process. Taylorism was no mere technique for specifying tasks but an expression of capital's demand for the control labour then exercised over the execution of the labour process; a demand that control rest with its hirelings, not those from whom surplus value was to be extracted. Management would assume the responsibility to conceptualize the entire work process, decompose it into constituent task elements each geared to the capacities of "a first-class man", select and train workers to perform these tasks, determine wage rates and differentials based upon task requirements and performance, and control the progress of workers from task to task. In general terms, I am advancing a much more dialectical view of the relationship between conception and execution, and implying that there was a lot of conscious purpose in management's activities and thinking at the time. Let us not forget Marx's distinction of the human labour process and the way in which animals go about producing on an instinctual basis "--what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is precisely that the architect conceptualizes his structure in his imagination before he realizes it concretely".

It is very important not to get lost in specific scientific management techniques, many of which were as farcical as those peddled by human relations experts today. Scientific management, as Palmer notes, was part of a general thrust for efficiency, whose proponents despite differences in technique found common ground in the objectives of specialization, standardization and simplification. To these points of consensus it should also be added that job hierarchies, and individual piece-rates (where possible) were also widely advanced to promote competition and individualism. This vertical structure had nothing to

do with mechanization per se, as Burawoy in quoting Lukacs seems to imply, but rather was seen as necessary to the realization of surplus value in the context of conflicting objective interests between capital and labour. In Taylor's words of warning to bosses preferring rules of thumb to 'scientific management', "when employers herd the men together in classes, pay all of each class the same wages, the only remedy for the men comes in combination".

This broader view of Taylorism is suggestive of the relationship between it and monopoly capitalism more generally. Its implementation meant the development of the management cadre, responsible for conceptualizing the production process, production planning and control, personnel, etc.; in short, a large administrative component. It presupposes a certain scale of production and degree of market control without which taking on the substantial investment is not likely to seem feasible. The significance of the magnitude of the investment is reflected in statistics in the United States which show that between 1899 and 1923, the administrative component of manufacturing industries doubled from less than 8% to 15% of all employees, a tremendous increase in overhead.

What I'm suggesting is that the division of labour, Taylorism, and the scientific-technical revolution are not easily separable and periodizable but rather form a very integrated unity. This idea is reinforced when we consider the specific relationship between the growth of monopoly capitalism and Taylorism in the United States. Kolko, in his study of the Progressive Era, points out that the bulk of the merger movement which generated monopoly capitalism, began in the late 1880's and peaked between 1897 and 1901. The date most commonly associated with the beginnings of the movement to establish industrial

management as a profession subject to scientific laws was 1903, when Taylor addressed the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. In other words, when one looks at the timing of the transformation of the structure of industry and one looks at the tremendous growth in all forms of 'scientific management' organizations etc., one sees a very close, indeed inseparable, linkage between the two processes.

Finally, it is important not to overlook the significance of scientific management as an instrument of the bourgeoisie's struggle for ideological hegemony, by undermining the working class's self-conception and its sense of its own worth, much of which was bound up in the image of the craftsmen. As Palmer notes, "called into being by the structural imperatives of the developing industrial capitalism which required to refine the division of labour, 'efficiency' fulfilled another more specific function. In relegating the labouring man and the capitalist to their respective positions in the hierarchy, the new managers buried the populist conception of labour and took a long forceful stride in the direction of lessening working-class autonomy on the shop floor". In a sense (to use one of Burawoy's concepts), the whole thrust for efficiency, including scientific management, was directed toward the process of obscuring surplus by suggesting that surplus came not from direct productive labour but rather from the skills and abilities of management.

Now let me briefly turn to the question of Braverman's pessimism. I will confine my remarks to the now-infamous Chapter Six, whose title in my view does not at all mirror its content. Braverman, to me, is talking about the post-Taylor evolution in management thought and practices to some extent, which to quote Braverman "do not by and large concern themselves with the organization of work but rather with the

conditions under which the worker may be brought to co-operate in the scheme of work organized by the industrial engineer". Braverman begins by overviewing the various subtle manifestations of working class resistance: absenteeism, output restriction, sabotage, as well as overt hostility to management (i.e. strikes). He is derisive in his treatment of management efforts to gain Labours' co-operation. In his conclusion he directs our attention not to the apparent acclimatization of the working class but beneath it, to "the hostility of workers to the degenerated forms of work which are forced upon them... This hostility 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". If anything, such assertions promote optimism (and perhaps even adventurism). Conversely, it is Burawoy rather than Braverman whom I find pessimistic. His analysis of games of habituation which focusses particularly on surface adaptation of workers to capitalism, it seems to me, contradicts his shouting of class struggle from the rooftops in criticizing Braverman. Moreover, his conclusion too is pessimistic -- in looking to contemporary theories of capitalist crisis and breakdown to jolt labour into revolutionary action. Crisis and breakdown are no automatic economic event but presuppose the working class strong enough to counter bourgeois efforts to resolve the contradictions of capitalism at the expense of the working class. Without addressing the question of how to build that strength, there will be no revolutionary crisis, but poverty, unemployment, and loss of freedom. And I think, in conclusion, the way to build upon Braverman is to build upon the various manifestations of class struggle which are very obviously often individualized, localized, union as opposed to community or

industry or more broadly class-based, and to try to build out of those manifestations an understanding of how to generalize them and how to broaden them into the kind of consciousness which will give the working class the capacity to create the political crisis which may lead us to a new era.

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