

Constructing the laborer

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- Charlie Chaplin in Modern Times
 - captures much of the point of this chapter in Robbins
 - Released in 1936
 - Chaplin (as the tramp) tries to fit into the role of laborer
 - points out
 - how unnatural this role is for one who is not acculturated into it
 - the absurd pressure on laborers to work faster and faster
 - and ridiculous attempts of managers to increase efficiency
 - also refers to Communist labor organizers and police suppression of them in the 1930s
- The role of labor in capitalism
 - Robbins' discussion is unnecessarily obscure here
 - Here is the point:
 - Doing business requires capital, usually loaned
 - to buy materials, machines, pay labor, etc.
 - Capitalists only lend to those who can pay the highest interest
 - they don't care about the process
 - they are just looking for the best return
 - Even a business invests its money
 - in its own operations if they are profitable
 - in some other business if that would return more interest
 - So a business can only continue if it makes a decent profit compared to other businesses
 - In order to make enough profit to get further loans, the business must keep its costs low
 - that includes paying laborers as little as possible
 - and getting them to produce as much as possible
 - breaking even or making a small profit is not enough
 - this encourages improving efficiency (good!)
 - and encourages exploitation of laborers (bad!)
 - From the investor's point of view, investing is a "black box"
 - you put money in, and get it back with interest
 - you just look for the highest-paying black box
 - This point of view leads to "commodity fetishism"
 - thinking of commodities (and money which buys them) as being animate
 - money "grows" in "plants"; you "put money to work"...
 - This hides the reality of what happens inside the box
 - relentless pressure on laborers to do more for less
 - Example of visit of Phelps Dodge directors to SPCC
- Construction of the laborer
 - Began before much construction of the consumer
 - Largely started in England with "enclosure"

- mid 1700s to mid 1800s
- conversion of open field system
 - villagers had rights to shared use of pasture land
- to privately owned and managed (enclosed) land
 - no more communal access
- reduced the subsistence resources available to peasants
 - making it impossible for many to survive on what they could produce themselves
 - many had to sell their small land holdings to survive
 - larger landholders bought out small ones that weren't viable
- ex-peasants flocked to cities to find paid work to survive
- just as factory production was getting started
 - efficiencies of centralized work in a large shop
 - not initially very mechanized, but similar labor relations
- Features of the laborer
 - mobile
 - can move to wherever jobs are, few ties to land or family
 - segmented
 - by age, gender, and race
 - subject to discipline and control
 - unlike peasants had been
 - work time schedules, long focus on a single task, etc.
 - militant
 - often objected to conditions of work
- Mobile
 - due to enclosure in England
 - a similar, later process in Italy, then Mexico, etc.
 - competition from imported US and Russian wheat made small-scale European subsistence farming unviable
 - small landholders sold to larger ones
 - who did not need that many laborers year round
 - many former small farmers moved to US, Australia, etc.
 - flow of Chinese and Indian indentured servants to US, Australia, Peru, etc.
- Segmented
 - by age, gender, race/ethnicity
 - also by power
 - some laborers could organize unions and get better wages and conditions
 - others could not, often justified by classifying certain work as appropriate for low-status groups like blacks or Irish
 - creating both new group identities for their members
 - and hostilities between the groups that prevented unified opposition to bad working conditions or the system itself
- Example of laborers with little power, few options
 - young women in many Asian factories

- already have lower social status and less power
- this can be maintained through the press and treatment
- accustomed to being controlled in other contexts
- have little power to demand higher wages
- Subject to discipline
 - shifting craft work from the home setting to factories
 - required controlling and coordinating many people
 - so early factories were based on designs of prisons!
 - new laborers were not used to keeping a time schedule
 - especially one ruled by clocks, rather than nature or tasks
 - new laborers were not used to working at one thing constantly
 - work in the home was interrupted and mixed with other tasks
 - time came to be seen as valuable
 - leisure was wasteful, even sinful
 - schools consciously taught skills of keeping to schedules
 - in order to prepare children for factory work
- Resistance
 - feared but unsuccessful revolutions by laborers
 - Communism as a popular alternative (in theory)
 - debates about whether the poor deserve their lot or are unfairly exploited; same debate continues today
 - Malthus: the rich aren't rich enough to help anyway; the poor should not have kids they can't support
 - Marx: the laborers (**proletariat**) are poor because the system exploits them to benefit the rich (capitalists; **bourgeoisie**)
- Marxist view of the exploitation of labor in capitalism
 - a capitalist runs a factory by paying laborers
 - this labor adds value to the product
 - so he can sell the product for more than the cost of the materials, tools, etc.
 - the difference in the prices is the “value of labor”
 - but pays the workers less than the full value of their labor
 - keeping the difference as his profit
 - Marx called this difference the “surplus value of labor”
 - a capitalist “expropriates the surplus value of labor” from the workers
 - Marx considered this expropriation unfair
 - Is it? Is just some of it? Could it be a problem even if it were fair in some way?
- Marxist view of the impact of capitalism on laborers:
 - **Alienation of labor:** labor is separated from social relationships
 - no longer done in households or other social networks
 - robs labor of social meaning
 - **Alienation of production:** labor is separated from its products
 - because the product is controlled by the capitalist
 - products cease to be possessions, linked to their makers

- they become merely meaningless commodities
 - Alienation robs laborer's lives of meaning
 - makes them miserable and prone to resist
 - Alienation facilitates abuse of labor
 - which is the inevitable outcome of capitalism
- Forms of resistance and rebellion
 - not only protests, strikes, rebellions
 - also moral critique in stories, songs, etc.
 - spirit possession in Malaysia
 - But also organization: union movements
 - see quote at the start of the chapter
 - and the labor history reading
 - union organizers and members repeatedly suppressed by force
 - private thugs
 - government police, even military
- Why laborers are chronically unhappy and militant: construction of the laborer as an unhappy person
 - capitalists are motivated to expropriate as much surplus value of labor as possible
 - to profit personally
 - to pay back loans with interest according to their fiduciary duty
 - so they pile further exploitation on the laborers
 - reducing their pay further
 - getting them to produce more
 - Ways to reduce labor costs
 - import laborers from places where lower pay is typical
 - problem: they or their children stop accepting low pay
 - repeated waves of immigration from different countries
 - followed by anti-immigrant backlash as they acculturate
 - Irish, Chinese, Mexicans...
 - use prison inmates who cannot demand higher pay
 - use slaves who need only be supported, not paid
 - use bonded (indentured) laborers
 - forced by contract to work off a debt
 - that they would otherwise be imprisoned for
 - so they are in no position to negotiate for higher wages
 - all get problematic if you do them here, in full view
 - A way to reduce labor costs that is not in full view
 - move production to low-wage areas
 - where our labor and other laws don't apply
 - but consumers can remain ignorant of production conditions
 - good for everyone?
 - consumers get cheaper goods
 - third-world workers find employment they otherwise wouldn't

- investors get a good return
- but the jobs are not available to laborers here
- and the reality of the jobs abroad may be grim
- Why would workers overseas take bad jobs?
 - some choose to, seduced by allure of being a consumer
 - more have to, because they have no alternative
 - because small-scale farming is no longer viable
 - or because they have lost their land
- So why have many people shifted from farming to being laborers?
 - again and again around the world, small farmers lost their land and had no choice but to become laborers
 - enclosure in England, as we saw before
 - also in other European countries such as Italy
 - more recent equivalents of enclosure in other countries
 - Mexico: led to consolidation of landholdings and displacement
 - outright confiscation of land by colonial governments
 - farmers switch from **subsistence crops** to **cash crops**
 - subsistence crops: to be consumed by the producing family, meeting their own food needs
 - cash crops: to be sold for money, which the producing family uses to buy food
 - also said as switching from the **subsistence economy** to the **cash economy**
 - why make this switch?
 - in order to be able to buy things and live better
 - often encouraged by government incentives
 - loans for specific crops
 - programs that give out seed, technical help, irrigation equipment, etc.
 - often to stimulate specific industries, like Peru encouraging highland farmers to grow wheat for sale to a big Peruvian beer company
 - may work for a while, but loans must be paid back annually
 - farmers need loans to buy seed, fertilizer, etc.
 - few make enough profit in one year to buy the seed, etc. for next year without a loan
 - if the farmer can't pay back even just once, he has to sell the farm
 - one bad harvest
 - one good season when the price drops due to a particularly good harvest, creating more crop than buyers need
 - could be a good season on another continent! A glut still drives the world price down
 - competition from imports grown on large, mechanized farms
 - participating in the global cash economy makes a small farmer subject to global market changes in supply, demand and price that he/she cannot predict or control
 - if he/she fails just once to make enough to cover a year's loans
 - the farmer may have to sell his/her land to cover the debt
 - and join the landless poor
 - with no alternative but to sell his/her labor
 - and so another laborer is created, and the construction of the role is reinforced...