

The Nature of Work

Also by Paul Thompson

Working the System: New Technology and the Shop Floor
(with Eddie Bannon)

Work Organisation: A Critical Introduction
(with David McHugh: forthcoming)

The Nature of Work

**An introduction to debates
on the labour process**

Second Edition

Paul Thompson

palgrave
macmillan



© Paul Thompson 1983, 1989

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1956 (as amended), or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 33-4 Alfred Place, London WC1E 7DP.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

First edition 1983

Reprinted 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988

Second edition 1989

Published by
MACMILLAN EDUCATION LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Typeset in Great Britain by
Styleset Limited
Salisbury, Wiltshire

ISBN 978-0-333-49504-9 ISBN 978-1-349-20028-3 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-20028-3

To Betty and John
Elsie and Reg

Contents

<i>Preface to the First Edition</i>	ix
<i>Preface to the Second Edition</i>	xi
<i>Glossary of Labour Process Terms</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
PART ONE THE ESTABLISHED TRADITIONS	
1 The Sociological Study of Work	11
Workplace Behaviour	13
Origins of industrial sociology	14
Post-war plant sociology	15
Technology, work organisation and alienation: a critique	19
Organisation, Hierarchy and Control	23
Bureaucracy and capitalism	25
Radical perspectives	28
Class, Work and Industrial Society	29
Orientations to work	30
Post-industrial societies	32
Conclusion: Contrasts and Continuities	34
2 Marx and the Idea of the Labour Process	38
The General Character of the Labour Process	38
The Capitalist Labour Process	40
From the workshop to large-scale industry	43
The division of labour	44
Mechanisation and its effects	46

Theory and Reality: a Reflection	52
One Step Backwards: Explaining the Drift from the Labour Process	58
Politics and the workplace	58
Already existing socialism	60
Conclusion	63
PART TWO THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATES	
3 Braverman and the Re-discovery of the Labour Process	67
New Beginnings: Theory and Practice	68
The Degradation of Work: The Braverman Thesis	71
Taylorism and control	73
Deskilling: science and technology in the service of capital	77
From production to society	83
The class structure	86
Conclusion	87
4 Deskilling: The Degradation of Labour?	89
The Deskilling Debate	89
Craft: Destruction and Resistance	92
The perspective	93
The critique	95
The Theoretical Issues	100
Labour markets and capitalist development	101
Worker resistance, skill and job control	106
The Contemporary Restructuring of Work	108
Motive forces for change	109
The application of new technology	111
The persistence of limits to deskilling	115
Conclusion: The Unsubstantiated Connections	118
5 Forms of Control and Resistance	122
The Origins of Capitalist Control	123
The Development of Systematic Management	126
Taylorism reassessed	127

Contents

vii

The Frontier of Control	133
Direct control and responsible autonomy	134
The significance of job enrichment	138
A new frontier?	143
Contested Terrain: The Edwards Thesis	144
Managerial experiments	144
Interrelations between modern control structures	146
Conclusion: The Dimension of Control	150
6 Legitimation and Consent in Work	153
Work and Consciousness: Alternative Problematics	155
Traditional Marxism	155
Sociology	157
The Manufacture of Consent	159
Games and practices	160
From coercion to consent?	163
The Limits to Workplace Consent	165
The perpetuation of conflict	167
The Relevance of External Factors	170
Class, culture and trade unionism	172
The social preparation for work	175
Conclusion: Integrating Consent	176
7 The Other Division of Labour	180
Women: Labour Market and Labour Process	181
Opportunity and inequality	182
The academically invisible woman?	184
The Application of Marxist Categories	187
Marx and female wage labour	188
Braverman: the feminist critique	190
An industrial reserve army?	192
Conclusion	195
Patriarchy and Capital	196
The parameters of partnership	198
The Family, Wages and Work	201
The feminisation of jobs	203
The consolidation of women's work	205
Recent trends	206
Conclusion: The Analysis of Stratification	207

PART THREE THEORETICAL ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

8 Towards a Core Theory	213
New Forms of Work Organisation	214
The Deskilling Debate Revisited	214
From flexible specialisation to Japanisation: a new work organisation paradigm?	218
Or new wine in old bottles?	224
Conceptualising Control	229
Capital, Labour and Managerial control	231
Reconstructing a case for control	234
The Core Theory	241
Retraining the Boundaries of Analysis	246
 <i>End-notes</i>	 251
 <i>A Short Guide to Labour Process Literature</i>	 274
 <i>Bibliography</i>	 278
 <i>Index</i>	 299

Preface to the First Edition

My interest in the labour process first developed in political activity with shop stewards and shopfloor workers in the motor industry on Merseyside in the early 1970s. The experiences of the restructuring of work and pay began to be put to academic use in subsequent years of part-time research at Liverpool University. At first most of the innovative writings on the changing nature of work and class derived from Italy and France. All that changed with the publication of Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* in 1974, and the explosion of interest in the labour process that followed in its wake.

My research became increasingly directed towards tying together and evaluating the new debates, comparing them with older sociological traditions. This book draws on the knowledge I gained in those years, although its scope, aims and content are very different. I owe a considerable debt to Tony Lane for his encouragement and support through that period. Richard Hyman, too, was kind enough to give me some very useful advice which helped me to revise a number of my ideas about labour process theory and its limitations.

In working on the present book, my thanks go to Theo Nichols for a set of fair and useful comments on the whole manuscript, and to Dave Robertson and Lynne Segal for looking at particular chapters. I have continually drawn on the advice and knowledge of Mike Jones, the discussions between us contributing considerably to the development of my own ideas. In addition, the critical attention of Hazel Davies to the style of the manuscript has greatly added to its

readability. My editor at Macmillan, Steven Kennedy, has also been an invaluable source of help in improving its form and content. Responsibility in all respects remains, of course, my own.

Thanks also go to Jean Pearson for work on the bibliography and index; and while most of the typing of the manuscript was my own, Tricia Houghton was kind enough to help with some of the chapters. Most of all, I would like to record my debt to Jill and our daughter Jane who have tolerated what often appeared to be endless periods of work on the book and its forerunners. Without their support such efforts could never have been completed.

Liverpool
December 1982

PAUL THOMPSON

Preface to the Second Edition

Many people influenced and helped me in preparing this second edition. The feeling that there is a distinctive labour process debate has been greatly facilitated by the Annual Aston-UMIST Conference on the Organisation and Control of the Labour Process. These conferences have allowed me and many others to receive feedback and test ideas in a sympathetic and critical environment. David Knights and Hugh Wilmott deserve considerable credit for putting in the practical and intellectual work to make this happen.

Graeme Salaman and Stephen Wood have encouraged and supported my work; and Peter Armstrong's humour, penetrating analysis and commitment has helped keep me sane and on the right path.

Fairly soon after the publication of the first edition, I moved to Lancashire Polytechnic. My colleagues there have been consistently supportive. I would particularly like to thank Jim McGoldrick. Whenever ideas needed exploring, I have been able to pop next door to continue our increasingly similar intellectual journey. I hope that I've been as useful to Jim as he has been to me. My students, too, especially on the 'People and Work' course, have provided valuable feedback.

Visting the Institute of Advanced Studies in Vienna during 1987 gave me a chance to put many of my ideas in order and enable them to be given a much-needed critical jolt. I would particularly express my thanks to Georg Aichholzer, Gerd Schienstock and Jörg Flecker.

My family have again supported me and put up with a disappearing act, though this time of a mercifully shorter duration. Finally I would like to thank Victoria Yogman and Steven Kennedy at Macmillan for their advice and encouragement in getting out this second edition.

August 1988

PAUL THOMPSON

Glossary of Labour Process Terms

The aim of this glossary is not to produce a set of definitions for the complete range of sociological and Marxist concepts, but rather to deal with those terms used throughout the text which have specific relevance to the labour process.

alienated work Work performed under conditions in which the worker is estranged from his or her own activity in the act of production, through the sale of labour power and the subordination of skills and knowledge to the capitalist, or other external social forces.

automation A form of production in which all manual intervention by the worker is eliminated, in some cases to be replaced by supervision, monitoring or control of machinery. It includes a number of types such as continuous process, numerical control and automated assembly; and is distinguished from *mechanisation*, which concerns the operation of tools or machinery through sources independent of the worker's manual dexterity.

capitalism A mode of production based on the generalised production of commodities for exchange and profit.

collective worker At a certain stage of capitalist production, manual and intellectual workers are combined together in association by the machine system. The term is used to stress the partial interchangeability of functions, and the potential for genuine co-operation in the labour process in a socialist society. See also *homogenisation*.

- control system** Mechanisms by which employers direct work tasks, discipline and reward workers, and supervise and evaluate their performance in production. See also *subordination*.
- deskilling** Incorporation of the crafts, knowledgeable practices and elements of job control held by workers into the functions of management, or operation of machinery.
- division of labour** This is not the existence of different jobs, but the simplifying and fragmentation of tasks into smaller parts, so as to cheapen and control the costs of labour. Marx also uses a distinction between this *technical* division and the *social* division of labour, related to wider societal processes through which workers are allocated to different branches of production. This has relevance to the analysis of relations between social hierarchies of race and sex, and hierarchies in work.
- fetishism** The process in production whereby the workings of the market, exploitation and private ownership *appear* as natural and inevitable rather than social relations capable of transformation.
- forces and relations of production** A distinction between skills, machinery and other physical properties of production, and the social relations of ownership, command and control. These are held by Marx to act constantly on one another, enabling a critique to be made of those who believe that science and technology are neutral.
- Fordism** A term used by some labour process theorists which extends the technique of factory production – based on the assembly-line – developed by Ford into a category referring to a general stage in capitalist production.
- homogenisation** Controversial term used by Marx and other labour process writers to refer to the equalisation of types of work under the impact of *deskilling* and related trends.
- intellectual and manual labour** All human labour involves mind and body, but this concept is used to describe the separation of *conception* and *execution* that is built into the design of jobs, reflecting the objectives of capital.
- job enrichment** One form of work humanisation by employers. It is often used as a generic description of a number of different processes of enlarging, aggregating and rotating tasks.

- labour market** The means of allocating and pricing jobs in the economy as a whole, and within particular firms (an *internal* labour market).
- labour power** The capacity to work which is transformed into *labour* that produces value for the capitalist through the creation of commodities.
- labour process** The means by which raw materials are transformed by human labour, acting on the objects with tools and machinery: first into products for use and, under capitalism, into commodities to be exchanged on the market.
- large-scale industry** A term used by Marx to distinguish between the mature factory system in which the labour process is transformed by the uses of science and machinery, and previous stages such as *manufacture* (dominated by the introduction of the division of labour), and *co-operation* (characterised by the concentration of workers into the same or connected processes by the capitalist).
- reproduction of labour power** The wider means of ensuring the continuity of wage labour through the organisation of the fundamental material and social needs of human life — food, clothing, leisure, etc. This is a crucial part of connections between the labour process and institutions such as the family.
- reserve army of labour** What Marx described as a relative surplus population of unemployed workers, or potential workers — such as the sporadically employed, housewives and migrants — who form a necessary part of the working mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production.
- subordination of labour** Marx used these terms in a more precise way than that of *control*. The *formal* subordination of labour is established when workers and their skills are subsumed in a labour process under the control of the capitalist. This is ultimately transformed into *real* subordination through the incorporation of science and machinery within the expanded scale of production — which, in turn, allows a qualitatively new and more effective means of domination of labour.
- Taylorism** Management control strategy named after F. W. Taylor. The first systematic theory and practice of management, its defining characteristic has been the attempt to

separate mental and manual labour, subjecting both to exact measurement. Taylorism spawned a more general movement known as *scientific management*.

valorisation The process of creating surplus value. The labour process only becomes distinctively capitalist when it is combined with valorisation.

worker resistance A widely used term by labour process writers to refer to informal *and* organised worker opposition to management and employers in the labour process. It is more specific to work than the often misleading application of the concept of 'class struggle'.