I'm reading Harry Braverman's classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (1974), which is "an attempt to inquire systematically into the consequences which the particular kinds of technological change characteristic of the monopoly capitalist period [since about 1900] have had for the nature of work and the composition (and differentiation) of the working class." It's influenced by the *Monthly Review* school of Marxism.

Long discussion of Frederick Winslow Taylor and scientific management. Insistence that the latter, interpreted broadly, is of essential importance to labor processes in mature capitalism. (Management taking knowledge of technical processes away from skilled workers and forcing them (over decades) to be dumbed down, to be mere instruments that have little or no understanding of how all the work they do in factories "fits together." Management becomes the brain, whereas formerly the skilled workers were both the brains and the brawn. "Conception is separated from execution," which in the 1870s, 1880s, and even afterwards was not the case. Hence the thickening of management, the addition of many layers of bureaucracy for the sake of planning and supervising.) The absurd extremes of the dehumanization of industrial labor under the impetus of the "scientific-technical" revolution in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

And machinery. 'Oh, the machinery!' "The capacity of humans to control the labor process through machinery is seized upon by management from the beginning of capitalism as the *prime means whereby production may be controlled not by the direct producer but by the owners and representatives of capital.* Thus, in addition to its technical function of increasing the productivity of labor—which would be a mark of machinery under any social system—machinery also has in the capitalist system the function of divesting the mass of workers of their control over their own labor." (Italics in the original.) Braverman gives myriad examples.

"Machinery offers to management the opportunity to do by wholly mechanical means that which it had previously attempted to do by organizational and disciplinary means. The fact that many machines may be paced and controlled according to centralized decisions, and that these controls may thus be in the hands of management, removed from the site of production to the office—these technical possibilities are of just as great interest to management as the fact that the machine multiplies the productivity of labor."

To reiterate what I've written elsewhere, the capitalist drive to increase labor productivity can become socially irrational in its unstoppable frenzy. In the obsession with cutting labor costs, more and more people are eventually thrown out of work; more and more people lose their source of income and become economically redundant. Machines take the place of workers. As a result, aggregate demand falls, which causes a fall in capacity utilization, which causes a fall in investment, which further decreases aggregate demand, etc., until eventually a recession or depression hits. Since profitability is the goal, the only cure that units of capital know to all this is to keep cutting labor costs and in the long run keep increasing productivity—which exacerbates the systemic problems and keeps the vicious cycle going. In the long run, governments, too, aid capital in cutting labor costs and financing improvements in productivity.

"Each capitalist nation will further degrade its own working population and social life in an attempt to save a social system which, like the very planets in their orbits, will fall to its destruction if it slows in its velocity. Here we have the *reductio ad absurdum* of capitalist efficiency, and the expression in concrete terms of the insoluble contradiction that exists between the development of the means of production [or the productive forces] and the social relations of production that characterize capitalism." The development of the forces of production in the long run tends to undermine the social relations of production, by causing (indirectly) economic crises and long-term stagnation. (The latter, too, tends to obstruct further growth of the productive forces (by discouraging investment)—though not to the point of stopping such growth altogether.)

Braverman's discussion of the modern corporation demonstrates the insane complexity of corporate structures. For example,

> …Thus marketing became the second major subdivision of the corporation, subdivided in its turn among sales, advertising, promotion, correspondence, orders, commissions, sales analysis, and other such sections. At the same time, other functions of management were separated out to form entire divisions. Finance, for example, although not as a rule large in size, became the brain center of the entire organism, because here was centralized the function of watching over capital, of checking and controlling the progress of its enlargement; for this purpose, the finance division has its own subdivisions for borrowing, extending credit, collections, supervising cash flow, stockholder relations, and overall supervision of the financial conditions of the corporation. And so on, throughout the various functions and activities of the corporation, including construction and real estate, legal, public relations, personnel and labor relations, etc.
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> Each of these corporate subdivisions also requires, for its own smooth functioning, internal departments which reflect and imitate the subdivisions of the entire corporation. Each requires its own accounting section, ranging from the complex cost accounting of the manufacturing divisions to the simpler budgeting functions required of even the smallest divisions. Each often controls its own hiring through its own personnel department; many require separate maintenance and cleaning sections, as well as traffic and routing, office management, purchasing, planning correspondence, and so forth. Thus each corporate division takes on the characteristics of a separate enterprise, with its own management staff.
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> The picture is rendered still more complex by the tendency of the modern corporation to integrate, vertically as well as horizontally. Thus, by growth and

> by combination, the manufacturing corporation acquires facilities for the production of raw materials, for transportation, semi-banking institutions for the raising of capital or extending of credit, etc…

And people deny that economic institutions (in their interrelations) are the central determinants of social dynamics!

The overall purpose of administrative controls is to reduce uncertainty and contingency with regard to the basic goal of making profit and accumulating capital. "Since markets must remain the prime area of uncertainty, the effort of the corporation is therefore to reduce the *autonomous character* of the demand for its products and to increase its *induced* character. For this purpose, the marketing organization becomes second in size only to the production organization in manufacturing corporations, and other types of corporations come into existence whose entire purpose and activity is marketing." All the mainstream intellectual fetishism of "free markets" is, therefore, sheer intellectual fraud. Corporations want to *control* markets, not let them be "free."

Needless to say, just as production jobs have become more and more degraded in skill and intellectual stimulation as mechanization has proceeded and the division of labor has become more minute, so the whole world of management (not just "managers," and not the upper ranks) has become characterized by degraded, semi-skilled clerical work, increasing mechanization, and a minute division of labor. Antagonistic class relations are reproduced in the ranks of "management" itself.

Braverman's discussion of the nature and history of clerical work, how it has grown incalculably since the 19th century and lost status and pay in the process, is excellent. In the early 20th century it, too, was subject to the discipline of scientific management. And then mechanization, etc. For all intents and purposes, clerical work ceased to be "mental" and became "manual." A nearly unthinking repetition of simple operations. (Manual labor, too, had once been quite "mental," requiring great intelligence and understanding, but gradually was reduced in skill level.)

And then there are the service and retail occupations.

> The reasons for the rapid growth of service occupations in both the corporate and governmental sectors of the economy [are as follows]: the completion by capital of the conquest of goods-producing activities; the displacement of labor from those industries, corresponding to the accumulation of capital in them, and the juncture of these reserves of labor and capital on the ground of new industries; and the inexorable growth of service needs as the new shape of society destroys the older forms of social, community, and family cooperation and self-aid…

As labor is displaced from manufacturing, which is more easily unionized than clerical, service, and retail labor, and so tends to have (after unionization has happened) higher rates of pay, society's aggregate demand starts to decrease because of the lower pay rates in non-manufacturing sectors.[1] In order to keep the economy going strong, consumer credit becomes increasingly important. As it has been from the 1970s on.

Based on extensive statistics and calculations, Braverman concludes persuasively that in the early 1970s, two-thirds to three-fourths of the total working population appeared "readily to conform to the dispossessed condition of a proletariat." This category excludes, of course, "the engineering, technical, and scientific cadre, the lower ranks of supervision and management, the considerable numbers of specialized and 'professional' employees occupied in marketing, financial and organization administration, and the like, as well as, outside of capitalist industry proper, in hospitals, schools, government administration, and so forth." According to Braverman, these categories embrace (or embraced) "perhaps over 15 but less than 20 percent of total employment." *Formally* they have the same proletarian condition as the others just mentioned…but increasingly these days, even *substantively* they have a similar position. More and more every year, as Marx predicted, the economy is being polarized into a tremendous majority of the dispossessed and a tiny minority of the possessors.

In the last chapter, Braverman demolishes the myth that most work tended to become *more* skilled during the 20th century by considering mainstream writers' arguments on their merits (or lack thereof). For example, most people in the West associated "white-collar" occupations with skill and "blue-collar" occupations with a lack of it, so that the rise of the former and decline of the latter was seen as proof that skill levels were rising. But we've already dispatched the myth that clerical, service, sales, and retail work is usually "skilled." In fact it's far less skilled than the work of the old craftsmen and even their semi-skilled assistants, and also the work of farmers and often their helpers (the number of (both of) whom declined sharply in the 20th century), who had to master "a great many skills involving a knowledge of land, fertilizer, animals, tools, farm machinery, construction skills, etc., and the traditional abilities and dexterities in the handling of farm tasks." (Plowing, milking, caring for animals, harvesting, mending fences, etc.)

What about the fact that the length of the average period a person spent in school before getting a job increased in the 20th century? Doesn't this indicate that the skill levels of jobs increased? No. First of all, basic literacy and familiarity with mathematics has become more important just for getting around in society. Second, the provision of *socialization* has been increasingly taken over by schools (whereas it used to be done by farm, family, community, and church). So basic education has had to be prolonged.

[1] Before mass industrial unionism, too, severe recessions and depressions were more frequent than in the era of unionism, in part because of insufficient aggregate demand.

Third, in the late 1930s legislation was passed "restricting the labor-force participation of youths, the object of which was to reduce unemployment by eliminating a segment of the population from the job market. The anticipated consequence of this was the postponement of the school-leaving age." Later, after the postwar surge of school- and college-enrollment (a result of government programs designed partly to reduce unemployment), there began to be an *over*-supply of educated people by the end of the 1960s. Millions of these people ended up being overqualified for their jobs.

At the same time, the expanded education sector furnishes jobs for millions of teachers, administrators, construction workers, etc., thus providing a huge boon to the economy.

I'll end the summarizing here. In any case, by the twenty-first century the main conclusions of the book have become common sense.