Introduction to “Braverman and the Structure of the U.S. Working Class: Beyond the Degradation of Labor”

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The 1974 publication of Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (Monthly Review Press) marked a seminal moment in U.S. intellectual history. The appearance of this landmark sociological volume renewed interest among historians and sociologists in industrial sociology, a field contained within the sociology of work. The book was instrumental in inaugurating the “labor process debate” which led to extensive research and writing occurring in Labor Process Theory (LPT). Specifically, LPT examines how employees work, the skills utilized in the work process, the control of work, how employees are remunerated for their work and employee resistance to managerial control.

In a nutshell, Braverman argued in *Labor and Monopoly Capital* that the implementation of scientific management (or Taylorism, named after Frederick Winslow Taylor) resulted in the deskilling and routinization of tasks performed by blue-collar workers in factories as well as those completed by lower-level white-collar workers employed in offices. Deskilling and task routinization occurred, according to Braverman, in order to decrease production costs and to boost employee productivity. Upon the deskilling of labor, employees are easier to control, and replace, because workers do not have to utilize intellectual skills but only have to follow managers’ instructions in carrying out their work tasks. Moreover, deskilled employees can be paid less. Finally, from the employees’ perspective, the deskilling process leads to the performance of work which is viewed as being less intellectually and emotionally rewarding.

On the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Braverman’s groundbreaking volume, the “Perspectives” section in this, and the following (December 2014), issue will be devoted to articles that celebrate the seminal contributions made by *Labor and Monopoly Capital* while applying Bravermanian concepts and ideas to an analysis of work in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In the excellent, insightful and extremely well-written article published in this issue, Dr. R. Jamil Jonna, Associate Editor for Technology for *Monthly Review* (New York) and Dr. John Bellamy Foster, Professor of Sociology at the University of Oregon, contend that Braverman’s analysis concerning the deskilling and routinization of work was only one portion of a major argument he was composing concerning U.S. working class structure. The two authors of this essay expand on Braverman’s “pioneering empirical research into occupational composition” from the early 1970s by providing a new empirical analysis of

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the U.S. working class' structural evolution over the last forty years while considering the U.S. working class' experience with unemployment and underemployment.

If any of the journal's readers are interested in responding to any essays published in the "Perspectives" Section or would like to write articles on any topics in the field of employee relations, please do not hesitate to contact me with your proposal. I welcome both practitioner-based and scholarly-based articles written from any one of a variety of theoretical perspectives. I hope that you enjoy this article and find it most illuminating.