Relations industrielles
Industrial Relations

Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism, by Michael Burawoy, Chicago, Illinois, The University of Chicago Press, 1979, 267 pp.

Craig A. Zabala

Volume 36, numéro 1, 1981

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/029144ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/029144ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)
1703-8138 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Zabala, C. A. (1981). Compte rendu de [*Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*, by Michael Burawoy, Chicago, Illinois, The University of Chicago Press, 1979, 267 pp.] *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, *36*(1), 282–285. https://doi.org/10.7202/029144ar

Rowan affirment sans ambages: "the documentary evidence, however, demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that these claims are, at best, figments of a fertile imagination bulwarked by an extraordinary publicity sense and, at worst, downright fabrications".

Malgré le bilan assez négatif de la situation actuelle, les deux auteurs n'en prédisent pas moins des jours meilleurs pour la négociation collective multinationale et ce sur la base des faits suivants: en premier lieu, il y a des personnes occupant des positions importantes qui voient dans la négociation multinationale un outil pour accroître leur prestige et leur pouvoir. Parmi ceux-ci on retrouve des officiers d'organisations syndicales internationales ou régionales ainsi que des fonctionnaires travaillant pour le compte d'organismes gouvernementaux internationaux ou régionaux, tels le Bureau international du travail. En second lieu, le développement de la co-détermination ou co-gestion dans certains pays comme l'Allemagne ou la Suède permet à certains dirigeants syndicaux d'occuper de hautes fonctions administratives à l'intérieur des entreprises multinationales et ceux-ci, comme c'est le cas pour Charles Levinson qui siège sur le conseil d'administration de la compagnie Du Pont d'Allemagne, seront désormais bien placés pour encourager le développement d'un tel type de négociation collective. Enfin, et ce qui semble le plus important du point de vue des auteurs, l'établissement par les organismes gouvernementaux internationaux comme l'OCDE et le BIT de codes d'éthique régissant le comportement des corporations multinationales procure un forum idéal aux technocrates syndicaux et gouvernementaux qui désirent pousser l'idée de la négociation multinationale.

Le principal reproche que l'on peut adresser à ce volume est qu'il semble implicitement prendre partie contre l'idée de la négociation multinationale sans cependant expliquer les inconvénients que pourraient comporter un tel type de négociation. Pourtant, lorsqu'une succursale d'une multinationale essaye de fermer ses portes et de mettre à pied des centaines d'employés sans avoir à rendre des comptes au gouvernement du pays où elle était installée, on peut se demander s'il n'est pas plutôt logique de chercher, comme le fait actuellement l'OCDE, à imposer un minimum d'obligations à la compagnie-mère qui a généralement empoché des profits intéressants pendant plusieurs années. Là-dessus, les auteurs sont silencieux et il est regrettable que leur analyse n'ait pas cherché à évaluer les avantages et les inconvénients de la négociation collective multinationale.

Jean BOIVIN

Université Laval

Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism, by Michael Burawoy, Chicago, Illinois, The University of Chicago Press, 1979, 267 pp.

Michael Burawoy's recent work is one of those rare pieces that should command wide attention in the industrial sociology literature, and for good reasons. It is a book about industrial workers by a participant on the shop floor of a machine shop. The data presented includes a textural account of the everyday world of work. Furthermore, the author's major focus is to demonstrate how it is that consent to work, consent to rules imposed by management and the trade union, and consent to the legitimacy of the capitalist profit-making system is produced at the point of production and largely independent of external forces such as schooling, family ties, mass media, the state apparatus, and so on. Now although the concern with workers' consent and commitment is not new to mainstream industrial sociology, it is unique for those interested in theories of changes in the labor process as is Burawoy.

This study, however, is not a debate with the marxist school, which virtually alone has theorized about the capitalist labor process. This is somewhat surprising considering Burawoy borrows much from the marxist tradition, and his concern with consent is borrowed from Antonio Gramsci, the late Italian marxist theoretician and leader of the Italian Communist Party, in his well-known passage

"hegemony here (in the U.S.) is born in the factory." Instead, the author presents a wide survey of the mainstream industrial sociology literature, as well as management and organization theories. He incorporates many of their concepts into his own analysis while presenting a critique of a narrow selection of classical marxism. While some of your more careful readers will probably criticize Burawoy for selecting what appears to be the best of various doctrines and methods in building his own model, students of industrial sociology will find much that is useful.

It seems clear by now, and my own research based on nearly four years of experiences as an assembly-line worker for the General Motors Corporation attests to it, that participant observation studies of social relations on the shop floor of American industry are important because they facilitate access to data on interaction among workers, between workers and the company, and, just as important, between workers and their union representatives. Such analyses enable us to witness the special characteristics of the modern enterprise which produce and reproduce social relations (like those mentioned above), as well as the profit-system from which derive various social, political, and economic institutions. We can learn about work culture, the formation of informal work groups, management programs, and industrial relations systems as they impact on (and are shaped by) the daily requisites of capitalist production and labor and product markets. On this score, Burawoy has much to say about how these factors converge in the organization of work, assuming all the while that workers, union officials, and managers are rational beings, albeit they often have conflicting interests and ambitions.

This recognition leads Burawoy to challenge certain mainstream sociological assumptions about work. For example, he assumes the general marxist proposition that exploitation is inherent in the capitalist labor market and wage system in arguing that there does *not* exist an underlying harmony in the shop. Yet, he does not accept the marxian emphasis on the fragmentation and atomization of the working class or the argument that expenditure of effort at work is decided by coercion alone. Contrariwise, he writes "Conflict and consent are not primordial conditions but products of the particular organization of work" (p. 12). For Burawoy is interested at least as much in patterns of conflict dispersion and spontaneity of social relations (which do not lead toward industrial conflict) as in the " self-organization of workers" in explaining why and how workers acquiesce to capitalist profit-making and hegemony in the industrial setting.

Burawoy proposes that workers consent to exploitative capitalist relationships by treating activities on the shop floor as a series of games in which machine operators attempt to achieve levels of production output within the constraints of what he refers to as the developing internal labor market and internal state. Such games enable these workers (within the piece-rate system) to earn incentive pay but also provide a social framework for evaluating the production activities and social relations that arise from the organization of work. The need for workers to play games also has the function of dissolving the tendency towards class conflict between workers and management, since they must cooperate with each other to fulfill their job tasks -- workers to make their rate or better it (called "making-out"), and management to meet production schedules and realize a profit for the company. But for Burawoy, such an organization of work, with the premium on making-out, leads to one other significant change on the shop floor. While inter-class struggles disappear, intra-class struggles divide workers further as, for example, machinists and their auxiliary workers tend to feud over their diverse individual interests in making-out. If the author sees collective bargaining relations and company hegemony facilitating the breakdown of the collective worker into an individual ("industrial citizen"), the competitive pressures from piece-rate work guarantee the decline of organized, collective conflict in the shop. Put differently, these games generate the consent to rules and expenditure of effort that enable capital-

ist society to collectively organize workers by bringing them together to work, under fundamentally exploitative circumstances, and realize profits *without* political challenge. The simultaneous process of obscuring and securing profits that Burawoy points to, explained partly by the games workers play, enable him to stress the significance of the interdependence of workers, union, and shop-level management that underpin capitalist hegemony in the workplace. In such a fashion, the author utilizes the concepts "game" and "consent" for analytical purposes and as a radical critique of capitalist society.

Burawoy's analysis is intriguing for its unique mixture of participant observation and historical and comparative methodologies by comparing his research with Donald Roy's important study of the same shop some thirty years earlier, especially his emphasis on changes in the labor process over this period. However, it is also questionable whether the data he presents and the labor problems he chooses to address can legitimately be generalized to the whole of the capitalist labor process. On the contrary, his study is about piece-rate production in one machine shop. Does the particular organization of work found in Burawoy's shop approximate the rest of U.S. industry? Are all skilled workers prone to see their material interests in purely individualistic terms? Are there important differences between worklife in auto plants, steel mills, coal mines, electronic plants, and small machine shops such as Burawoy's? These are just some of the questions which require attention before we can generalize to the whole of the labor process. Moreover, Burawoy fails to consider the social significance of industrial relations systems and the relevant trade union except to include the union in his internal state thesis and make some vague references to unions carrying out class struggle. Do not certain industrial conflicts develop from collective bargaining relations on the shop floor? Does not some of this conflict destabilize company hegemony when it leads toward collective organization among rank-and-file workers? Is it legitimate to consider dialectical relations between rank-and-file workers and their union officials? Burawoy is certainly not sensitive to these questions while accepting the union-corruption thesis uncritically. This is not a surprising omission, since both mainstream industrial sociology and contemporary marxist theory have failed to develop a Sociology of Trade Unionism that compares with the work done on the capitalist labor process. It is both a shame and an opportunity lost that we can learn more about industrial relations from the economist Albert Rees' 18 years old study, **The Economics of Trade Unions** (University of Chicago Press, 1962), than from Burawoy's ethnographic data.

Game theory, on the other hand, has been around since mid-World War II, initially attractive to labor relations scholars who desired to improve their understanding of industrial conflict and provide analysis for developing management systems that deemphasized fundamental antagonisms between management, workers, and unions. Since the 1950's, this school was successfully challenged and largely disappeared from the literature. Burawoy neither acknowledges this debate nor illustrates why he is justified in resurrecting the thesis. It seems his choice is arbitrary and the date does not automatically lead us to choose "game" as the explanatory variable.

Two final criticisms conclude this review. One is the overly deterministic role he attributes to capitalist institutions and managerial hegemony in the shop. For example, the logic of his argument about foremen-worker relations is that management could avoid much of the existing industrial conflict by more rational and centralized planning. That is, many conflicts between labor and capital result from intra-management disputes. At the same time, Burawoy fails to address some of the important classical political theories that address the tough questions of social change. Even Marx qualified his economic determinist formulations by noting the importance of the relations of social classes to their political leaders and the political and organizational possibilities that frame many of the workers' actions. Nothing is inevitable about economic relations. If that were not

true, management would ignore the grievance machinery and speed-up the line anytime market conditions and competitive relations deemed it advantageous. Secondly, by his own choosing, he sacrifices "rich ethnographic data" he collected "for the sake of excursions into theorizing" (p. xiv). But what makes this study important is precisely the shop floor data. Therefore, I feel that a large part of the uniqueness in this study is left behind to our disadvantage.

To conclude, the 1980's present the student of industrial sociology with unique and controversial problems that demand attention. Declining productivity, high labor turnover rates, persistent inflation, highly volatile domestic and international product markets, a more heterogenous and younger labor force with significantly different expectations from older workers, rapidly changing industrial relations systems such as the new Quality of Worklife Programs and joint union-company political actions like the recent UAW-Chrysler Corporation bail-out project, and the introduction of new technologies that are drastically changing the work environment require us to grapple with the labor question whether our role is in policy formation or job reform. Before we can do either requires extensive knowledge about what the man and woman working in our mines, mills, and factories need and demand. Thus, participant observation studies such as Burawoy's are an important first step in this direction. While his study raises certain problems and leaves many questions unanswered, it requires an ambitious and farsighted research project such as this one to engage in meaningful and fruitful debate about these issues and possibly lead in the direction of a theory of the labor process. For that, we welcome this book with open arms, and pens and notepads ready.

Craig A. ZABALA

University of California
U.S. Department of Labor

The Quality of Working Life in Western and Eastern Europe, by Cary L. Cooper and Enid Memford, (eds), Westport, Greenwood Press, 1979, 348 pp.

The European experience in the QWL field is of a growing importance and therefore the review of it in the book here under consideration should be of some use. The authors of contributions into the book are European specialists in the field, and they really know what they talk about.

The contributions from public funds to the QWL projects have grown very considerably during the 1970's. The scope of the QWL projects has gone much beyond the original focus mainly on the assembly lines of the automobile industry. Now there is already a very considerable number of people actively involved in the QWL field; they consist of managers, trade unionists, ergonomists, social scientists, economists, accountants, representants of various interest groups, etc.

According to A.T.M. Wilson, there is a problem of finding common language between representants of differing interests and orientations. In order to promote industrial participation, the promotors themselves have to secure mutual tolerance and acceptance. The growing governmental involvement in industrial relations, so evident for example in Sweden, contributes to the ncesssity of a team approach in the QWL field. In addition, there are in the modern world several important forces that support the humanisation of work: the conviction of humanisers, the ecological limits of growth, the increasing rates of structural unemployment, the increase in educational opportunities, the higher standard of living, the increasing research and concern for moral comfort, the necessity to share power and responsibility with trade unions. One of the questions is how much the humanisers will find common language with the objects of their effort. As G. Hofstede says, "For alienated workers to shift their values in the direction of those of humanisers, will first have to start to shift theirs in the directions of those of the alienated workers" (p. 34).