

Dehumanization by Mass Production: the Cause of Job Dissatisfaction?

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Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* asserts that the utilization of mass production and management strategies degrades the working class. There is a natural and clear distinction between animals and humans, but this once-clear distinction has become blurred ever since strict management and mass production came into effect in the working environment. Braverman concludes that subjecting workers to the mundane atmosphere required by mass production in factory environments degrades workers to a sub-human level. While incentive tactics have been applied to disguise the increasingly prevalent evidence of employee degradation and dissatisfaction, Braverman's analysis reveals that employees continue to succumb to dehumanization from mass production.

Although there are similarities regarding the work performance of animals and humans, there is one significant and vital difference that differentiates humans from animals:

Human work is conscious and purposive, while the work of other animals is instinctual. Instinctive activities are inborn rather than learned, and represent a relatively inflexible pattern for the release of energy upon the receipt of specific stimuli...In human work, by contrast, the directing mechanism is the *power of conceptual thought*, originating in an altogether exceptional central nervous system.¹

Thinking capability draws the line between humans and animals. Humans are able to visualize and plan out what they want to do, whereas an animal would merely work on instinct. Braverman uses the caterpillar example to exemplify this difference. A caterpillar will continue to construct the

second half of a cocoon despite the fact that the first half that it created was destroyed by an external and unforeseen source.² The caterpillar is unable to comprehend the fact that the second half of the cocoon is useless without the first half; it automatically and mindlessly continues to construct the cocoon as if nothing had happened to the first half. If a fire destroyed a house that was being built, the contractors would not continue to construct the second half of the house like a caterpillar would with its cocoon, but instead, the contractors would begin the project over from start. Humans have the ability to recognize the futility of continuing to work on the second phase of a continuous project (e.g., building a house) if the first phase has been destroyed. This ability to conceptualize and analyze the situation at hand differentiates humans from other animals.

The complex framework of the human brain gives humans the ability to manipulate the simpler-minded animals. Humans are able to realize the strengths of different animals and utilize their abilities to benefit whatever activity humans attempt at the time. The ability to conceptualize allows humans to control animals in a useful and effective manner in order to reduce the amount of time and effort that the human will actually have to put forth to complete a task. Humans have been using animals to perform many laborious tasks for centuries in order to relieve the workload on people, from using horses to draw carriages instead of walking the distance to using the strength of oxen for work on farms. People use the ability to conceptualize more effective manners to perform tasks, and animals have commonly been a tool to achieve this effectiveness.

¹ Braverman, Harry. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. Monthly Review Press: New York, 1998. pp.32.

² Ibid.

Animals, however, are not the only tools that have been used to achieve a commonly desired chain of efficiency among humans. It has become quite common for humans to utilize the manpower of other humans to accomplish desired goals, manipulating fellow human beings in the same manner that any other working animal is used.

The introduction of mass production created an increased demand for managers in the working environment. Management on some level has existed for years, but mass production greatly increased the need.³ To retain a high order of efficiency, increased organization and supervision became vital. According to Frederick Taylor, “hardly a competent workman can be found in a large establishment...who does not devote a considerable part of his time to studying just how slowly he can work and still convince his employer that he is going at a good pace.”⁴

Observing the work ethic of the typical American worker reveals the validity of this claim. It is evident most workers have little motivation to work to their fullest capacity; they would prefer to perform at the minimum acceptable level. For this reason, increasing the number of workers in a single, enclosed environment necessitated an increase in management personnel. Workers were highly regimented in their robotic performances by the management teams in order to ensure efficiency and speed, and managerial oversight became a critical element in the more effective production practices.

The utilization of this new method of mass production increased profits for the capitalists because it produced a more effective use of resources. Highly skilled workers working as a team could build an entire car at one time; this work resulted in a product they could clearly visualize as an accomplishment.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Taylor, Fredrick W. *Shop Management*, in *Scientific Management*, p. 30.

When they finished for the day, before their eyes was the satisfaction of seeing a complete car; they knew exactly how much effort and work they had put forth to construct the machine.

Under the mass production method, the only thing the workers were left seeing was some part of the engine that went somewhere in the car whizzing by on the conveyor belt. They would put in a seemingly unimportant four bolts to some part of the car, never seeing the resultant of their work. Unlike the skilled mechanics, these workers would not be able to locate their contribution to the finished product. The workers had been reduced to a level of performance that any machine or animal could perform, resulting in many sociological effects on the human worker’s mind. Braverman views this type of working environment as a horrid result of capitalist greed:

The transformation of working humanity into a ‘labor force,’ a ‘factor of production,’ an instrument of capital, is an incessant and unending process. The condition is repugnant to the victims, whether their pay is high or low, because it violates human conditions of work; and since the workers are not destroyed as human beings but are simply utilized in inhuman ways.⁵

Capitalists use other humans as any other resource in order to produce the highest profit possible. Human workers are reduced to a sub-class associated with animals and machinery. The capitalists locate the strength that the worker has and utilizes that ability into a repetitive action that will result in the fastest and most efficient method of producing products that will result in money. The worker does not have to think to perform his task, but rather continues to follow the monotonous motions instructed from the management.

⁵ Braverman, Harry. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. Monthly Review Press: New York, 1998. pp.96.

Working under these types of demeaning work conditions easily results in dissatisfaction with the job. Over the last decade, job satisfaction has markedly continued to drop.⁶ Blue collar workers have come to desire and demand more fulfillment in their job settings.

The long-term drop in job satisfaction has been driven by rapid changes in technology, employers' push for productivity and shifting expectations among workers', said Lynn Franco, director of the group's Consumer Research Center. 'As large numbers of baby boomers prepare to leave the work force, they will be increasingly replaced by younger workers, who tend to be as dissatisfied with their jobs, but have different attitudes and expectations about the role of work in their lives,' Franco said. 'This transition will present a new challenge for employers'.⁷

Younger generations are less accepting of the mundane and demeaning work environment than older generations, despite increases in wages. When Ford originally instituted his assembly line production, he offered wages for his employees far exceeding those of other menial jobs.⁸ Many workers today, however, seek more fulfillment from their jobs than money can offer.

Though younger generations have seen an overall increase in wages, they have also become subject to a steep increase in job stress and working hours. "Over the past two years, as business budgets have tightened and remaining employees have been forced to take on larger workloads, employees have experienced significantly added stress..."⁹

⁶ Survey: Workers' dissatisfaction increasing ; Those 65 and older happiest with jobs | Employees 35 to 44 register biggest decline:[Fourth Edition]._Adam Geller. Seattle Times Seattle, Wash.:Mar 13, 2005. p. F2.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Braverman, Harry. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. Monthly Review Press: New York, 1998. pp.

⁹ *Improve your Employers' Job Satisfaction*. www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,314871,00.html.

Younger generations have also witnessed the increasing workload and stress of previous generations, causing them to become more overtly disenchanting with working conditions.

Over the past two decades, the average annual workload for employees has grown by one hundred and sixty-three hours.¹⁰ As times progress, it seems more and more is expected of employees (witness the influence of "total quality management" and continual quality improvement programs). These ever-expanding workload expectations imposed by higher-level management tend to amplify the experience of degradation felt by lower-level workers. Younger generations of employees who have witnessed this transition first hand risk becoming increasingly fed up with the seemingly endless accumulations of stress in America's work environments.

According to a recent job satisfaction survey, "Employees are more satisfied when they have challenging opportunities at work. This includes chances to participate in interesting projects, jobs with a satisfying degree of challenge and opportunities for increased responsibility."¹¹ Unfortunately, subjecting workers to work well below their capabilities increases dissatisfaction in the workplace because many workers begin to feel unimportant and fear being easily replaced because of the minimal effort and skill required for them to perform their job.

Many employers have decided to offer fringe benefits to their employees to help ease this dissatisfaction. According to the United States Chamber of Commerce, employers have continued to increase the number of benefits offered to employees. "Despite rising costs, employers continue to offer a broad array of benefits to their workers," said Bruce Josten, Chamber executive vice president. "These higher costs are being paid

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Managing Job Satisfaction*. Bavendam Research Incorporated, Special Reports. Volume 6. <http://www.employeesatisfactions.com/>.

voluntarily by employers and demonstrate a commitment to employees and to maintaining a strong workforce.”¹² Employers attempt to make their employees feel less like degraded animals by offering many perks to appease the workers. These fringe benefits disguise the monotonous and mundane working experience that the employees endure, and they may also make the employees feel important and appreciated.

Though employees might not feel a total sense of happiness or fulfillment from these added benefits, they typically feel more satisfied with a situation that is made easier to endure. Increasing perks appeases the mass and decreases the likelihood of having disgruntled employees. Production increases and improves greatly when the employees are happy with what they do. Employers may have to spend a few extra dollars to keep their employees happy, but this small cost will increase the net profits greatly.

Recognizing employees for achievements has become commonplace in the workplace. If employees perform tasks in an exemplary manner in comparison with coworkers, they can be “honored” with a special title, such as “Employee of the Month.” This form of recognition would come at little or no cost to the employer, but could effectively raise the self-esteem and pride of the employees. Of course, without the prospect of earning a promotion or wage increase, symbolic titles may have little significance, since they would become a mere ploy to manipulate employees into believing they are important to the company. But prospects for tangible rewards would increase competition among employees to attain the title of “Employee of the Month,” thus increasing production, just as the

managers and executives desire. In these instances, higher management manipulates employees into acting the way it wants them to by using incentives like special titles to lure the employees, which is very similar to luring a horse with a carrot on a stick.

The current capitalistic system gives the impression of being the most efficient and effective system we could ever hope to adopt. But while Braverman argues for the economic efficiency of this system, it remains socially degrading to the vast majority of workers. It is unfortunate so many workers are subjected to degradation in the working environments imposed on them by profiteering capitalists, but attractive benefits packages and other forms of appreciation for employees can help to compensate for the monotony of work.

Employees typically do not achieve total fulfillment when they receive fringe benefits, but fringe benefits often provide a sense of encouragement for them to continue working and can also alleviate job dissatisfaction. The workers may not be satisfied with their line of work, but they might be satisfied with the appreciation and recognition they attain from certain awards, along with the satisfaction of the monetary benefits. The monetary benefits can, in turn, provide ample opportunity for the employees to gain fulfillment and satisfaction in life outside of the working environment.

This possibility for a fuller life outside of the workforce seems to justify the working conditions that so many endure. Although so many must perform robotic and mundane actions, they at least work under civilized working environments in the United States and are able to sustain a comfortable lifestyle with the money that they earn. If these simple jobs were not made available to the masses, the unemployment rate would skyrocket, and this would almost surely lead to more serious problems than job dissatisfaction.

¹² *Chamber Survey Shows Worker Benefits Continue Growth Medical Payments Account for Largest Share of Employee Benefit Costs.* U.S. Chamber of Commerce. <http://www.uschamber.com/press/releases/2004/january/04-07.htm>. January 21, 2004.