

Harry Braverman, labor process theory and HRM: Taking Stock and Looking Forward

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Abstract

Since the publication of Harry Braverman's (1998 [1974]) seminal book *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (LMC), a particular – if not unique – interest has been blooming among many work sociologists during the past decades, all contributing to the well-known perspective of the labor process theory (LPT). Not as an academician or a sociologist, but rather as a suffering and experienced shop-floor worker, as well as an engaged reader and social activist in the U.S.A., Braverman opened up a new avenue that unraveled many threats to the nature of work, brought about by a capitalist mode of production. Building on Marx's (2004 [1867]) ideas regarding the commodification of labor under the capitalist regimes, he systematically addressed how the labor process is degraded inside the workplace via the allegedly efficient scientific management ethos. For some leading scholars, Braverman's LMC has been considered a paradigmatic breakthrough (1994) and monument of Marx's Capital volume one (Burawoy, 1978), which has become a normal science over time (Ackroyd, 2009).

While many organizational sociologists have paid much attention to Braverman's thoughts and the LPT framework so far, a dedicated theoretical and practical pathway in the HRM field inspired by LPT is scant. This becomes crucial when considering that, as Harley (2015) and Thompson (2011) argued, the HRM field has been substantially affected by positivist methodologies, market-related objectives, and individualistic preoccupations mostly inspired by psychological perspectives less concerned with connecting workplace realities to the broader society (see Aguinis et al., 2021). Away from atomistic orientations, HRM could be expanded

into a more socially relevant discipline by acknowledging, and thus exploring new research possibilities starting from the interconnectedness of human experiences inside the organizations and macro societal affairs (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018). Regarding such concerns, Harry Braverman's intellectual project and its subsequent advancements in the LPT paradigm can significantly enrich the HRM field. Relying on the insights offered by the LPT concerning the degradation of work in the workplace within a capitalist society, the HRM discipline could be benefitting in different realms such as recruitment strategies, job design, performance management, employee empowerment, and policy interventions. The current paper, therefore, aims to set a research agenda toward an LPT-inspired HRM scholarship. It does so by taking the following steps:

- (a) Overviewing the building blocks in Braverman's seminal book *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* and explaining his main ideas regarding the degradation of work under the capitalist mode of production;
- (b) Reviewing the subsequent theoretical advancements on LPT, showing how other issues such as workers' agency, subjectivity, skills, solidarity, and resistance have been addressed;
- (c) Reviewing recent empirical literature on LPT's contributions to the new theorizations on the emerging regimes of control, performance management systems, worker autonomy and discretion over the labor process, especially within the context of the growing platform economy; and finally,
- (d) Discussing the LPT's implications in the HRM field and showing how the HRM scholarship could be further developed in theory, context, and method.