

This article forms the final section of a lengthy study, "Two Roads from Marx: The Themes of Alienation and Exploitation, and Workers' Control in Socialist Thought," which was given as a paper at the international seminar on Workers' Participation in Management, held in Vienna, Sept. 19-25, 1958, under the auspices of the Congress for Cultural Freedom.

MEANING IN WORK—A NEW DIRECTION

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In recent years there has arisen a sophistication which understands that the abolition of private property alone will not guarantee the end of exploitation. The problem has been posed as: how does one check bureaucracy. The problem is a real one. In socialist thought the "new" answer is to raise again the theme of "workers' control." This has shaped the demand for *comités d'entreprise* in France, for *mitsbestimmungsrecht* in Germany, and is emerging in Britain as the left-wing answer to the British Labor Party's plan, "Industry and Society." It underlay, of course, the demand for workers' councils in Poland and Yugoslavia. I have no quarrel with the demand *per se*. But often it is difficult to know what the concept means.

In Communist theory (to the extent there has been one apart from the opportunistic absorption of syndicalist ideas), the slogan of "workers' control" was conceived of almost entirely in *political* terms, as one of the means of undercutting the economic power of the employer class under capitalism, as a means *to* power, but not as a technique of democratization or the administration of industry *in* a socialist society.*

At the other extreme there were the detailed, imaginative, but unworkable blueprints pieced together by the medievalists, distributivists and syndicalists who formed the Guild Socialist movement in Britain before and after World War I. The movement has been insufficiently appreciated for the Guild Socialists wrestled, as did the earlier Fabians, with concrete problems of administration. Most of the questions which

* See, for example, the explicit statement by Trotsky, the 1931 letter entitled *Ueber Arbeiterkontrolle der Produktion*, reprinted in *The New International*, May-June 1951, pp. 175-178. "For us," said Trotsky, "the concept of workers' control exists within the scope of a capitalist regime, under bourgeois domination . . . [it] means a kind of economic dual power in the factory, banks, business enterprises, etc. . . . Thus a workers' control regime, by its very nature, can only be thought of as a provisional, transitional regime during the period of the shattering of the bourgeois state . . ."

beset socialist and managerial societies today were anticipated and thrashed out in Guild Socialist debates. They were aware that nationalization of the means of production might result in the exploitation of the individual Guilds by the State (e.g., the building of unwanted new investment at the expense of consumption or leisure, the setting of high work norms, etc.). On the other hand, syndicalism, or the ownership of production by the individual Guilds, might lead to a separatism or "parochial imperialism" whereby a single Guild might seek to benefit at the expense of others. The Guildsmen "solved" the problem by vesting title to capital and land in the State, but leasing the property to the Guilds at a rent (or interest) large enough to cover Government expenses. Politically, the Guild State was to be composed of a bicameral body, the one a geographical Parliament, the other made up of functional (i.e., vocational) representatives. The consumer, through Parliament, was to set the goals of production; the Council of Guild Representatives was responsible for the efficient conduct of industry. Each Guild was to be a self-governing body, based on local councils; membership was to be open freely, but if jobs were unavailable, the State was to support the waiting applicant until he could work. Each Guild was set to its own condition of work—tempo, grievance procedures, etc. The Guild would receive money in proportion to its membership, but, could distribute the shares in accordance with the wishes of the membership, either in equal shares or in differentials according to skills. In contrast to production, distribution was to be under the control of the State, with Parliament determining wage and price levels, and the general level of new investment. Foreign trade, inevitably, would be a Government monopoly. But ordinary forms of personal property, homes, autos, etc., would be left to the individual.

As a compromise between statism and syndicalism, Guild Socialism has given us many useful guides. Its weakness is that it sought to grapple with too many problems and that it set forth too detailed a blueprint. It was, paradoxically, too rational. Human societies cannot be made over *de novo*. One has to begin, pragmatically, with existing structures and with the character, temperament, and traditions—and desires—of the people concerned.

IF THE SLOGAN of "workers' control" is raised, the simple starting point, perhaps, is to ask: workers' control over *what*? Control over the entire economy? This is unfeasible. A syndicalist society is too much a single-interest affair, which, if extended with its own bureaucracy, would simply substitute one form of interest domination for another. In a single industry, or enterprise? One can question, further, whether this, too, is a meaningful—realistic—concept.* The British

* Hannah Arendt, the keenest student of totalitarianism, and a sympathetic critic of the idea of workers' councils, writes apropos of the Hungarian and Polish experiences of 1957: "... it is quite doubtful whether the political principle of equality and self-rule can be applied to the economic sphere of life as well. It may be that ancient political theory, which held that economics, since it was bound up with the necessities of life, needed the rule of masters to function well, was not so

T.U.C. report, in 1932, on *The Control of Industry*—which accepted the public corporation rather than Guild structure as the form of nationalized property, and joint consultation rather than syndicalist organization as the form of social control—was a hard-headed recognition of the limits of workers' control. And the new British Labor Party program on "Industry and Society," which extends the idea of social control, through State ownership of shares in enterprises, although increasing the risk of a new "managerial" class society, is, in principle, a large step forward in creating "social accountability" of corporations to society,* which is the aim, too, of workers' control.

The major confusion in the idea of workers' control, as it has been put forward by socialists and syndicalists, is that the word *control* has always had a double meaning: as direction (e.g., to control the course of an automobile) and as a check (e.g., to control someone's rage). Usually, in the debates on workers' control, the proponents have rarely singled out the different meanings. Roughly speaking, socialists have talked of workers' control to mean direction, management of an enterprise by the workers themselves, or the participation in management. This latter sense is the meaning of workers' control as it is being tried in Yugoslavia. The difficulty inherent in worker participation in management is that it tends to minimize the separate interest of workers from management, and to rob the workers of an independent status in the plant. Historically, the trade union has been a restrictive and protective organization, acting to defend workers' interests. Where the union has become an instrument to "control" the workers, in the interests of national unity or for the state, workers have formed substitute bodies. This was the history of the shop stewards movement in Britain during World War I, of the workers' councils in Poland in October 1956. In Yugoslavia today, the Communist Party is in a dilemma. Because the workers have been brought into participation in management, there seems to be no functional role for the union; and some theorists have gone so far as to say that the trade unions ought to be eliminated. In Britain, on the other hand, the unions in nationalized industries have consistently refused to participate on the Boards of Management, or to take responsibility for production. The union continues to act as an independent, defensive institution vis-a-vis management.

Is there, then, no role at all for workers' control? If there is any meaning to the idea of workers' control, it is control—in the shop—

* Even joint consultation, it should be pointed out, runs the risk of being a catchword. One can point out, wryly, that in practice joint consultation, may simply become a "buck-passing" mechanism whereby each of the parties, managers as well as works' council representatives, evades its own responsibilities. For a revealing picture of this, particularly for those who fear the spectre of "managerialism," see the study by Elliot Jaques, *The Changing Culture of a Factory*, Tavistock Publications, London 1951.

wrong after all." For her extraordinary discussion of the meaning of the spontaneous emergence of workers' councils during the 1957 events, see her article "Totalitarian Imperialism," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 20, 1958, pp. 5-43.

over the things which directly affect his work-a-day life: the rhythms, pace, and demands of work; a voice in the setting of equitable standards of pay; a check on the demands of the hierarchy over him. These are perhaps "small" solutions to large problems, what Karl Popper has called "piecemeal technology," but look where the eschatological visions have led!

LET US SEPARATE out two things which are crucial, I believe, in affecting the worker in the plant: one is the question of equity in treatment; the other is the impact of technology and an engineering culture on the work process itself.

By *equity*, a worker wants a situation where no supervisor should have arbitrary or capricious power over him, and where some channel exists whereby his own grievances find an impartial adjudication. And secondly, by *equity*, a worker wants to be assured that his wage, *relative to others in the plant or area*, is fair. The question of differentials in wages is a difficult one. In the past these differentials have been set by custom, or by the supply-and-demand balances in the market. In recent years, engineers have sought, through job evaluation schemes, to set up "impartial" intervals between classes of jobs. Often these have failed because the "ornery" workers refuse to believe that mechanical criteria, mechanically applied, constitute equity; and sometimes because "power" groups in a plant refuse to recognize a scheme which disadvantages them.* In the West, by and large, the functions of the unions (or of shop committees, since in Germany, for example, the unions deal with regional wage policies and have no roots in the shops) have been directed, with a large measure of success, to securing recognized standards of equity written into collective-bargaining contracts. The principles of seniority, of arbitration and umpire procedures, of union determination of methods of sharing wage increases (e.g., through equal or across-the-board allocations, or through percentage increases), all attest to the victory of the workers' conception of equity, rather than the employers', in the matter of fair treatment in the plant.

But in the second aspect of control, in the challenge to the work process itself, the unions have failed. The most characteristic fact about the American factory worker today—and probably the worker in factories in other countries as well—is his lack of interest in work. Few individuals think of "the job" as a place to seek any fulfillment. There is quite often the camaraderie of the shop, the joking, gossip, and politicking of group life. But *work* itself, the daily tasks which the individual is called upon to perform, lacks any real challenge, and is

* For an interesting attempt to set an "objective" standard of pay differentials, see the article by Elliot Jaques in *The New Scientist*, July 3, 1958 (London), p. 313. Jaques believes that by measuring the "time-span" which an individual has to perform jobs on his own initiative, without review, he is able to elicit "an unrecognized system of norms of what constitutes fair payment for any given level of work," and that these norms are "intuitively recognized by the people at work themselves." This would lead, says Jaques, to "an empirical basis for a national wages and salary policy."

seen only as an irksome chore to be shirked, or to be finished as best as possible. Most workers, by and large, are not articulate about work. Questionnaires and surveys provide merely the muttered semi-approvals or disapprovals, the grudging assents, or the grunted displeasures which mask the "to-hell-with-it-all" attitude of the individual who feels his life-space constricted.* But the behavior itself becomes a judgment. First and foremost, it appears in the constant evasion of thought about work, the obsessive reveries (often sexual) while on the job, the substitution of the glamour of leisure for the drudgeries of work. Yet the harsher aspects are present as well. It takes the form of crazy racings on the job or what the workers call the "make-out" game, i.e., the break-neck effort to fulfill one's quotas early in order to lounge for the rest of the hour or day (and it is striking to see how this pattern is recapitulated identically by the Soviet worker in his habit of "storming"), by the sullen war against production standards, and, most spectacularly, even if infrequently, by the eruption of "wildcat strikes."**

Contemporary sociology has come to the melancholy, and defeatist conclusion, that technology as "progress" cannot be reversed.† In a rational order one would *reduce* to as little time as possible the number of hours spent in irksome work, and then find respite in leisure. But is this the case? Can we not do something about the nature of the work process itself?

ACTUALLY, THE ROOT of alienation lies *not* in the *machine*—as romantics like William Morris or Friedrich Junger were prone to say—but in the concept of *efficiency* which underlies the organization of the work process. The idea of efficiency dictates a breakdown of work and a flow of work in accordance with engineering rationality. It seeks to increase output by erasing any "waste"; and waste is defined as those moments of time which are not subject to the impersonal control of the work process itself. Central to the idea of efficiency is a notion of measurement. Modern industry in fact, began not with the

* Some sociologists deny that workers in a plant tend to be unhappy, and point to survey data—much of it collected by management—to show that the workers are fairly well satisfied with the job. The argument misses two essential points: One, there may be other aspects than work itself which provide some satisfaction, e.g., the clique or the group, and, second, no questionnaire on satisfaction is meaningful unless the worker is aware of alternative possibilities of work. (This, I suppose is the meaning of the old saw: how can you keep them down on the farm once they've seen Paree? A farmer never having seen or known Paree may be satisfied with his lot; but is he, once he knows wider horizons? My quarrel with industrial sociology—see my article "Adjusting Men to Machines," *Commentary*, July 1947, and my essay on *Work and Its Discontents*—is that not only has industrial sociology accepted managerial biases in conceptualizing what is a problem (e.g., the idea of "restriction of output") but that it has failed to conceive of alternative methods of organization of work so as to provide real choices for a worker.

** The most comprehensive account of the effect of machine labor on human personality can be found in George Friedmann's *Ou va le Travail Humaine?*, Paris, 1951. Most of this is included in the translation by Harold Sheppard published in *Industrial Society*, Free Press, 1958. See, too, Alvin Gouldner, *Wildcat Strike*, Antioch Press, 1953.

† See David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, as a prime example.

factory—the factory has been known in ancient times—but with measurement. Through measurement we passed from the division of labor into the division of time. Through measurement, industry was able to establish a calculus of time and pay a worker on the basis of units of work performed. But the value of work itself could only be defined in terms of its cost to the user; and cost was—and is—conceived primarily in narrow market terms. Thus the psychological costs of indifference or neuroses, the social costs of road and transport, are charges all outside the interest and control of the enterprise. Thus such a consideration, for example, as the size of a factory is determined largely by the possibility of increasing output rather than by the costs involved in travel time for the worker, community crowding, etc. In these situations the human being is taken as one more variable in the process, and quite often a very subordinate one. Our emphasis has been on economic growth, increased output, but not on what kind of men are being molded by the work process. Even the recent vogue of “human relations” has been considered a justified cost to management not in terms of increasing satisfaction in work but of increasing output. The assumption has been made, of course, that if a worker is more satisfied he will increase his output. But what if the costs of satisfaction, involved in reorganizing the work process, mean a *decreased* output? What then? Which “variable” does one seek to maximize: the satisfaction of the work group, or the productivity of the enterprise?

I have tried to spell out in some detail elsewhere* the reasons why the cult of efficiency has been an unanalyzed assumption in the “logics” of modern industry. Some of it is due to a utilitarian rationality (one of the sources, too, for the practical British bent for seeing problems in “administrative” rather than ideological terms); much to early technological necessity since the nature of early steam power required the bunching of work. Once the goal of efficiency was established, however, the rationalization of work began; so, in Taylorism, we have the detailed breakdown of time, and with Gilbreth the economizing of motion.

In the United States apart from questions of production standards, the unions have failed to challenge the organization of work. To do so would require a radical challenge to society as a whole: to question the location of industry or size of plant is not only to challenge managerial prerogatives, it is to question the logic of a consumption economy whose prime consideration is lower costs and increasing output. Moreover, how could any single enterprise, in a competitive situation, increase its costs by reorganizing the flow of work, without falling behind its competitors?

But this is not only a failing of “capitalist” society. In the socialist

* See my book *Work and Its Discontents*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1956, for a discussion of the relation of efficiency to the concepts of rationality, and the necessary relationship of meaningful work to meaningful play and leisure. Shorter and variant versions have been published in *L.P.E. Papers*, Number 4, “Work in the Welfare Age,” London, July 1956, and “Notes on Work,” *Encounter*, July 1954.

societies, sadly, there has been almost no imaginative attempt to think through the meaning of the work process. In Britain, this has been, in part, the heritage of the Webbs, and their own concept of efficiency (capitalism for them was waste and anarchic; socialism would be a "tidy" society). But of equal weight is the fact that with outmoded machinery and in a falling world market, British society has been forced to think primarily of productivity in order to compete in the world markets. And who, today, would challenge the God of Productivity, if it might mean a lowered standard of living?

In Communist countries, where minority dictatorship has sought to speed rapid industrialization, the effects on the workers have been even harsher. Lenin's solution for the disorganization of production, for example, in a famous speech in June 1919, was to introduce piecework and Taylorism, in order to discipline the workers!*

In the West, at least, where dehumanized work results in increasing productivity, the fruits of that productivity are shared with the workers. In the Communist countries, not only is work dehumanized but the social surplus through "primitive accumulation" goes to enhance the power of the State.

For under-developed countries, where living standards are pitifully low, it is difficult to talk of sacrificing production in order to make work more meaningful to the worker. Yet these are not, nor should they be put in either/or terms. Engineers have learned that if efficiency considerations are pushed too far—if work is broken down into the most minute parts and made completely monotonous—it becomes self-defeating. The question is always one of "how much." But the question must be stated and placed in the forefront of considerations.

One need not accept the fatalism of the machine process—or create new utopias in automation—to see that changes are possible. These range from such large-scale changes as genuine decentralization, which brings work to the workers rather than transporting large masses of workers to the work place, to the relatively minute but important changes in the pace of work, such as extending job cycles, job enlargement, allowing natural rhythms of work.**

The specifics are there: what is needed is a change of fundamental attitude. If one is to say, for example, that the worker is not a commodity, then one should take the step of abolishing piecework and eliminating the distinction whereby one man gets paid on a weekly or annual salary, and another man is paid by the piece or the hour. If one accepts again the heritage of the old socialist and humanist tradition of worker protest, then the work place itself and not the market should be the center of determination of pace and tempo of work. The "flow of demand," to employ the sociological jargon, must come from the worker himself rather than from the constraints imposed from above.

* "Scientific Management and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat," *Collected Works*, Vol. 7.

** See, for example, Charles A. Walker's *The Man on the Assembly Line*, for a fascinating discussion of changes in time cycles and the effect on work.

Even if costs were to rise, surely there is an important social gain in that the place where a man spends such a large part of his day becomes a place of meaning and satisfaction rather than of drudgery. Fifty years ago, few enterprises carried safety devices to protect workers' limbs and lives. Some protested that adoption of such devices would increase costs. Yet few firms today plead that they cannot "afford" to introduce safety devices. Is meaningfulness in work any less important?

Among Our Contributors . . . David Bazelon is a writer on literary and political subjects whose articles have appeared in many magazines. . . . Daniel Bell is the well-known writer on labor and political subjects; he is the author of a book on problems of work, as well as of a narrative history of American radicalism, which appeared in the Princeton University studies on American socialism. He is at present working on a study of Communism and the American labor movement. . . . David Spitz, who made his first DISSENT appearance during the discussion of Hannah Arendt's article on the South, is a teacher of political science; his most recent book, "Democracy and the Challenge of Power," will be reviewed in the next issue by Mulford Sibley. . . . Suzanne Labin is a French journalist and historian, currently winner of the Prix de la Liberte; her article has been adapted from the French journal, *Revue Socialiste*. . . . Seymour Melman is a teacher of economics who has recently published a much-discussed book on disarmament and a study of factory life called "Decision Making and Productivity." . . . Norman T. DiGiovanni is a young writer who has published reviews in *The Nation* and is currently working on a book about the Italian neighborhood of Boston.