

CHAPTER 20

COORDENATIVE AND OPERATIVE LABOR

In the last chapter, we saw that productive and unproductive labor are not useful as categories to distinguish between the working class and the technobureaucracy, since in technobureaucratic capitalism practically all workers, including technobureaucrats, have become "productive", i.e., are subject to the logic of capital and produce surplus value. However the same cannot be said for the categories manual labor and intellectual labor. In the conventional Marxist tradition, only productive manual workers belong to the working class in the strict sense. Thus we could conclude that productive manual workers make up the working class, whereas those productive (and also unproductive workers) who perform intellectual labor would be technobureaucrats. But this apparently obvious solution is also unsatisfactory because it is not grounded in history. Manual and intellectual labor are not historical categories, but are just descriptive categories. Rather than contrasting intellectual versus manual labor or productive versus unproductive labor, I propose that we look at the distinction between "coordinative" labor, performed by technobureaucrats, and "operative" labor, performed by workers.

1. Manual and Intellectual Labor

The distinction between manual and intellectual labor has been fundamental since the beginnings of history. It cuts across the whole history of mankind. Exactly for that reason it is not a historical category that helps to understand historical change. Long before capitalism, this dichotomy was a basic one in differentiating the dominant from the dominated class in each mode of production. While it is difficult to say that the dominant class always exercised strictly intellectual functions, it is clear that the political, religious, administrative and military activities carried out by the dominant class were of a more intellectual than manual nature. Classes were defined by their participation in the relations of production, yet this implies that manual labor will be reserved for the dominated class, intellectual labor for the dominant class.

Rather than say that intellectuals are members of the dominant class, it is more precise to say that they are assistants or consultant to the dominant class. Gramsci's theory of the organic intellectual shows the clearest understanding of this point. He considered intellectuals to be "commissioners" of the dominant group which carry out functions of social hegemony and political governance (1934: 12). Intellectuals are part of civil society, directly responsible for articulating ideological hegemony. The legal and police systems also fall in his

traditional realm. They have an increasing role in organizing production, as technobureaucrats. In statism, they directly assume responsibility for domination. Intellectuals include mainly philosophers, scientists, clergy, and educators, as well as public officers, judges, managers and technical experts. Businessmen, entrepreneurs and independent professionals should also be considered as performing intellectual labor.

This large spectrum indicates the fundamental limitation of the categories of manual and intellectual labor. Employing this term in the broad sense, intellectuals exists in all modes of production. In addition, within each mode of production, we see intellectuals belonging to various classes. The entrepreneur is bourgeois; the independent professional, petty bourgeois; the bureaucrat, a technobureaucrat. There is no reason not to consider certain highly skilled workers or those with strong political consciousness to be intellectuals.

These facts limit decisively the utility of the concept under consideration. Although we know that socialism will be attained only when the distinction between manual and intellectual labor fades out, and that the gap between the two types of labor is fundamental in any society, we must admit that this concept only has a limited role to play in understanding history to the extent that it goes beyond the relations of production.

On the other hand, this distinction is quite relative, allowing for a considerable grey area between the two categories. We could say that intellectual labor implies greater mental exertion, whereas manual labor implies greater physical exertion. Yet there is no labor which does not involve some degree of mental activity, and, on the other hand, that some operative workers merely push buttons or turn levers, exerting less physical force and perhaps less mental effort than office clerks do with pens, typewriters and calculators.

Gramsci understood this when he warned against the error of looking for certain qualities intrinsic to intellectuals rather than looking at their participation in the relations of production:

"The most widespread error of method seems to be that of having looked for this criterion of distinction in the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities, rather than the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities (and therefore the intellectual groups who personify them) have their place within the general complex of social relations". (1934: 8)

Thus what is essential in defining a class is its participation in the relations of production. Carrying out intellectual activity does not identify one's class position, though it may give some indication. This is not only true because it is difficult to distinguish between manual and intellectual labor, but also, and more importantly, because intellectual labor may be carried out by and for different dominant classes.

2. Coordinative and Operative Labor

I propose to use the categories of coordinative/operative labor as an alternative to those of productive/unproductive labor. These categories are specific to the technobureaucratic mode of production. They make it possible to make a clear distinction between the working and the technobureaucratic class not only in statism but also in technobureaucratic capitalism. The advance of technobureaucratic relations of production in contemporary capitalism may be better understood using these categories.

A basic assumption behind this argument is that organic intellectuals, as defined by Gramsci, have increased so much both in number and power as bureaucratic organizations have multiplied and become the basic structure of production, that they have become a class in themselves. Gramsci observed that "in the modern world the category of intellectuals, understood in this sense, has undergone an unprecedented expansion" (1934: 13). However he considered them to be the organic intellectuals of the bourgeoisie. Gramsci gave considerable importance to intellectuals and was, in fact, the first great Marxist to do so. Though he never stated this, perhaps he realized that intellectuals were gaining critical mass, conscious of their own interests and taking on the status of a class within a new emerging mode of production. As long as the bourgeoisie continued to be the dominant class, intellectuals could continue to be an organic part of the bourgeoisie. Yet this organic quality is one of degree.⁸⁰ For many technobureaucrats, who are the particular sort of intellectuals of interest here, this organic nature is total, while for others it is dubious. The allegiance of bureaucrats to the capitalist class is a decreasing function of their emergence as an autonomous class. We are witnessing the appearance of an increasing number of intellectuals who are decidedly hostile to the bourgeoisie, even though they have no other alternative but to serve this class in varying degrees, working as technobureaucrats for the state and for private business enterprises.

In order to establish a clear distinction between technobureaucrats and workers, the concepts of coordinative and operative work are fundamental. The technobureaucrat performs coordinative labor, the worker operative labor. Coordinative labor is that which creates, manages, or helps to manage the organization; operative labor is that which makes the organization function on the level of mechanical or manual activities in agriculture, industry and services. As with capitalism, in which productive labor creates surplus value under the capitalist's direction, with statism, both coordinative and operative labor create

⁸⁰ According to Gramsci, "it should be possible to measure the 'organic' quality (organicité) of the various intellectual strata and their degree of connection with a fundamental social social group..." (1934: 12)

and expand the organization as well as assure the production of a surplus. One cannot point to operative or coordinative alone as that which creates the organization, since both are intrinsically bound together. Together they produce the bureaucratic organization, and together they collaborate to produce surplus.

Marx was aware of this kind of interaction when he talked about the collective worker, including managers, engineers and technical experts in this category. He was still thinking in terms of the capitalist system, yet it is clear that a new mode of production originates through this process. Marx recognized this fact when he talked about the joint-stock companies, an advanced form of capitalism and a prime example of how the collective worker functions. In describing these companies, he states that though they "still remain trapped within the capitalist barriers" they are

"the abolition of the capitalist mode of production within the capitalist mode of production itself, and hence a self-abolishing contradiction, which presents itself prima facie as a mere point of transition to a new form of production." (1894: 571 and 569).

Coordinative labor ranges from the executive manager of the bureaucratic organization to the office clerks. Managers, engineers, technical experts, consultants, supervisors, accountants and functionaries on all levels share the work of coordination. They are high, middle and low level technobureaucrats. On the other hand, those workers whose labor only deals with production tasks for goods or services are operative workers. They do not coordinate; they operate. They could be defined in terms of the positive aspect of directly realizing the operations essential to production, or negatively by the absence of coordination tasks. Perhaps this negative criterion is the fundamental one, since coordinative workers collaborate in production, although indirectly, whereas operative workers do not collaborate, even indirectly, in the coordination of production.

The concept of operative labor is a broad one. It includes traditional production workers, as well as a variety of activities not precisely characterized in terms of production, such as cleaners or trash collectors. Operative workers are also those who work in mass transit, water companies, sewer maintenance, those who perform manual labor in health care and entertainment or who stock shelves and bone meat in the supermarket.

Naturally there are still grey areas. Teachers perform certain coordinative tasks, yet are still workers. Salesmen could be considered technobureaucrats because they carry out coordinative activity between the supplier and the buyer, yet at the same time, especially in commercial retail operations, they are the ones who carry out the suppliers' operations par excellence.

These large grey areas concerning the work of the low-level technobureaucracy and the working class exist by virtue of the very nature of the technobureaucratic relation of production. The technobureaucrat is a coordinative worker who has a theoretical share of ownership of the bureaucratic organization. His coordinative labor is precisely the exercise of this ownership, expressed directly in terms of power within the bureaucratic organization and indirectly in terms of control over the means of production held by a given bureaucratic organization. However, a low level technobureaucrat has only very limited power and as such, his coordinative labor is difficult to distinguish from his operative labor.

These concepts are useful in helping to define socialism. Socialism will only exist when the difference between coordinative and operative labor disappears, when the functions of production and coordination are rotated.

2 Two or Three Classes?

In pure capitalism, there are two social classes: the bourgeoisie and the working class; in statism, there are also two classes: the technobureaucracy and the working, or more specifically the operative, class. There is considerable overlap between the working class of capitalism and the operative class of statism. In transitional formations such as technobureaucratic capitalism, they are indistinguishable. If we broaden the concept of productive labor, then productive manual workers correspond to operative workers. Yet it is important to maintain the distinction, because capitalists and workers participate in relations of production which are distinct from those of technobureaucrats and operative workers.

The social distance between technobureaucrats and operative workers is much less than that between capitalists and workers. The capitalist is the owner of the means of production in both legal and real terms; the technobureaucrat has ownership of the organization, yet in varying degrees and with no guarantees for continuity. The capitalist has the right to ownership whereas the technobureaucrat has only the exercise of ownership. On the other hand, a capitalist may be inactive, living off an income, an idler, a rentier. In contrast, the technobureaucrat must work in order to live. Technobureaucrats only stop working when they retire, a characteristic they share with the operative workers.

In technobureaucratic capitalism, to the extent that it is a transitional social formation, there are three classes: the bourgeoisie, technobureaucracy and workers. The bourgeoisie is constituted by those who own the means of

production; the technobureaucracy shares this ownership with the bourgeoisie to the extent that they both control private and state bureaucratic organizations. They are the coordinative workers. The working class is made up of productive manual laborers, if our definition is more in terms of capitalism, or by operative workers, if we choose to define them in terms of the new emerging mode of production.

Within these three classes, there are high, middle and low strata. Whereas the upper technobureaucracy's interests are much the same as those of the bourgeoisie, the lower technobureaucracy is equally or more exploited than the operative class. The upper bourgeoisie extracts surplus value from workers and from the lower technobureaucracy, while the upper-level technobureaucrats extract high salaries.

This fact, however, should not obscure the identity of the technobureaucracy. Like any other class, it is divided into fractions and strata, making a variety of alliances. Yet it maintains a determined form of participation in the relations of production which distinguishes it from other classes and gives it a particular historical destiny. We have already discussed the tendency of several Marxist analysts to confuse the lower and even middle techno-bureaucracy with the working class, obviously as an attempt to increase the latter's numbers. While in many aspects, equating these two classes is justifiable, the equation of the middle layer of technobureaucrats, who constitute the core of this new class, with the working class is unacceptable. On the other hand, though it is essential to distinguish the upper technobureaucracy from the upper bourgeoisie, it is also necessary to admit their similarities in two respects. First of all, upper technobureaucrats receive such high salaries that soon they become owners and consequently members of the bourgeoisie. Second, when they manage large private organizations and also the state apparatus, they become so close to the upper bourgeoisie, maintaining such direct contact, that the association of interests between the two tends to become quite strong. Nevertheless, these two classes should not be confused. In technobureaucratic capitalism, this relation is a continuously contradictory one of cooperation and conflict. In certain circumstances, conflict prevails, in others, cooperation, the latter often taking on the character of an intimate association between the bourgeoisie and the upper technobureaucracy.