The Labor Process as a Source of Class Consciousness: A Critical Examination

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Much of the recent literature on the labor process has assumed that work content plays a prominent role in the development of class consciousness. Little systematic attention has been given to this assumption, however. The present study examines the relation between aspects of workers' jobs and their levels of class consciousness, using data recently gathered from a survey of workers in the communications industry. Contrary to the prevailing view, the results indicate that extrinsic job characteristics—e.g., job security, patterns of supervision, and working conditions—have much stronger effects on class consciousness than do intrinsic job characteristics. The implication is that analyses of the labor process may have focused too narrowly upon the work itself, at the expense of other critical aspects of the wage-labor relation. Models of the determination of class consciousness will need to consider the expectations workers bring into their jobs. Managerial violation of the workers' expectations may have more to do with the development of class consciousness than does the content of work alone.

Interest in the labor process under advanced capitalist society has continued to expand (Edwards, 1979; Stark, 1980; Burawoy, 1979, 1985; Noble, 1978, 1984; Littler and Salaman, 1982; Salaman, 1986). Although the theoretical premises that inform these studies vary widely, students of the labor process have commonly assumed that the content of workers' jobs plays a prominent role in the formation of working-class consciousness. Studies of office workers, for example, often expect that the routinization of work gives rise to an oppositional consciousness among the white-collar group (Crompton and Jones, 1984; Oppenheimer, 1973, 1985; Shlakman, 1951–1952; and the critique by Przeworski, 1977).

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Parallel assumptions are often made in studies of manual workers. For example, in an historical analysis of skilled craft workers, Montgomery (1974) suggested that the introduction of Taylorism and the rationalization of craft work that it implied provided the major impetus for "the transformation of worker consciousness" during the years surrounding World War I (see also Palmer, 1975). A similar emphasis upon the labor process as a determinant of class consciousness can be identified in studies by Burawoy (1979: 135-157) and Edwards (1979) and, more implicitly, in the theories of Braverman (1974) and Carchedi (1977) as well.

Despite such emphasis on the content of workers' jobs, little systematic attention has been given to its relation to variations in class consciousness. In the United States especially, investigations of the labor process and class consciousness have developed along separate paths. Students of the labor process have focused on changes in the organization of workers' tasks, without studying the ideological effects such changes might have (Braverman, 1974; Carchedi, 1977; Oppenheimer, 1973; Kraft, 1979; Glenn and Feldberg, 1979; Wright and Singelmann, 1982; and the critique by Stark, 1980). On the other hand, students of class consciousness have seldom been concerned with the nature of workers' jobs. Instead, they have focused mainly on the characteristics of workers' communities, workers' positions within the labor market, or workers' racial or ethnic group status (Berger, 1960; Leggett, 1968; Zingraff and Schulman, 1984). As a result of this division, the link between work and class consciousness has remained relatively unexplored.¹

Where the connection between the labor process and class consciousness has been traced, the results have proved somewhat contradictory. Some of the research appears to suggest that the labor process is far less significant for the development of class consciousness than has often been presumed. For example, Cotgrove and Vamplew (1972) examined the relation between production technology and industrial attitudes and behavior within several regions of Great Britain. They found that regionally-based political traditions, not work situations, had the stronger effect upon workers' attitudes. A similar conclusion was reached in Kimeldoff's (1985) comparison of longshoremen on opposite coasts of the United States. Workers employed within almost identical contexts nevertheless developed quite different forms of labor unionism, owing to differences in working-class culture. Using survey methods, Low-Beer

¹ British sociologists have been more attentive to the relation between work and class consciousness than their American counterparts (see especially Goldthorpe et al., 1968; B. C. Roberts et al., 1972; Hyman, 1978; and Andrews, Prandy, and Blackburn, 1980). Ironically those studies that are most directly concerned with the relation between the labor process and class consciousness in the United States have been conducted by British sociologists. See MacKenzie (1973), Burawoy (1979), and Halle (1984).