

Comments by Leo Panitch

I want to begin with a couple of comments on what Braverman has accomplished. I think this is important because although Burawoy began his paper and his talk with praise of Braverman, by the time he's through with him, he's dragged him through what Marx would call the "muck".

Now, all of this puts me in an odd position because I have criticisms of Braverman's work. I was struck, in coming into this room, by a resemblance to a court-chamber--the way we're sitting here, the way you're sitting there. And as I read Burawoy's critique of Braverman, I had the feeling that what was being engaged in here was a prosecution and that willy-nilly I was being cast into the role of the defence attorney. Therefore, you may have to excuse me if what I say sounds like that to some extent, if I have to occasionally bring evidence into court, that is, the odd quotation, in order to salvage Braverman from the critique which we just heard..

In order to counter the critique, I think one has to note Braverman's achievements, the ones that haven't been noted. First of all, Braverman has brought us back to a proper appreciation of what Marx meant by the tendency to emiseration. Those embourgeoisement theorists who thought that Marx meant by this the increasing material impoverishment of workers simply did not know what they were talking about. On the contrary, Marx saw capitalism as constantly, through its restless striving after the general forms of wealth, driving labour out beyond the limits of its natural needs and producing the material elements needed for the development of the rich individuality--replacing natural needs with needs that were historically produced. In other words, capital was itself constantly redefining subsistence at higher levels. What emiseration meant for Marx in this context was

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something different. It was what Braverman describes as the degradation of work, and Marx put it extremely well in terms of capitalists establishing "the accumulation of misery corresponding to the accumulation of capital". And what he means by that is the accumulation of wealth at one pole is therefore at the same time the accumulation of misery expressed in Marx's terms as "the agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation at the opposite pole, i.e. on the side of the class that produces its own product in the form of capital". That's what Marx meant by the tendency to emiseration, and what Braverman has done is salvage this definition for our own time.

Well, Braverman also has done more than this, and one of the ways in which people who look at Braverman have done him injustice is that they see the book as a book on the labour process. It's much more than that, its central core, its intent, to begin with, was to identify the structure of the working class, and the manner in which it had changed. If you read the first page of Braverman's introduction, that's what he set out to do. He makes it clear that in the process of trying to look at occupational shifts, that is, between occupations and within occupations, he became aware of a contradiction in the literature between an argument that went something to the effect that modern work required higher levels of education, training, mental effort, etc., and a simultaneous argument that work was subdivided into petty tasks, petty operations, that are mundane, alienating, and so on. Braverman found no attempt to reconcile those two processes. So he began to look for a dynamic which would explain the evolution of labour processes within occupations as well as between them, and this led him to stress the evolution of management and technology, of the modern corporation as well as of social structure. He found himself doing a history of the capitalist mode of production over the last hundred

years. But this does not mean that his central concern was lost in the process. It's no accident that the last third of the book is concerned with the mapping-out of the structure of the modern working class, in the context of his examination of the dynamics of proletarianization. He arrives at Part IV, at this point, and what he gives us is something not dissimilar to the kinds of mapping we receive from kinds of recent Marxist theoreticians like Carchedi or even Erik Olin Wright. But unlike their work, he provides us not merely with a mapping which is deductively arrived at, but one which is also empirically and inductively arrived at. As a result, his mapping is much more detailed and richer; it has meat on it if you will.

We will remember that the critique begins at the level of a divorce between evaluation and criticism, a divorce between "science" and critique in Braverman, with the statement that in Marx, these two things are combined, and I think that's very true and it's an important insight--probably the person who has given the best expression of that insight in Marx is Norman Geras. And what he was getting at was the argument that Marxism as a critique is not a moral critique, not an ethical critique; it doesn't take its standpoint in that sense from a set of values--it is scientific, and insofar as it attempts to get at the essence of things rather than the appearance of things, it cuts away mythology, ideology in the false sense, and establishes criticism by counteracting mythology and ideology. His criticism is therefore based on uncovering the essence of reality and it doesn't depend on a moral or ethical stance. I don't think Braverman does in fact base his criticism of capitalism on a moral stance, but bases it on his attempt to uncover the dynamics of proletarianization in capitalism.

Moreover, I don't think one avoids the problem that Burawoy seems to think Braverman has by stepping out of capitalism. The whole

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problematic of speaking of inside and outside of capitalism in terms of points of view for us today is very bothersome. It's very difficult to imagine that we, living in a capitalist society, can step outside of capitalism when we try to define feudalism. We define those elements of feudalism that appear to us important vis-à-vis capitalism; we never step outside of capitalism (that seems to me an essential point in the sociology of knowledge). Moreover, what Burawoy gives us is a very ideal-typical definition of feudalism, one which-really I think would apply to all pre-capitalist formations, and not to feudalism itself. Braverman would reject an attempt to understand the contrasts between feudalism and capitalism in ideal-typical terms; he in fact says very clearly and explicitly in his introduction that the same productive forces that are characteristic of the close of one epoch of social relations are also characteristic of the opening of the succeeding epoch. It is not a matter of craft production not being there in feudalism and suddenly being there in capitalism--in that sense Braverman is both developing his point of view, if you like, from feudalism and from capitalism. What he is talking about is not the craft worker per se; what he is talking about is the paradox that labour is a commodity (labour-power is a commodity) that can't be separated from its owner. That's what he's talking about; and what capitalism has to do in treating labour-power as a commodity is in some way attempt to attenuate, although it can never remove, that indissoluble connection between labour-power and the individual to whom it belongs.

A second point that Burawoy made is a critique of Braverman for treating class as an objective rather than a subjective category. I think that if one reads Braverman carefully, one sees that an attack on Braverman for not seeing class as class formation is a straw man. Braverman makes very clear that he doesn't want to

deprecate the importance of the study of the state of consciousness of the working class, since it is only through consciousness that a class becomes an actor on the historic stage

Class consciousness is that state of social cohesion reflected in the understanding and activities of a class or portion of a class. Its absolute expression is a pervasive and durable attitude on the part of a class toward its position in society. Its long-term relative expression is found in the slowly changing traditions, experiences, education, and organization of the class. Its short-term relative expression is a dynamic complex of moods and sentiments affected by circumstances and changing with them, sometimes in periods of stress and conflict, almost from day to day. A class, cannot exist in society without in some degree manifesting a consciousness of itself as a group, with common problems, interests and prospects, although this manifestation may for long periods be weak, confused and subject to manipulation by other classes. (Braverman, 1974: 29, 30).

So I think that the conception that Braverman has is very much of a class as an historical actor. But what he is saying, is that in order to understand and examine empirically that class, one has to begin with a certain mapping, in order to know what to look for. Przeworski, in his important paper on class formations, ends up by agreeing with this, but giving us a very crude mapping--industrial workers, white collar workers, bourgeoisie, will do. But what Braverman gives us is a rich mapping, which marks out the paths to follow much more clearly. So again I think that the criticism is misconceived.

There is another criticism of Braverman--he doesn't talk enough about class struggle. Clearly, this is part of our problem, which wasn't Braverman's problem (he didn't live in a university). In isolation, we have a need to shout class struggle from the rooftops in terms of understanding society. Braverman has an understanding of society's dynamic being composed of class struggle so deep that it suffuses his work and he doesn't constantly have to keep crying class struggle. I think that if you read Braverman (this is not new--many

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people have made this criticism of Braverman) this criticism can be avoided. Rather than, as Burawoy suggests, seeing workers' responses to Taylorism being merely impotent resistance, or simply internal friction, Braverman makes it clear that it doesn't have that view at all. Braverman points out that Taylorism raised a storm of opposition among trade unions during the early part of the century, and then he goes on to quote, after discussing that opposition, a long passage from the International Moulders Journal in which he shows that the moulders understood perfectly what was happening to them. When he later speaks of internal friction, (and he doesn't use the term "mere" friction) he first makes clear that the pace of production is decided in a practice which largely assumes the form of a struggle, whether organized or not. Braverman very clearly has this image of class struggle taking place, not only and maybe even not so much, given his American context, at the level of the central organizations of the unions, at the level of the National Civic Federation in the nineteenth century, but at the level of the shopfloor in day-to-day struggle. And it's interesting how he's able to use Taylor to make his own case in this regard, because his quotations from Taylor are full of the class struggle (soldiering, etc.).

Burawoy argues that Braverman doesn't have a concept of contradiction; at best it's only there in passing. To some extent I think this is true, in the sense that the contradiction that Braverman identifies apart from class struggle is the gap between potential which exists in modern capitalism, and the actuality that we experience. But the irony of Burawoy's points with regard to contradiction, is that of the eclecticism that he indicates by referring to certain neo-Marxists who do use the concept of contradiction. He refers to Habermas and Offe and others who have decided that the working class is not an

element in the contradiction any longer, who identify contradiction at the highly abstract levels of legitimacy crises in the sense that crises then always beset capitalism. Even the best of the works based on this, like O'Connor, give very little play to the actual class struggle. Sure, you can identify contradictions, the question is to what extent can you operationalize them in terms of being able to understand whether a society will in fact evolve in a certain direction or not. And it's interesting that the theoretical framework that Burawoy adopts in terms of understanding capitalism and in terms of his critique of Braverman, is that of understanding how capitalism in a concrete way reproduces itself. I think that is very important and it's one of the great contributions of the structuralist (Marxist) developments. But I wonder whether, by simply looking at the way capitalism reproduces itself, we don't fall into the same error that Parsons or Parsons and Shils fell into. Parsons and Shils argued that by understanding the way in which the system maintained itself, one could also understand the conditions for change. All one can understand, if the system doesn't reproduce itself, is breakdown; one doesn't understand conditions of transformation, by simply studying maintenance. And there's no doubt that one of the great problems with the structuralists, even the structuralists like Poulantzas, is that they don't establish the conditions for change in any sense. They are simply talking, in a very functionalist way, of outcomes rather than purpose at the centre of their analysis, of how the state comes in to plug the gaps, the contradictions that develop in the system.

One final point on socialist machines, and then I'll shut up. I think that in a sense Burawoy's onto something here, in what is I think an important section of the paper, but I'm not sure one can lay apathy on Braverman, the kind of neutral view of technology that is

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suggested in the latter part of the paper. I don't think one can hang on Braverman the conception that technology is neutral, that machines are neutral. Braverman makes it very clear in the beginning of his work that the treatment of the interplay between forces and relations of production occupied Marx in almost all of his historical writings, and while there is no question that he gave primacy to the forces of production in the long sweep of history, the idea that this primacy on a day-to-day basis could be used in a formalistic way in the analysis of history would never have entered his mind. Within the historical, analytical limits of capitalism, according to Marxist analysis, technology instead of simply producing social relations, is produced by social relations represented by capital.

The concrete and determinate forms of society are indeed "determined" rather than accidental, but this is the determinacy of the thread-by-thread weaving of the fabric of history, not the imposition of external formulas... Every society is a moment in the historical process, and can be grasped only as part of that process. Capitalism, a social form, when it exists in time, space, population, and history, weaves a web of myriad threads; the conditions of its existence form a complex network each of which presupposes many others. It is because of this solid and tangible existence, this concrete form produced by history, no part of which may be changed by artificial suppositions without doing violence to its true mode of existence - it is precisely because of this that it appears to us as "natural," "inevitable", and "eternal". And it is only in this sense, as a fabric woven over centuries, that we may say that capitalism "produced" the present capitalist mode of production. This is a far cry from a ready-made formula which enables us to "deduce" from a given state of technology a given mode of social organization. (Braverman, 1974: 21, 22).

Braverman clearly argues here that technology is a product of social relations, and I think he is arguing, at least implicitly, that the bringing about of socialism involves not only the changing of social relations, but the changing of machines in the process, and his discussion of the Soviet Union yields this interpretation.