

# **Labor and Capital in the Age of Globalization**

**The Labor Process and the  
Changing Nature of Work in  
the Global Economy**



**Edited by  
BERCH BERBEROGLU**



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# Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Preface

Introduction - The Political Economy of the Labor Process in the Age of Globalization

1 - Labor and Capital at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century

2 - Labor, Capital, and the Struggle for Control at the Point of Production

3 - The Labor Process and the Transformation of Corporate Control in the Global Economy

4 - Working Women and the Dynamics of Power at Work

5 - Race, Nationality, and the Division of Labor in U.S. Agriculture

6 - The Global Economy and Changes in the Nature of Contingent Work

7 - The Political Economy of Global Accumulation and Its Emerging Mode of Regulation

8 - Women's Work and Resistance in the Global Economy

9 - Dynamics of Globalization: Transnational Capital and the International Labor Movement

10 - Globalization of Capital and Class Struggle

Bibliography

Index

About the Contributors

About the Editor

# Preface

As we enter the twenty-first century, the continued deterioration of life under capitalism in the United States and around the world is posing a challenge to the working class everywhere to forge ahead with a program of action to fulfill the interests and aspirations of workers throughout the world.

The development of capitalism and the capitalist labor process during the twentieth century has resulted in control over labor to assure its continued exploitation and production of ever-higher levels of surplus value, which constitutes the very basis of the accumulation of capital under the capitalist system. This process of control and exploitation of labor had developed and matured during the nineteenth century in line with the growth and development of capitalism in Europe and the United States from its competitive to monopoly stages in all major sectors of industry across the domestic and later the world economy. In this expansive process, the state has come to play a central role to protect and advance the interests of capital against labor in the intense class struggle that has been maturing over the course of the past century. As the globalization of capital accelerates, and its internal logic and contradictions become apparent, the situation is bound to facilitate the further organization and radicalization of labor, while the state becomes less and less able to deal with (let alone “resolve”) the contradictions generated by the globalization process.

An examination of the nature and dynamics of the labor process in various sectors of the U.S. and world economy—from auto to steel to agriculture to services—would provide us with the necessary insight to an understanding of the nature of work under capitalism and relations between labor and capital at the point of production. Such relations, which are at base a manifestation of larger, capitalist relations of production (i.e., class relations), become evident in their social form as workers confront capital and capitalist management who extract from them an ever-growing sum of surplus value or profits. It is in this context of the struggle between labor and capital at the point of production that we begin to see the class nature of this struggle—a struggle that in its broader *class* context becomes a *political* struggle involving the state, hence a struggle for state power. The balance of forces in this class struggle beyond point-of-production work relations translates into a struggle for preservation or transformation of the capitalist system itself.

It is for a clear understanding of the labor process and control of labor under advanced capitalist production—a process that explains the structure of work relations within the context of broader class relations at the global level—that this project was conceived and carried out with the collective participation of the contributors to this book. The detailed analyses of the changing nature of work in late-twentieth-century U.S. and world economy is the product of the intellectual work of a dedicated group of

progressive academics and activists who, deeply concerned with the condition of labor and its prospects, have expended much time and effort to expose the inner logic of global capitalist production. They hope that an understanding of the underlying contradictions of advanced, global capitalism can be used by those who side with labor to effect change toward the ultimate transformation of capitalist society into a social order based on the power and dynamism of labor throughout the world.

I would like to thank, first and foremost, all the contributors to this book: Jerry Lembcke, David Gartman, Harland Prechel, Marina Adler, John Leggett, Robert Parker, Behzad Yaghmaian, Julia Fox, Cyrus Bina, Chuck Davis, Walda Katz-Fishman, Jerome Scott, and Ife Modupe. Over the years friends and colleagues at the University of Nevada, Reno, and other universities across the United States and the world have made an important contribution to discussions on the labor process, the nature of work, and the relationship among labor, capital, and the state in the global economy. I thank all of them for their crucial role in shaping the ideas that went into the structure and organization of this book.

This book was originally published in the early 1990s under the title *The Labor Process and Control of Labor: The Changing Nature of Work Relations in the Late Twentieth Century*. This special, revised, updated, and expanded edition, under the title *Labor and Capital in the Age of Globalization: The Labor Process and the Changing Nature of Work in the Global Economy*, includes the latest available data and analysis in the light of recent developments in each of the major areas covered in the book. Chapters 3, 4, 6, 8, and 9 have been thoroughly revised and updated with the most recent data. An earlier chapter on the computer industry by Navid Mohseni has been dropped, and a new chapter on globalization and the state by Behzad Yaghmaian is added as a reprint from *Science & Society*, where it first appeared. I thank David Laibman, editor of the journal, for giving permission to reprint the article in this book.

Many of the arguments presented in the various chapters have been reformulated to address the relationship among labor, capital, and the state in a global context. While the ideas presented in these pages remain substantially the same, the changing nature of the global political economy at century's end has brought up new questions and concerns that are addressed here in a fresh, new way.

All in all, the ten chapters that constitute this book offer probing and provocative analyses on the labor process, the nature of work, and the relationship among labor, capital, and the state in the age of global capitalism.

# Introduction

## *The Political Economy of the Labor Process in the Age of Globalization*

*Berch Berberoglu*

As we enter the twenty-first century, the maturing contradictions of late capitalism—which have developed with great speed throughout the twentieth century—are surfacing in a variety of forms and are calling into question the process of capital accumulation that has facilitated the control and exploitation of labor in the United States and other countries for decades.

Although recent developments in the world economy have their roots in earlier decades when the consolidation of U.S. power began to take hold on a world scale, the transformation of the labor process through automation and high technology on the one hand, and the internationalization of capital and the restructuring of the international division of labor on the other, has effected changes in the nature of work at the point of production—changes that are a manifestation of broader social relations of production between labor and capital. In the struggle between the two contending classes that characterize the nature of the production process in capitalist society, the control and exploitation of labor are the dual motive forces of capital accumulation that assure its continued growth and expansion. While the logic of capitalist development during the twentieth century has led to the growth of transnational monopolies and thus effected transformations in the labor force structure, the labor process, and the nature of work at the point of production in various productive settings, the central characteristic of capital during this period has been the further intensification of control and exploitation of labor throughout the world.

Under capitalism, the intensification of the exploitative process at the point of production has meant the continuation of the struggle between labor and capital during its development, but the specific nature and forms of control of labor have varied from one industry or economic sector to another, as well as across national, regional, and international boundaries. Thus, the labor process and forms of labor control have historical and spatial dimensions. While, therefore, an analysis of the historical development of basic industries, such as auto and steel, reveals the methods and tools



of control used by management during capitalist development over the past century, an analysis of the labor process today as it develops in the context of the world economy shows us the varied forms of labor control and exploitation of labor on a world scale. In this sense, the internationalization of capital and its social component—the internationalization of capitalist relations of production, involving the exploitation of wage labor throughout the world—has ushered in a process of control, exploitation, and repression of labor across national boundaries that are now global in nature. The labor process under late capitalism must thus be seen within the context of its global dimensions, but it still manifests itself in determinate national settings. Thus, although the development of capitalism through its competitive and monopoly stages results in its expansion from the national to the global level, its contradictions at the higher, late-monopoly stage unfolding on a world scale affect the process of control and exploitation of labor in its own home base in a contradictory way: Expansion abroad translates into contraction at home and, thus, changes in the nature and structure of the labor force; the forms of control; and the nature, rate, and intensity of exploitation in different sectors of the economy.

As the class struggle between labor and capital develops and matures, and as the working class becomes increasingly class conscious and acts on behalf of its own class interests, the central imperative of transformation of the capitalist system demands a careful study of the nature, mechanisms, and processes of control and exploitation of labor in specific industries, sectors, and segments of the economy and the workforce.

The ten chapters in this book address these questions in varied historical, sectoral, spatial, and topical contexts, examining many of the issues central to the labor process, the changing nature of work, and the relationship between labor and capital in the U.S. and global economy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

The opening chapter by Jerry Lembcke examines a number of critical issues that confront labor in the United States. Providing a critical review of U.S. labor studies over the past few decades, Lembcke argues that although the volume of work on the labor process mounted during this period, its effect on the U.S. working class was minimal, as the inability of labor studies to inform the strategy of a revitalized working-class movement was an outcome of the theoretical and methodological choices made by labor process scholars. To the fragmentation currently characteristic of dominant approaches in labor studies, Lembcke's chapter counterposes an alternative analysis based on class as a relational phenomenon—a new, class-capacities approach to labor studies that captures the nature and role of labor in the class structure, an approach that is better able to explain the recent resurgence of the labor movement in the United States. Adopting such an approach, Lembcke opts for an analysis that understands class capacities as having inter- as well as intraclass dimensions, recognizes the historical and spatial dimensions of class power, and comprehends the dialectical relationship between production relations, union organization, and class consciousness.

Addressing the tough questions around which post-World War II labor politics revolved, Lembcke then examines some key issues that have confronted workers in the United States in recent years: plant closings; declining union membership; lower

living standards; automation and deskilling; level of class consciousness and political organization; and the role of the family, unions, and other mediating forces in the formation and transformation of labor and the labor process. Lembcke's essay thus sets the stage for more detailed class-based analyses of the nature, dynamics, and contradiction of the labor process in different historical, spatial, and organizational settings in late-twentieth-century global capitalist production.

In chapter 2, David Gartman takes up a study of labor and the labor process in the U.S. auto industry, which at the turn of the century set the stage for mass production of goods that gave a boost to capitalist expansion reaching far beyond the auto industry. Gartman examines the historical origins of a fundamental aspect of the mass-production process—the minute division of labor. Tracing its origins in the all-important U.S. auto industry, he finds that this was not a neutral technique used by capital merely to increase the efficiency of labor. Rather, the fragmentary division of labor introduced by Henry Ford and other capitalists in the mass production of automobiles was part of a larger political agenda of capital to shift the control of the labor process away from skilled craft workers and toward managers.

The early craft process of producing automobiles, Gartman explains, left a great deal of discretion in the hands of skilled assemblers and machinists, who used it to struggle against their own exploitation. This powerful resistance prevented managers from increasing the intensity of labor sufficiently to mass-produce cars. To overcome this class resistance, the management divided the unitary crafts of auto production into a plethora of unskilled fragments. This minute division of labor not only made jobs easier to fill, hence reducing the power of workers in the labor market, but it also reduced the power of workers in the production process by giving managers greater control over the quantity and quality of labor.

The class struggle, however, was not eliminated in the auto industry by this transformation of the labor process, Gartman argues. Although the division of labor and subsequent changes, like the moving assembly line, undermined the individual power of craft workers, they, ironically, increased the collective power of the new industrial labor force. With this new power, auto workers were able to force their employers to recognize their union and bargain collectively. The strength of employers, however, soon confined bargaining to the narrow issues of wages and benefits, leaving the basic structure of the labor process untouched.

Recently, Gartman points out, renewed class struggles and international competition have forced the automobile industry to reassess the benefits of the fragmented division of labor; they have instituted new programs of job enlargement and worker participation that give workers more responsibility in the labor process. A close examination of these programs, however, reveals them to constitute no fundamental threat to the balance of power held by capital on the industrial battlefield. They are but modest attempts to win greater identification of workers with the firm and greater managerial flexibility in the use of labor. In reality, Gartman concludes, these are merely revised tactics to achieve the long-term capitalist objective of greater control over labor and the labor process in the U.S. auto industry.

Shifting the discussion to another level of the labor process and authority structure

on the shop floor, Harland Prechel in his chapter on control over the labor process in the U.S. steel industry demonstrates how the application of neo-Fordist control centralizes authority, reduces the decision-making autonomy of lower and middle managers, and makes it possible to eliminate several layers of management. This change in the corporate structure was top management's response to contradictions and inefficiency within the Fordist mode of control that emerged as a crisis of capital accumulation in the early 1980s. Prechel points out that these changes were implemented through the imposition of formal rational controls over various spheres of the labor process. If managers fail to follow the rules governing the manufacturing process, these interrelated controls simultaneously identify the location of the subsequent cost variation and the manager or production worker responsible for that cost.

Prechel argues that the emergence of neo-Fordism has important implications for the distribution of authority. In addition to extending more precise control over production workers, neo-Fordism demands that lower and middle level managers base their decisions on criteria established in decision centers, redefines the responsibilities of lower- and middle-level managers, and reduces their decision-making autonomy. In contrast to Taylorist and Fordist modes of control, which require extensive managerial hierarchies and the allocation of decision-making authority to lower and middle managers, neo-Fordism reduces managerial hierarchies and simultaneously establishes formal controls to ensure that managers adhere to standardized decision-making criteria. The application of formally rational neo-Fordist controls increases mechanization, standardization, and centralization of authority.

Prechel shows that neo-Fordist controls have placed lower and middle managers in the steel industry at a greater distance from the decision-making centers, while providing the organizational capacity to increase surveillance over them. He argues that one-sided corporate strategies based on work teams, cooperative decision making, and participation on the shop floor masks the basic relations of domination and subordination that prevail when centralized controls are implemented. Rather than allocating authority, neo-Fordist controls centralize authority, which reduces autonomy while increasing responsibility and accountability of both traditional production workers and lower and middle management.

Marina Adler's chapter on gender and the labor process explores the position of women in the workplace. She points out that although working women make up nearly 50 percent of the U.S. workforce, they continue to be in a disadvantaged position compared with working men. Both occupational segregation and the traditional gender division of labor are perpetuated by the organization of work in modern capitalism.

One consequence of the interaction of capitalist and patriarchal structures, Adler argues, is the fact that working women are less likely than working men to have control over their labor. Moreover, in addition to the inequalities arising from the labor process, gender and race divide workers into different jobs and activities. This selection process ranks "gendered" tasks by their importance, resources, and remuneration. Because "women's work" has been historically undervalued, working women retain less control over their work environment than working men.

Adler points out that research on gender, occupational segregation, and power reveals a persistent income and authority gap by gender, which stems from the class and occupational structure of society: Women are overrepresented in occupations with lower average incomes than men's. Overall, Adler concludes, although both working men and women have relatively little control over the labor process—in terms of organizational decision making, supervisory activities, and autonomy—working women have significantly less control at work than working men.

Race, nationality, and the division of labor in U.S. agriculture is the topic of chapter 5. Here John Leggett focuses on farm workers in California's San Joaquin, Imperial, and Coachella valleys. Providing an intimate history of the diverse national origins of the workforce in California agriculture from earlier periods to the present, Leggett examines the division of labor in commercial farming in great detail and describes the multilayered relationship between the growers, the farm labor contractors, the crew chiefs, and the farm workers in the fields.

Given the race and national dimensions of farm labor in U.S. agriculture, historically and today, Leggett insists that one cannot comprehend the division of labor, the labor process, and the superexploitation and control of a segment of the working class in today's corporate agriculture, under conditions of globalization, without a clear understanding of the structural underpinnings of racial and national domination that have persisted in California agriculture ever since the expansion of white settlements, which began in the early nineteenth century. Although the racial and national origins of successive generations of local and immigrant labor have changed over the decades, Leggett concludes, the cruel forms of labor control practiced by a small number of wealthy white growers through their intermediaries on the land have been a constant feature of the lives of farm workers who labor under conditions of modern-day servitude that characterizes the division of labor in U.S. agriculture—a sector that is becoming increasingly important in affecting the production and distribution of food in the global economy.

Another issue concerning the changes taking place in the nature of work in the global economy is the problem of part-time work. In the chapter that follows, Robert Parker discusses changes surrounding the employment of contingent workers in the U.S. economy. He discusses the various types of contingent work in the labor force and points out that increasing numbers of workers are becoming a part of the contingent workforce in the United States, which is part of the process of the globalization of capital and the changes in the labor force structure on a world scale. The shift in production from the advanced capitalist centers to the Third World is related to the explosion of part-time, contingent work in the imperial centers. And this is creating a major problem for the structure of the labor force in the United States and other advanced capitalist countries.

In documenting the growth and spread of contingent employment, Parker stresses that the official government statistics that track the number of contingent workers has been modified over the past decade in ways that understate the true number of contingent workers. The key development in this area has been the creation of three separate definitions of contingent work—all of which rely on a narrow, restrictive

conception of contingent work. As Parker notes, underemployment is the defining characteristic that these workers share; it is this central characteristic that makes them contingent, and a distinctive part of the U.S. labor force.

In the last section of the chapter, Parker analyzes several trends that may slow down, or even reverse the move toward the conversion of large segments of the workforce to contingent status. Among these factors are the numerous legal and administrative problems that U.S. corporations have been encountering in their drive to convert their workforce into contingent labor. In some cases, as Microsoft has discovered, the fees and taxes involved in violating federal regulations that cover workers such as “independent contractors” can be substantial. But Parker also emphasizes that worker resistance, in many forms, is causing employers to rethink their labor relations strategies. More and more corporate executives, he argues, appear to understand that worker absenteeism, tardiness, sabotage, and strikes are a high cost to pay for the luxury of employing contingent workers.

Next, Behzad Yaghmaian focuses on the role of the state in the global political economy. He argues that the world economy is undergoing a process of restructuring, and that fundamental transformations are taking place in both the structure of the capitalist system and its institutional/regulatory counterparts. Yaghmaian goes on to point out that the underlying causes of some of the institutional changes, and their interrelations with the structural transformations in the world economy, can be revealed by synthesizing the theory of the internationalization of capital and the basic framework of regulation theory. The continuing internationalization of accumulation, he notes, has led to the gradual ascendance of neoliberalism—the regulatory mechanism for global accumulation.

Yaghmaian contends that institutional arrangements and apparatus conducive to the needs of the emerging hegemonic regime of accumulation and its regulation are being developed, and will lead to the formation of a nascent supranational state. However, the debate over whether this state will represent the collective will of the capitalist class across national boundaries and advance the interests of global capital as a whole, or be an extension of the rule of the dominant capitalist class of one or another of the major capitalist powers over the world economy through the traditional nation-state, will continue to rage in the coming years. In this light, Yaghmaian’s chapter forces us to confront this issue head-on and sets the stage for another round of discussion and debate on this important question that highlights the crucial relationship between capital and the state in the global political economy.

The internationalization of production and the employment of a low-wage labor force that increases corporate flexibility and profits in the global economy are examined next by Julia Fox. In her chapter on the new international division of labor, Fox attempts to address the strategic question of why Third World working women have been recruited and integrated into the global capital accumulation process. She develops a theoretical framework, that incorporates both the international division of labor as an outgrowth of the exigencies of capital accumulation on a world scale, and a more concrete analysis of work relations at the point of production on a national level. Within this framework, Fox focuses on the labor process in three countries (South

Korea, the Philippines, and Mexico) to analyze how the specific conditions of a labor-intensive investment strategy—export processing—require the use of the cheapest and most controlled segments of labor, and hence, at the national level, how four major conditions (patriarchy, bureaucratic control of work, repressive labor policies, and low instances of unionization of women) combine to produce the cheapest and most repressed forms of labor—Third World working women.

Fox argues that although the mediation of the political, cultural, social, and organizational dimensions of control make Third World working women one of the most exploited segments of the international labor pool, the internal contradictions of this exploitation have created the conditions for more militant forms of resistance in which Filipino, South Korean, and Mexican working women are becoming an integral part of the global working-class struggle against transnational capital.

Addressing the political implications of the transnationalization of capital and the emerging global labor process, Cyrus Bina and Chuck Davis raise the level of discussion to the political level in chapter 9. They examine the position and prospects of the international labor movement in response to the globalization of the production process and the proliferation of capitalist relations of production on a world scale.

Bina and Davis show that the transcendence of capitalist social relations beyond the boundaries of nation-states leads to the emergence of the global labor process and contradictions that are historically unique to the present stage of capitalism. They point out that the transnational character of today's production is the product of two simultaneous transformations: (1) the evolution of the labor process in advanced capitalist countries and (2) the spread of capitalist social relations into the less-developed countries at the various stages of economic development. Bina and Davis argue that it is due to these transformations that the current stage of globalization takes on a historical significance.

Bina and Davis further argue that the technological advancements, which have taken several decades to develop in the industrialized countries, have quickly found their way into the remaining part of the global economy during the last three decades. Today, these global technologies lead to fast-paced universal skill redundancy and skill formation (i.e., skills that are invoked by the machine) on the part of the working class everywhere. Bina and Davis conclude that today, given the rising complexity of technology and rising exploitation of the working class globally, the prospects for international working-class solidarity and cooperation are more promising than ever before.

In the final chapter, Walda Katz-Fishman, Jerome Scott, and Ife Modupe focus on the relationship among the changing role of labor in capitalist production, the crisis of capitalism, and the political response of the working class to increased control and exploitation of labor. They argue that a major change in the labor force structure of the United States has taken place during the past several decades, such that traditional machine-based factory production, which constituted the basis of U.S. manufacturing industry for more than a century, is giving way to computer-automated mass production. This development, coupled with the internationalization of U.S. capital since World War II in search of cheap labor, and a more favorable investment climate

overseas, has effected a shift toward low-paid service occupations and has led to increased unemployment among a growing segment of the working class—a situation that has become a permanent fixture of contemporary U.S. capitalism. The resulting decline in purchasing power and the standard of living of workers, who are now consuming less and less of the goods produced in a shrinking market, has plunged the U.S. economy into a structural crisis that has ushered in a period of decline and decay, pushing the country to the edge of depression.

Responding to this deteriorating economic situation, U.S. labor has begun to mobilize and take action to reverse the defeat it has suffered under an increased capitalist assault during this period. Documenting this response, Katz-Fishman, Scott, and Modupe survey the various forms of class struggle waged by workers at the point of production and beyond the shop floor, which are manifested in strikes, demonstrations, and other forms of protest and political action.

Together, the ten chapters of this book make an important contribution to the study of labor, the labor process, and the nature of work in late-twentieth-century global capitalism—processes that are a product of the relationship between labor, capital, and the state on a world scale.

# 1

## *Labor and Capital at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century*

*Jerry Lembcke*

The amount of academic work on labor history and the labor process during the last three decades of the twentieth century was impressive. Less impressive, however, was its impact on the crisis of the labor movement, which deepened during this period. Only in the latter half of the 1990s did labor show signs of resurgence.

In the pages that follow I argue that, although much of the study done on labor between 1970 and 1990 was carried out by radical historians and political economists, their work was based on assumptions consistent with those of neoclassical economics and pluralist sociology that dominated the field during the 1950s and 1960s. It is the failure to break with these assumptions, moreover, that impaired scholars' ability to find a path out of the labor movement's morass.

In this context, I highlight a new trend begun during the late 1980s that holds promise for future studies. Of particular importance is the theoretical work focusing on class capacities, and some recent work that explores the relationships between the temporal and spatial dimensions of working-class formation.



## **SOCIAL HISTORY AND DEGRADATION OF WORK**

In 1970, the editors of *Radical America* heralded the emergence of a new school of historiography.<sup>1</sup> The new trend was characterized by its separation from mainstream “celebrationist” accounts of U.S. history and by its critical posture toward the history of “old left” political practice.

Many of the new radical historians had been or were students of William Appleman Williams at the University of Wisconsin, but it was the British historian E. P. Thompson who had the greatest influence on their development. Thompson’s emphasis on the subjective aspects of human history encouraged the framing of historical questions in terms of “shared experiences.”<sup>2</sup> The new generation of radical scholars was captivated by the notion that history could be studied as occurring within a cultural context as well as a process that created the symbolic world.

The radicals also challenged the mainstream approach of the time: institutionalism. Institutionalism had arisen early in the twentieth century, when the theories of neoclassical economics, rooted as they were in psychological assumptions about human behavior, appeared to be inadequate to deal with the task of understanding monopoly capitalism. Thorstein Veblen and John R. Commons were among those who accorded increased importance to institutions as determinants of political and economic behavior. Commons and his student Selig Perlman took the institutionalist approach into the field of labor history and, until the 1970s, it was the dominant paradigm.<sup>3</sup>

The radicals attacked institutionalism at two levels. The first was the preoccupation of the institutionalists with trade unions as the sole vehicle through which working-class history unfolded and could thus be studied. The followers of Perlman had narrowed the field to the point where the only relationships being studied were the contractual ones, and the only subjects in their accounts were union functionaries, company negotiators, and government arbitrators.<sup>4</sup> The new left scholars rejected these traditional formulations and endeavored to restore workers to a class-conscious part in their own history.

At another level, the attack on institutionalism became a euphemism for criticism of practices identified with certain political tendencies. It was argued that institutions (unions, political parties, and so on) *per se* were prone to conservatism<sup>5</sup> and that the political movements, such as the Communist Party, which had emphasized the building of unions and party organizations in their work, had retarded the development of the U.S. working class.<sup>6</sup> In their work, the anti-institutionalists emphasized the place of mass movement, general strikes, spontaneous worker rebellions, and the anarcho-syndicalist traditions in the U.S. working-class experience.<sup>7</sup>

The ability of the social history trend to speak meaningfully to the deepening crisis of the U.S. labor movement of the 1970s was thus limited in several ways. First, its approach compelled questions relevant to the specific historical period when U.S. working-class culture was shaped by the influx of large numbers of immigrants and the heyday periods of anarcho-syndicalist movements, such as the International

Workers of the World (IWW). Second, it had an additive notion of class power based on the “association” of sovereign individuals in the production process. This notion elevated the role of craft and skilled workers in history, and dovetailed with the assumptions of the “degradation of labor” school of political economy.<sup>8</sup> Third, its disdain for certain political traditions sometimes led to contemptuous treatment of important organizations and to sectarian interpretations of critical turning points in U.S. labor history. Moreover, by equating working-class capacity with control of production, the trend toward deskilling, which accompanied the development of monopoly capitalism in the twentieth century, was difficult for social historians to deal with dialectically; the fact that masses of lesser skilled, industrial workers, not the craft and skilled workers, had been at the forefront of the battles of the 1930s was difficult to interpret. All of these traits made it difficult for radical historians to examine effectively the period most relevant to the needs of contemporary labor activists: the period of the CIO, 1935-1956.

In other words, the shift away from an institutional analysis also shifted attention away from the historical period when institutions were clearly the focus of labor history, and it refocused our attention on time periods leading up to the formation of unions and/or the very early years of organized labor—the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Embedded in the method of anti-institutionalism, then, was the political consequence that its adherents were able to avoid confronting head-on the anticommunism of the postwar labor establishment and the anticommunist bias of academic labor historians. In that respect, the new social labor history provided an ideological escape hatch for academics. As the 1980s proceeded and the crisis of the labor movement deepened, labor historians retreated further and further into the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries, endlessly producing case studies having less and less to do with the pressing issues facing the labor movement today.

The shift in focus produced by the anti-institutionalist trend had two other consequences. One was that it elevated the importance of craft and skilled workers, versus twentieth-century industrial workers, as agents of social change under capitalism. Another was that the prominence given to craft and skilled workers by the social historians carried with it implications for our analyses of the objective capacities to make social change. The latter question, about the relative capacity of skilled versus less-skilled workers to make change, was at the center of studies of the labor process done following the publication of Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital*.

Braverman has been credited with reviving the Marxist tradition of labor studies, and establishing the relationship between class relations and the development of technology.<sup>9</sup> His followers produced copious studies attempting to specify the relationships between technological change and job displacement, the labor market, skill level, and world system integration. The empiricism spawned by this “decomposed” research agenda rivals that of the social history trend, whereas its influence on the real world of labor strategy and tactics is equally hard to find.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to claims that Braverman restored Marxist premises to the study of labor, the deskilling school, like the social history trend, continued within, rather than broke with, the fundamental premises of its predecessors. Braverman wrote at about the

same time as the early social historians, when the dominant paradigm in the sociology of labor, based on neoclassical assumptions, was best represented by the work of Seymour Martin Lipset and his associates.<sup>11</sup> In accordance with the methodological empiricism dominant at the time, Lipset et al. defined their variables in ways that were neatly operationalized and quantifiable—occupational characteristics, such as income, skill level, and status, were associated with the voting habits of union members. Workers in lower-status skill and income levels were found to be less democratic in behavior. In this manner, Lipset et al. isolated work-related studies from larger historical and political economic contexts, and reduced the unit of analysis to the level of individuals and individual job characteristics.<sup>12</sup>

Most important, Lipset et al. inverted the relationship Marx identified between development and working-class capacity.<sup>13</sup> For Lipset et al., workers with the least skill were the least capable of what they considered socially efficacious behavior. These findings, of course, supported their hypothesis that only the middle class was capable of democracy, and they conformed to the prevailing Cold War ideology that the proletariat was prone to totalitarianism.

Despite the heavy polemics of radical academics against liberal sociology, much of the radical scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s retained the fundamental premises of liberal pluralism. The unit of analysis continued to be the individual or, as for Braverman, the properties of individual job positions. Working-class power, in these studies, was equated with aggregated individual sovereignty, albeit sovereignty in the workplace rather than in a political process. These studies were characterized by a strongly normative bias holding proletarianization or deskilling to be “bad,” and attempts at resisting proletarianization to be virtuous. Finally, these studies located the cutting edge of history at the interface between monopoly and competitive forms of production, and elevated the central importance of the labor aristocracy in the historical process. In sociology, the result has been a virtual preoccupation with the “middle class.”

There is no gainsaying the fact that the voluminous empirical contributions of historians and political economists working within the respective schools of social history and degradation of work have advanced the field of labor studies enormously. What is also true is that the paradigmatic flaws they inherited from their predecessors were not corrected for, with the result that they continue to impair the field.

A summary of the problems as they currently manifest themselves in the study of labor is, first, that the working class has been more or less written off the agenda. Work done under the rubric of class analysis has largely been concerned with questions of class boundaries and class identities, and for this purpose, the middle class has been of much greater interest than the working class.<sup>14</sup> State-centered theory has similarly displaced workers from its accounts of the New Deal policy in favor of an autonomous stratum of state managers.<sup>15</sup> Finally, there is a neoinstitutionalist stream that avoids the atomism of neoclassical analyses but only by downgrading the role of human agency.<sup>16</sup>

Second, there is in recent work a postmodernist tendency toward “fragmentation,

indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or ‘totalizing’ discourses.”<sup>17</sup> Ira Katznelson and Al Zolberg, for example, conclude their edited volume of European and American working-class studies with the observation that the classical Marxist notion of a working class under capitalism is mistaken; each national working class has to be understood on its own terms.<sup>18</sup> The class analysis trend, on the other hand, tends to overly dichotomize class capacities and class consciousness, and uses survey research and voting behavior to infer meaning about class properties from the response of individuals.<sup>19</sup> Also, work degradation studies tend to compartmentalize institutionally the economic aspects of the labor deskilling process from the social institutions through which that process is refracted.<sup>20</sup>

Third, the relationship between the working-class formation and the long-term process of capitalist development is inadequately understood. As I have argued above, the dominant literature holds that the long-term consequence of capitalist development is the erosion of working-class capacity and that the cumulative effect of the class struggle is the progressive *disempowerment* of the working class. Each successive period of class struggle results in working-class defeat, and each period of history begins with the working class buried deeper in the ruins of the past. The problem in this regard is the basically functionalist bent to the literature that radical scholars of the 1970s and 1980s did not address.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, there are anti-working-class and anticommunist biases running through the field of labor studies. The former has been nearly constant since Lipset et al.’s studies in the 1950s. More recent literature treats workers sympathetically, but its bias causes it to misinterpret important data.<sup>22</sup> Lillian Rubin, for example, sees working-class reluctance to pursue higher education as evidence of victimization, whereas I think it could be read as evidence of class solidarity in the culture.<sup>23</sup> The anticommunist prejudice of work done during the 1950s and 1960s was never challenged by “New Left” scholars. C. Wright Mills added fuel to the fire when he wrote that “communists’ rule within unions they control is dictatorial,”<sup>24</sup> and Stanley Aronowitz, whose work was probably the most influential for a new generation of labor activists, reinforced that bias.<sup>25</sup>