

Harry Braverman and the Working Class

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Note:

This presentation is based on the theories of Harry Braverman. A more complete summary of his and other macro-social theories can be found in *Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems*, by Frank W. Elwell.

In Brief

In 1974 Harry Braverman published *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*, an analysis of the impact of capitalism on work in twentieth century America. Using the concepts and theories developed by Marx in the first volume of *Capital*, Braverman's book was a biting critique of the growing degradation of work in America.

In Brief

A large part of Braverman's argument centered on the "deskilling" of jobs in a capitalist economy in a systematic effort to more efficiently control and coordinate the labor force to maximize profit.

In Brief

Braverman then documents the growth of working class occupations from 1900 to 1970 using U.S. Census data. This presentation briefly reviews Braverman's argument and data and then extends the analysis through 2001 to determine the validity of the Braverman/Marxist critique.

Marx

Braverman's problem—a study of the objective conditions of the working class—is identical to the task Marx set for himself in the first volume of *Capital*.

Work

Work, Marx (and thus Braverman) asserts, is central to the human animal. It is through work that men and women realize their humanity. Capitalism begins with labor power, specifically the purchase and selling of labor power. This has consequences for the entire sociocultural system.

Work

The value of all goods and services (all commodity value) is created by human labor. Capitalism is a system built around the drive to increase capital. In order to expand his capital, the capitalist invests in the purchase of labor.



Work

The capitalist then attempts to get more value out of this labor than he has invested in it. The more surplus the capitalist can expropriate from the workforce, the greater the profitability, the greater the accumulation of capital.



Work

For the purchase and sale of labor power to become widespread in a society, three conditions need to be met:

1. Separate workers from the means of production.
2. Free the worker from serfdom or slavery, allowing them to sell their labor.
3. Establish an economic system in which individuals strive to increase their investment.

Work

With the establishment of a labor market the worker enters into employment because there are few other options to make a living. The capitalist enters into the relationship to make a profit.



Work

And that is the heart of it. The working life of the vast majority in capitalist society is dominated and shaped by the needs and interests of the capitalist class. Primary among these interests is to expand capital, to maximize profit. It is this “aspect which dominates in the mind and activities of the capitalist, into whose hands the control over the labor process has passed.”

The Problem of Management

All management has the problems of coordinating supplies, scheduling, work assignments, records, payroll, sales, and accounting. Also, with the rise of more complex production processes, the need for managerial coordination increases.

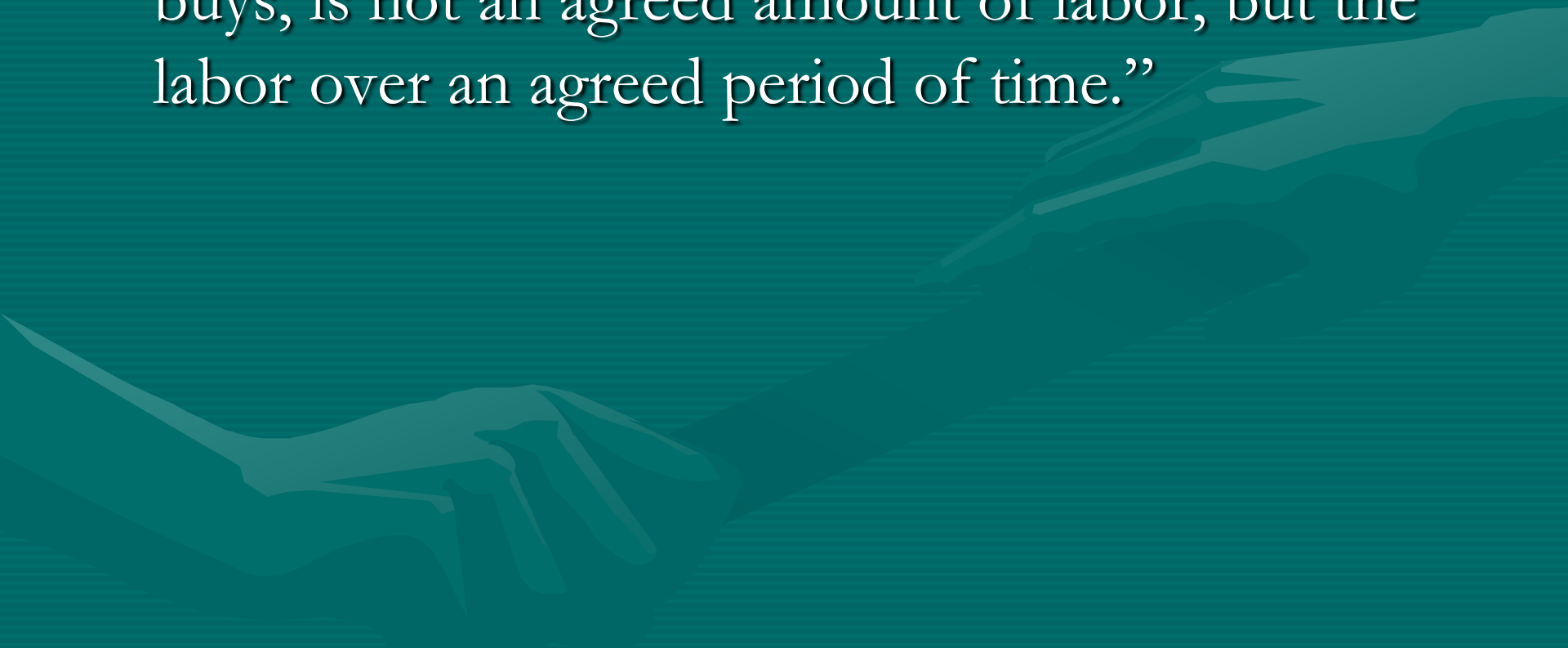


The Problem of Management

The capitalist problem of management is different in kind, however, in that the capitalist is working with “free” labor, in a system of constantly expanding technology, and spurred on by a driving need to expand production and profitability. The capitalist problem of management is rooted in the buying and selling of labor.

The Problem of Management

“What the worker sells, and what the capitalist buys, is not an agreed amount of labor, but the labor over an agreed period of time.”



The Problem of Management

“Such labor represents a cost for each non-productive hour. Workers have an interest in conserving energy, capitalists in expending it. There is, therefore, a fundamental antagonism between worker and capitalist, between those who manage and those who execute, those who bring to the factory their labor power, and those who undertake to extract from this labor power the maximum advantage for the capitalist.”

The Problem of Management

While early capitalism used outright force and coercion to attain this maximum advantage, management must now exercise more subtle methods of control. How then do capitalists expand their capital through a “free” labor force? What are the foundations of monopoly capitalism?

The Detailed Division of Labor


The earliest and perhaps most important principle of the capitalist mode of production, Braverman states, was the detailed division of labor.

The Detailed Division of Labor

The social division of labor, or the breakdown of the social labor on the basis of craft specialization, has existed in all known societies. This social division of labor is an important factor in determining the rate of technological development, the extent of stratification and inequality, and the degree for sociocultural solidarity and cohesion.

The Detailed Division of Labor

The detailed division of labor, on the other hand, is a very different phenomenon. The detailed division of labor breaks the manufacturing of a product down into simple discrete steps, and then assigns each task to an individual workman.



The Detailed Division of Labor

The detailed division of labor was first described by Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations* in the manufacture of pins. As described by Smith, the task of making a pin was broken down to eighteen distinct operations, which were all performed by distinct hands.

The Detailed Division of Labor

Smith goes on to point out that he had observed small factories of some 10 men who, engaged in the detailed division of labor, could produce some 48,000 pins a day. This would amount to some 4,800 pins for each man. In traditional manufacture, with each man performing all the steps, they would be hard pressed to produce 20 in a day.

The Detailed Division of Labor

The increase in productivity caused by the detailed division of labor, Smith surmises, is due to three independent factors:

- Increase of dexterity in performing a simple operation repeatedly;
- Saving of time that is generally lost in passing from one type of work to another;
- Invention of machines to assist in performing simple tasks.

The Detailed Division of Labor

The more the manufacturing process can be broken up into simple, discreet tasks, and the more of these tasks that can be assigned to separate workmen, the greater the resulting productivity.

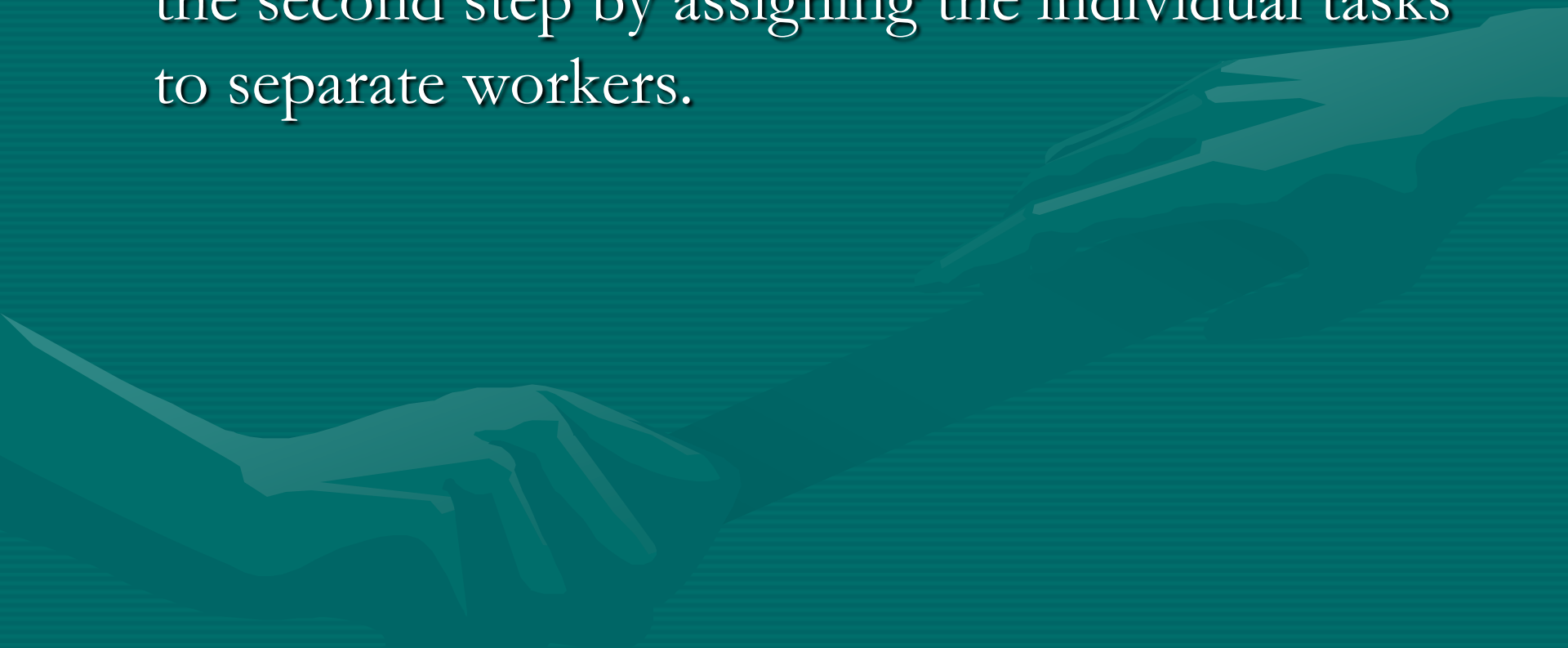
The Detailed Division of Labor

The problem for the worker is not with the first factor listed by Smith. The breakdown of work into detailed tasks is something that workmen often willingly does to suit his own needs.

Rarely, however, will the workman take the next step on his own, that is, rarely will he voluntarily become a lifelong detail worker. Such a work role calls for the endless repetition of performing a simple task.

The Detailed Division of Labor

However, the capitalist has no problem in taking the second step by assigning the individual tasks to separate workers.



The Detailed Division of Labor

The fact that the resulting jobs are mind numbing, devoid of variety, human initiative and thought, and any sort of skill save, perhaps, manual dexterity does not enter into the equation.

The Detailed Division of Labor

Further, the detailed division of labor increases the capitalists' control over the labor process. By dividing the work up in such detail, the manager takes more direct control over the process and pace of work.

The Detailed Division of Labor

Also, by specializing in a single task, the detail worker becomes “unskilled” labor. He is coming to the labor market without any distinctive skills to offer, in accordance with the laws of supply and demand, his labor is interchangeable with a multitude of others. Consequently, there is little incentive for the capitalist to offer more than the regional rate for such labor, little leverage that the unskilled laborer can use in trying to increase his wage.

The Detailed Division of Labor

The detailed division of labor has organized the labor market according to the interests of the purchasers of labor power, not the sellers. It significantly boosts productivity, lowers wages, and greatly extends the capitalists' control over the pace and process of labor.

The Detailed Division of Labor

The detailed division of labor underlies all relations between capitalists and labor. Under capitalism, labor becomes a commodity to be sold on the market. In fact, labor power is the only commodity that the worker has to exchange for necessary goods and services.

The Detailed Division of Labor

Even today the process continues in areas far removed from manufacturing. Jobs are continually broken up into simple tasks. Special skills, knowledge, and control are reserved for those at the top of the hierarchy.

The Detailed Division of Labor

Braverman goes so far as to call this the “general law of the capitalist division of labor.” Its impact is not only shaping our working lives, but the character of the entire sociocultural system. For this process polarizes capitalist society into a small powerful elite at the top, and a mass of simple labor at the bottom.

The Detailed Division of Labor

The heart of Marx's critique of capitalism beats in his analysis of the effect of the capitalist mode of production on the working class. Braverman carries on this tradition. Under capitalism, workers become a "labor force," just another factor of production, another commodity to be purchased.

The Detailed Division of Labor

Controlling costs, maximizing productivity, and amassing more capital is the overriding goal of the enterprise. To do this the capitalist class has created jobs that use men and women in inhumane ways, separating their labor power from their critical facilities.

The Detailed Division of Labor

That the process is repugnant to the workers is apparent from the high absentee rates, widespread job dissatisfaction, early retirements, and alienation. The thrust of the critique, however, does not rely upon such indicators but rather on the objective conditions of work itself.

The Detailed Division of Labor

Real skill replaced by manual dexterity, conception and thought is removed from execution, control of action and pace is removed from the worker and placed in management.

The Working Class

The process of turning workers into commodities is continually being extended into more areas of the economy. Further, each succeeding generation has to be acclimated to the new mode of work; each has to be socialized to overcome the initial revulsion to the ever more detailed division of labor, the consequent rending of human beings.

The Working Class

This ever-widening process, Braverman claims, becomes a permanent feature of capitalist society. Laborers are increasingly seen as machines, machines that can be readily adapted to the requirements of most any job.

The Working Class

This view of man as a machine, Braverman says, has become more than a mere analogy. For the capitalist class, the laborer as machine is how the class has come to use labor, it is how it has come to view humanity.



The Working Class

The process leads to the polarization of American society, Braverman claims, with a few at the top of the hierarchy having tremendous power, wealth, and control and the great mass of workers at the bottom, with few skills, resources, or prospects.

The Working Class

To demonstrate this polarization Braverman performs an analysis of census data to determine the size of the working classes throughout the 20th century. The working class, he says, consists of those who come to the labor market with nothing to sell but their labor. This labor is systematically exploited and degraded by the capitalist system.

The Working Class

To enable growth in profit businesses break skills down to simple tasks, automate where economically feasible, and manipulate the speed of production. These processes do not just occur in manufacturing operations, Braverman adds, but throughout the capitalist economy.

Working Class (in millions)

	1900	1920	1940	1960	1970
Laborers	7.3	11.5	14.4	16.4	18.1
Craftsmen	2.9	5.0	5.6	8.0	9.5
Clerical	.9	3.4	5.0	9.6	14.3
Serv./Sales	3.6	4.9	8.8	10.6	13.4
# Workers	14.7	24.8	33.8	44.6	55.3
T. Force	29.0	42.2	51.7	64.6	80.0
% Workers	50.7%	55.8%	65.4%	69.1%	69.1%

Describing the Table

While the first separation of conception and execution of tasks occurs between the factory and the office, the second occurs within the office itself. In the U.S., the proportion of clerks and administrative assistants in the working population climbed from 3% in 1900 to 18% by 1970.

Describing the Table

While traditionally classified as “white collar,” Braverman points out, the vast bulk of these jobs involve minimal skills and initiatives, and garner wages and benefits roughly equivalent to manual occupations.

Describing the Table

The number of service workers rose from 1 million at the turn of the century to some 9 million by the 1970 census. While there are a couple of occupations in this grouping that require some educational credentials and extensive on the job training, most are low skill, low pay, and often temporary.

Describing the Table

To this group Braverman adds retail sales workers and cashiers, people with the same skills and compensation as the majority of service workers. By 1970, Braverman reports, there were a total of 3 million such workers.

Describing the Table

So, the percentage of the workforce engaged in essentially rote manual labor, with little skill, educational requirements, autonomy, or decent compensation has been growing each decade from the turn of the century through 1970, then comprising almost 70% of the working population.

Work in America

Work in the American economy has become very polarized, with a few people having all of the technical expertise and managerial control over a largely unskilled and uneducated workforce.



Middle Class

As conception and execution are separated, more and more technical expertise is concentrated in fewer hands. Braverman estimates that, at most, only 3 percent of the 1970 workforce consisted of such technical specialists as engineers, architects, draftsmen, designers, natural scientists, and technicians.

Middle Class

In addition to this 3 percent, Braverman acknowledges that there are a significant number of individuals engaged in lower levels of management as well as professional specialties. He estimates that this middle level accounts for about 20% of occupational employment in 1970.

Middle Class

However, like Mills before him, he points out that these occupations should not be equated with the old middle class of independent entrepreneurs of an earlier era. Most are wage earners dependent upon the corporations or government for their employment.

Middle Class

Unlike the old middle class, they are part of the exploitation system. Taking their character from both capitalists and workers they take part in the expropriation of surplus from the workers, but have the same dependent characteristics as other workers, with only their labor to sell.

Middle Class

The sheer productivity of the working class and the taking of a large part of the surplus make the number of middle-level managers possible.

Working Class (in millions)

	1950	1960	1970	1983	2001
Laborers	15.5	16.4	18.1	16.1	17.7
Craftsmen	7.3	8.0	9.5	12.3	14.4
Clerical	7.1	9.6	14.3	16.4	18.5
Serv./Sales	8.7	10.6	13.4	21.3	29.7
# Workers	38.6	44.6	55.3	66.2	80.8
T. Force	57.9	64.6	80.0	100.1	135.1
% Workers	66.7%	69.1%	69.1%	66%	60%

Describing the Table

This table again presents Braverman's breakdown of occupational classifications with the addition of the years 1983 and 2001. While Braverman's working class has continued to grow in terms of absolute numbers (with the exception of "Operatives and Laborers"), going from 55.3 million workers in 1970 to almost 81 million in 2001, the percentage of working class occupations as part of the total labor force has actually decline since 1970, going from 69% of the workforce to 60%.

Describing the Table

It is interesting to note the differences in the relative numbers among the four basic categories. Only one category experienced an absolute decline, that of “Operatives and Laborers.” Clerical and Service & Sales workers both grew rapidly, Clerical from 12 percent of the workforce in 1950, to 14 percent in 2001; Service and Sales from 15% to 22%.

Describing the Table

It would appear that the proportional decline is due to the relatively slow growth in the number of manufacturing jobs in America. These manufacturing jobs have been slow growing due to automation and international trade in which many goods now come from other countries, and many low skilled American manufacturing jobs have been exported or “outsourced.” Compared to manufacturing, it is far more difficult to automate or export most personal service work.

Describing the Table

And this is what accounts for much of our legal and illegal immigration. If you cannot have the services provided from cheaper overseas labor markets, another option is to import cheaper foreign laborers.

Describing the Table

Clerical work stands somewhat intermediate between manufacturing and service occupations. The personal computer has made it relatively inexpensive to automate typing and filing services even in small offices. While some of these jobs can be shipped overseas, cultural differences prevent too much off shoring such occupations.

The Working Class

So, for the first 70 years of the 20th century Braverman found that the percentage of the American workforce engaged in essentially rote manual and clerical occupations, with little skill, educational requirements, autonomy, or decent compensation has been growing each decade. However, this trend has been halted and reversed in the latter third of the century.

The Working Class

Though it should be pointed out that even today the working class is still a majority of the employed population in hyperindustrial society, the trend now seems to be in the opposite direction. How far this trend can go is open to question.

The Working Class

Can an industrial society exist without a significant portion of the working population engaged in rote manual or clerical labor? Is a capitalist-industrial society even possible without the bulk of the people engaged in the detailed division of labor—isn't such a society defined by this very division?

Managerial & Professional Occupations

The bulk of the growth in U.S. jobs since Braverman is mainly attributable to the rapid growth of “Managerial and Professional Specialty” occupations. Braverman estimates that by 1970 some 20 percent of the workforce was engaged in lower levels of management and professional specialties.

Managerial & Professional Occupations

By 1983, these occupations accounted for some 23 million of the employed, or 23% of the population. By 2001 these occupations had ballooned to 31% of the employed population.

Managerial & Professional Occupations

Add to this the Technical and Sales Occupations (non-retail and non-clerical) and the figures go up to 39% of all employment for 2001. Clearly this middle level of employment has grown dramatically since Braverman's time.

Managerial & Professional Occupations

Within this broad category the fastest growth was experienced among “Executive, administrative, and managerial” occupations (EAM). EAM grew from 11 percent of the workforce in 1983 to 15% in 2001. Braverman would attribute this growth as further evidence of centralization of coordination and control.

Managerial & Professional Occupations

The “Professional Specialty” categories grew from 13 percent of the total workforce in 1983 to 16 percent in 2001. About half of this category is from education and medicine.

Technical Specialists

In all, Braverman estimated that only 3% of the 1970 workforce consisted of technical specialists such as engineers, architects, draftsmen, designers, and natural scientists.

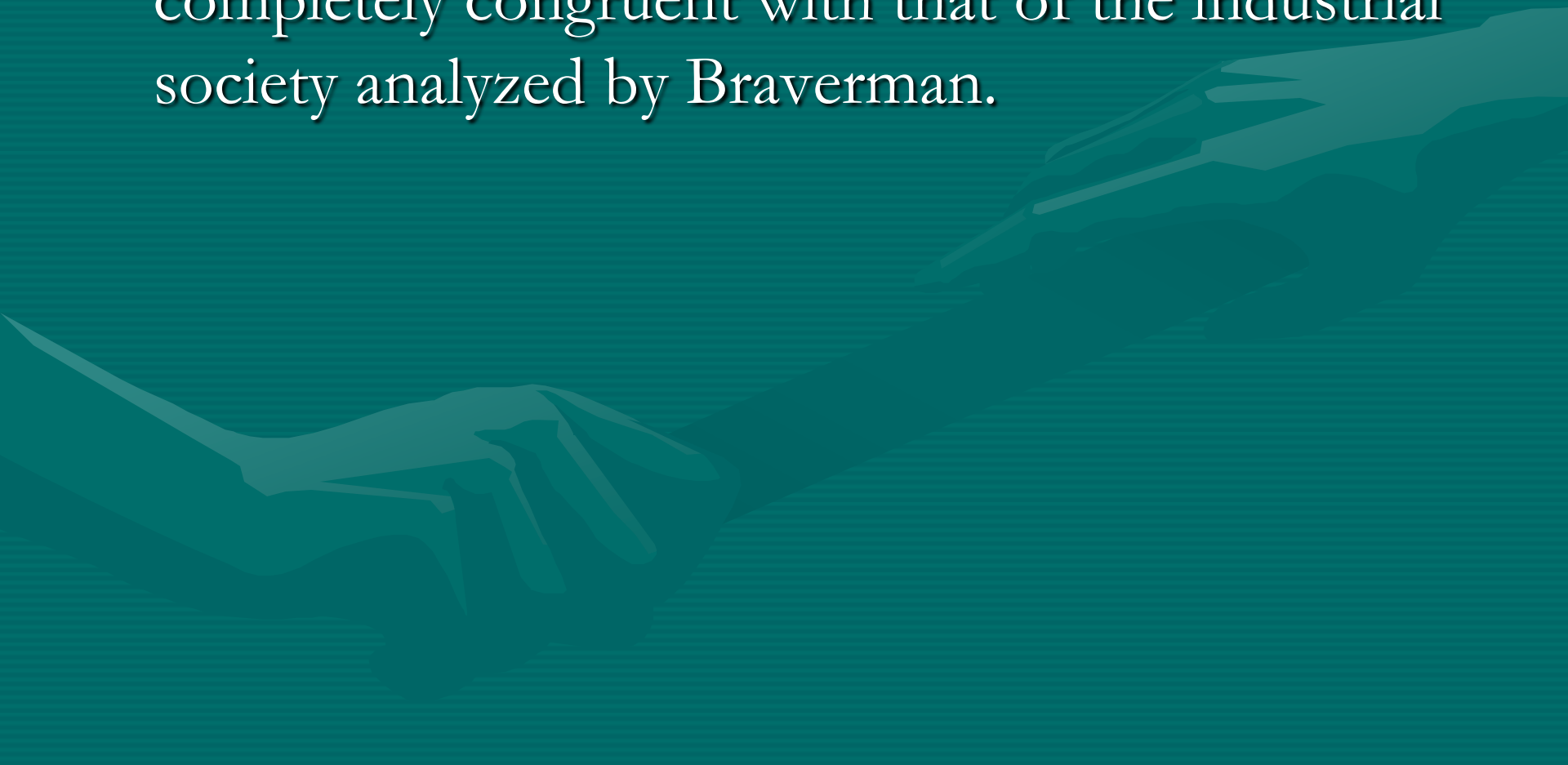
Technical Specialists

In 1983 this had grown to only 3.5% of the workforce in 1983, and to 4.7% in 2001.

Interestingly, computer scientists accounted for the bulk of this growth, a technical expertise almost unknown in the 1970 census. Excluding their numbers the concentration of technical expertise for both 1983 and 2001 is at Braverman's estimate of about 3% of the labor force.

Conclusions

The workforce of hyperindustrial society is not completely congruent with that of the industrial society analyzed by Braverman.



Conclusions

As is necessary for a more complex technological infrastructure and a more bureaucratic structure, there are a higher proportion of executives, managers, and professionals in the workforce. Some of these positions, no doubt, are given high degrees of latitude and freedom, some are highly paid and prestigious as well.

Conclusions

However, contrary to the postindustrial dreamers, these elite do not (nor can they ever) make up the bulk of the society. Nor are most of them a part of the elite, as Mills described in *White Collar*, they are very much dependent upon the bureaucratic organizations of private industry, nongovernmental agencies, and governments.

Conclusions

The economy as a whole still depends on a large working class population both domestically and increasingly on a global scale. The bulk of these jobs are unskilled or semi-skilled occupations, and increasing proportion of them in the U.S. are in sales and personal services.

Conclusions

Because our economic and political system is dominated by capitalism, the entire sociocultural system is organized around the need to expand capital.

Conclusions

It is this drive that is behind the ever more detailed division of labor, the adoption of computers and other technologies to replace workers, immigration and off shoring, the degradation of work and workers, and the polarization within and between societies.

Bibliography

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