

# An Analysis of the Labor Process Theory: from Marx to Post Braverman Debate

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## Abstract

The roots of labor process begins with Marx analyses of how the labor process shifted from simple cooperation to manufacture and modern industrial stage, which resulted in the elimination of the skilled craft workers ability to exercise his judgment and authority over their labor power. Braverman take a new look at the skill, technology and work organization. He argued there is a greater possibility for managerial control which resulted in the wide-range deskilling of the workers. The Labor process debate in late 1970s attempts to include into discussion the important changes in the labor process. The debate over the development of the labor process led to a developing body of theoretical and empirical literature in the sociology of work. The present paper reviews the theoretical contribution of various thinkers to the labor process and to analyze the roots of deskilling or Upskilling of the workers in the labor process.

**Keywords:** Labor process • Deskilling • Division of labor • Upskilling

## Introduction

The labor process refers to the connection between labor and their work. The study of the labor process offers a singular and influential version of how work is organized in capitalist societies. Work in a society is not only to meet the needs of society, or carried by people to survive, but it is the basis through which owners of the capital make sure the appropriation of the surplus [1]. The primary thought of the labor process theory is the degradation of work in modern capitalistic societies. For Marx, labor in its first place, is a human-nature interaction, the man is a conscious being. As a result of his/her consciousness, the information of the creation procedure exists in his/her imagination at the beginning of the work. Marx states that towards the end of each work process, we get an outcome that already existed in the creative ability of the labor at its initiation. Marx analyzed how organization of labor shifted from simple cooperation to manufacture and modern Industrial phase (discussed in details below), which resulted in the elimination of the skilled craft workers ability to exercise his judgment and authority over their labor power.

Braverman made a successful effort to renew Marx's theory of the labor process and taking a new look at the skill, technology and work organization. He argued that with the introduction of new forms of technology and science in the service capital, there is a greater possibility for managerial control (Taylorism) which resulted in the wide-range deskilling of the workers. The Labor process debate (Post Braverman approach) attempts to include into discussion the

important changes in the labor process during the late 1970s. The debate over the development of the labor process led to a developing body of theoretical and empirical literature in the sociology of work. Braverman is criticized on the basis of his particular assumption that capitalism developed in a particular fashion, i.e. deskilling and degradation of craft work excluding the reskilling of workers with the introduction of new technology, workers' resistance, management control as the exclusive form of control.

## Conceptualizing Deskilling

With the introduction of new technology and new methods of production have been introduced, many thinkers have thought that the new technologies would deskill the workers or rob him of his traditional skills and crafts rather than liberate the modern workers from the manual labour or upskill them. The term 'deskilling' first used by Harry Braverman in his book "Labour and Monopoly Capital". For him deskilling refers to a process of reducing the skill level of jobs through a detailed division of labour and the application of new technology in order to enhance managerial control over the work process. The breakdown of skills of craftsmen and the reconstruction of production process destroyed the traditional concept of skill [2]. Deskilling aims at degrading the position of workers and this happens through incorporation of three elements: firstly reducing the need for skilled worker by simplifying individual tasks to make the workers exchangeable with other workers or skilled workers replaced by machines, secondly making their work easier through division and

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sub-division of jobs and lastly downgrading a job or occupation from a skilled to a semi-skilled or unskilled position in order to decrease the total wage cost associated with the employment of skilled labour [3]. Littler argued that deskilling mainly includes four processes; workers lose the right to design and plan work i.e. a Separation between planning and execution, redistribution of jobs among unskilled and semi-skilled workers, shift of work organization from craft system to modern and Taylorized forms of control [4]. Palloix opined that deskilling of the workers developed by: reducing the field in which the worker's skills can be used and developed; suppressing that part of the worker's activity which consists of preparing and organizing the work on his own way; eliminating his understanding of the whole of the labour process, as a result, eliminating his concrete control of the labour process [5].

## Historical Background of Labor Process Theory (First Wave)

In *Capital*, volume I, Marx provides the framework of nature of work relationship in the capitalistic mode of production. He was perhaps the first to show that there is a long-run trend for workers to become deskilled in the process of production in a capitalist economic system. Marx held that the design of work under capitalism suppresses creativity of workers and prevents them from enjoying the fruits of their labor, so distorting human nature [6]. Marx studied the labor process under transition from pre-capitalism to capitalism. Marx analyzed how organization of labor shifted from simple cooperation to manufacture and modern Industrial phase, which resulted in the elimination of the skilled craft workers ability to exercise his judgment and authority over their labor power. For understanding the roots of deskilling of workers we need to analyze the organization of the labor process under capitalism

## Marxian Perspective

Before the development of capitalism in Western Europe, Marx argued labor process was organized in the domestic sphere of the craftsmen or producers, either independently or through guild or putting-out system. In handicraft and domestic production, worker or craftsmen were usually involved in independent production. They make products by hand with their creative thinking and hard work. The independent producers or craftsperson directly controls the labor process as they were the owners of the means of production, i.e. raw-material and tools. Some jobs or crafts were organized under the putting-out system or guild system, in which the merchants or masters only supply the raw-material and wage funds to the workers. The worker owned the tools or instruments of production, which directly interacts with the raw material to change its shape. The craftsmen had a full knowledge of work and skill; therefore, there was no separation between the conception and execution in the labor process. The craftsmen had full control, quality, concentration, judgment and knowledge, over the decisions, regarding their work, e.g., when to work, how to work, and how much to work. Marx has identified the three stages of development in the capitalist labor process, i.e. the simple co-operation, the manufacturing and the modern industry or machinery. For Marx, the process of deskilling i.e. separation between the conception and execution of the craftsmen started in simple co-operation where capitalist control the labor process, developed in manufacturing through division of labor.

## Bravermanian on labour process

In "Labor and Monopoly Capital" Braverman renew Marx's theory of the labor process and taking a new look at the skill, technology and work organization. He argued that with the introduction of new forms of technology and science in the service capital, there is a greater possibility for managerial control (Taylorism) which resulted in the wide-ranging deskilling of the workers. Braverman tries to reveal how craft work has been eroded and destroyed in America during the 20th century. Braverman attempts to disclose that craft workers are takeoff from their skill by the detailed division of labor, introduction of managerial control and routinization of their traditional work within capitalist societies. For Marx, the real subordination of labor occurred when capitalists changed the organizational and technological basis of production due to the industrial revolution. Braverman in his thesis showed that the industrial revolution left significant areas of production in which skilled workers still maintained their control over the labour process. Capitalists, in order to gain larger control over the labor process, introduced the concept of 'scientific management' that completed the transition to real subordination. This results in the deskilling, job fragmentation and degradation of work in the 20th century. Braverman argues that throughout capitalism a degradation of craft work is produced where the worker not only loses his craft skills, but also the control of the labor process that was associated with them. He argues that capital, in destroying the craft as a process under the control of the worker, reconstitutes it as a process under his own control. These developments are most significant since the introduction of scientific management at the end of the nineteenth century. For Braverman, the main focus of the 'scientific management' is to ensure the management control of the labor process. Palmer argued that through scientific management practices capitalist undermined the populist view resulted in the dilution of a craftsman's skill became a passive factor of production and capitalist or managers attain more extensive control over the work process. Braverman précised the 'Taylorism' in the form of three different principles: first principle involves the 'dissociation of the labor process from the skills of the workers, The second principle involves the 'separation of conception from execution, of mental from manual work and The third principle is the 'concentration of knowledge in the hands of management to control each step of the labor process and its mode of execution'.

Rubery stand with Braverman argued that Craft workers control the work process before the development of mechanization and scientific management because the knowledge of the craft was stored in the craftsman themselves. During the 20th century, the craft workers lose their skills as a result of mechanization. The jobs of workers were simplified and divided into segments. The craftsman, who had used their own specialist skill and knowledge in production, was replaced by the workers who only perform one special operation and also required little training to do the job. Reckman observed that the carpentry craft have suffered from the deskilling since the past century due to technological innovation. Carpenters' craft position faces a strong challenge from a machine woodworking technology in the late 19th century. The factory production of house parts such as

doors and windows, etc. has been the main source of challenge, rather than new tools and machinery used by carpenters themselves.

## Labor Process Debate: Post Bravermanian Approach

Labor process debate attempts to include into discussion the important changes in the labor process during the late 1970s. Braverman's book plays a 'pivotal role in later debates because he combined a renewal of Marx's categories with an explanation of the dominant trends in the world of work'. The labor process debate counters with the usual conceptions of his book "Labour and Monopoly capital" and responded to it representing a fresh departure in this field. The first problem lies in Braverman's farsightedness about scientific management. He argued that Taylorism had been accepted by capitalists on the both the sides of the Atlantic. But the fact is that European and American industrialists hastened in introducing the work reorganization advocated by scientific management. Many thinkers have argued that, on the contrary, Taylorism existed more in theory than practice, and was only successfully introduced in a handful of firms. . Management acted as resistance to the scientific management for their entry into the firms. Robert Hoxie's in his report 'U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations' 1914 concluded that 'no single shop was founded which could be said to represent fully and faithfully the Taylor system as presented in the treatise on shop management'.

Braverman is criticized on the basis of his particular assumption that capitalism developed in a particular fashion, i.e. deskilling and degradation of craft work excluding workers enskilling, workers resistance and management control as the exclusive form of control. The criticisms can be arranged under three headings; one group relates to the conception of class struggle or worker's resistance; the other group is related with the conceptualization of control and the third group of critics dealing with the concept of skill.

## Post Bravermanian Approach

The mid-1980s saw the rise of post-Fordism and flexible specialization theories of paradigm breakage. The new forms of labor organization and labor deployment in the manufacturing sector that developed in advanced industrial countries in the 1980s arose from a number of factors other than the need to manage labor control and reduce costs, as stated by Braverman. This approach, therefore, seeks to understand these new forms of work organization and their consequences for the labor process as shaped by a combination of factors such as intensified international competition, saturation of the markets for mass consumption, and the development of new scalable computer-based technologies. The definition of a 'flexible specialization thesis' could be best defined as technical framework or as an ideal model for industrial efficiency. In other words, this refers to a change from a process based on mass manufacturing, specialized machinery and semi-skilled labor to produce standardized goods to a modern version of craft production based on the manufacture of a variety of products and shifting markets using flexible general-purpose machinery and multi-skilled labor. According to Piore and Sabel, this new version of craft production 'flexible specialization' involves the use of flexible computer technology, constitutes an attempt to break away from the system of mass

production. It makes use of the new flexible technology so that the production of specialized products can be easily adapted to changing market demands. This process increases the skills of workers and enables them to apply their expertise in increasingly varied manufacturing processes. The more flexibility the machine is, the more generally applicable the process and more it expand the workers' capacity for productive expression. Labour process theorists have been at the forefront in exploring the rapid changes in technology, management strategies, and the production techniques under the term flexible specialization or Japanisation. The first and second wave of labour process came under serious criticism when flexible specialization techniques superseded scientific management. Flexible specialization is linked to flexible technology that produces standard products in mass production. This organizes the manufacturing process with the workforces who have been trained to produce wide variety of goods. This allows the workers to increase the breadth of their skills through the practice of a range of tasks, teamwork and more conceptual tasks and responsibilities in the work process. Therefore, it is claimed that flexible production reduces the detailed division of labour and removes the alienation of labour due to deskilling [7,8].

## Conclusion

This paper discussed the contribution of various thinkers towards labor process theory specifically in context of deskilling of workers in the capitalist society. Each thinker has made their contribution to the study of labor process in a specific way. However, we need not only to look at the capitalist labor process in terms of capital accumulation or control, rather in terms of its effect on skilled craft workers, worker's resistance or class struggle and its impact on the general social level. The study of the capitalist labor does not finish the forms of the labor process within a capitalist social formation, but one can find many labour processes within the domain of particular social formation which does not fall under the law of accumulation or control. For example, the survival of handicraft production even in developed and developing countries. To conclude that there has been no inherent change in the tendencies of the capitalist labor process since analyzed by Marx. The change then occurred in organizational structures, material techniques, spatial location, etc., which have occurred historically.

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