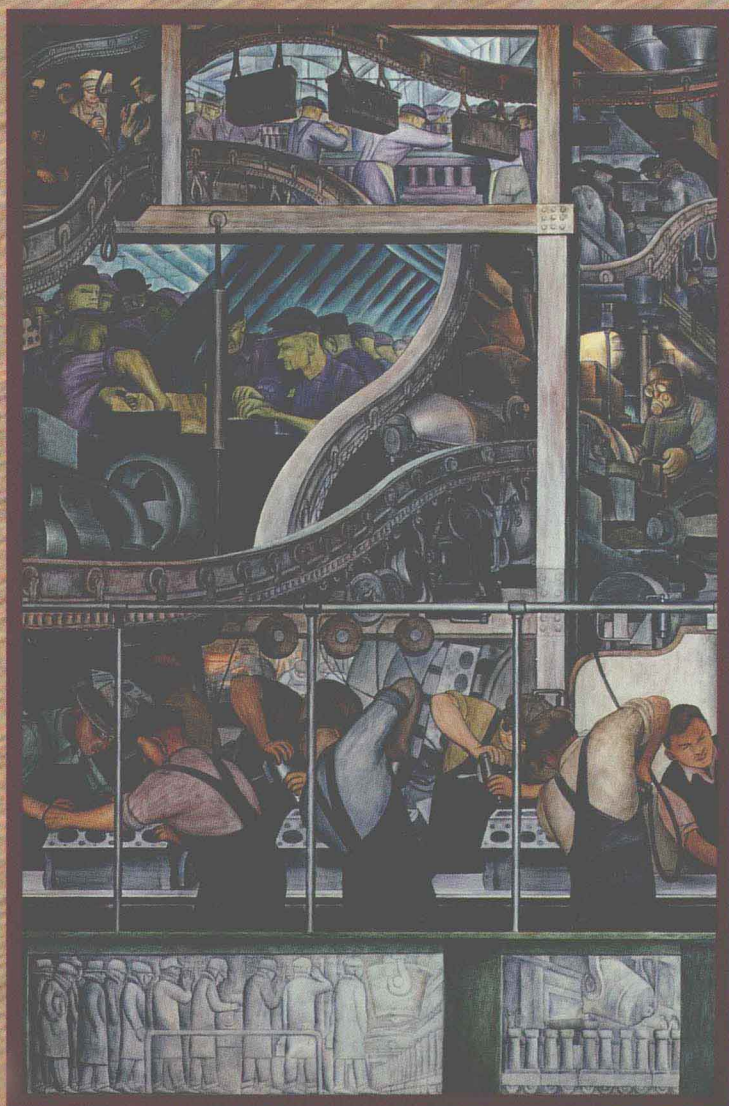


THE TYRANNY OF WORK

ALIENATION AND THE LABOUR PROCESS

THIRD EDITION



James W. Rinehart

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University of Western Ontario

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PREFACE

Nearly a decade has passed since the publication of the second edition of this book. These have not been good years for working people. We have witnessed two free trade agreements; the dilution of social programs; a deep recession accompanied by double-digit unemployment; the disappearance of relatively secure working class jobs and the rapid growth of contingent (part-time, temporary) forms of employment; the erosion of real wages. The threat or reality of disinvestment and capital flight have reduced considerably the relative autonomy of even the most ostensibly progressive governments and driven unions into concessions on wages and work rules that took years of struggle to achieve. New modes of organizing the labour process have appeared, with the hard-driven, lean and mean Toyota system pointing the one-best-way to competitive advantage. As workers and unions get caught up in the processes and logic of competitiveness, they are pitted against their counterparts in other companies and other countries in a race to the bottom in which the only winners are employers. Management consultants and human resources administrators have synthesized and repackaged old nostrums and created new, tougher justifications to ensure their acceptance. Once labelled as measures aimed at humanizing the workplace, these programs for restructuring — and intensifying — work now are justified by the need to enhance corporate competitiveness — and save jobs. Bitter medicine goes down better with a spoonful of sugar. That the term “empowerment” is so widely used today in “progressive” management circles suggests not just manipulative intent but an awareness that even in periods of deep recession the boundaries of workplace control continue to be challenged by workers striving to attain a measure of power, security, and dignity.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union (where alienation was deeply entrenched), the triumph of market ideology, and the increasing commodification of goods and services, more and more countries and regions of the world are being swept into the orbit of capitalism. Yet a growing proportion of the world's population remains outside the system, landless, jobless, lacking the wherewithal to purchase even a fraction of the goods and services produced in abundance for the market. On a world scale, the problem of alienated labour has been partially eclipsed not by the growing security and empowerment of human beings but by the utter scarcity of jobs and the means of subsistence.

The transcendence of the related problems of mass unemployment and alienated labour, which are rooted in the same capitalist soil, appears more remote than ever. The persistence of patriarchy and racism and the ugly resurgence of ethnic, national, and religious hostilities are major impediments to the development of the kind of class-based solidarity and political action needed to begin to construct a new social order. Nevertheless, deep-seated ideals — security, community, freedom, and equality — are the foundation for the development and pursuit of alternative modes of organizing work and society. I believe that people, driven by social, economic, and political conditions that frustrate the realization of these ideals, will continue to struggle to establish a very different — and better — world.

Scattered throughout this third and, I presume, final edition of *The Tyranny of Work* are new materials relating both to historical and contemporary periods. Some sections of the text were substantially revised in the light of recent research, while others are completely new. Hopefully, readers will find in this edition a more satisfactory treatment of gender as it relates to the world of work. Again, and in keeping with the tone of the above paragraphs, I found no compelling reasons to discard or alter the conceptual framework of alienation.

Throughout the several, frequently interrupted, years it took to complete these revisions my wife, Carol, did her best to keep me from obscuring reality with scholastic mumbo jumbo. Mark Priest of the London Oxfam office did his best to make sure I didn't completely disappear within the cloistered walls of academia. I received an intellectual shot in the arm from my union colleagues of the Canadian Auto Workers Research Group on CAMI — David Robertson, Jeff Wareham, Herman Rosenfeld, Alan McGough, and Steve Benedict — and from the other academic member of the group — Chris Huxley. For several years we worked, argued, and learned together in a genuinely collective effort. To these people and others too numerous to mention by name, I am grateful.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In the more than ten years since *The Tyranny of Work* first appeared the field of labour studies has grown enormously, thanks in no small part to Harry Braverman's now classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Braverman's book amplified ideas and generated insights on the labour process that had lain dormant in the writings of Karl Marx. Despite certain analytic flaws, particularly the refusal to examine the consciousness and activity of workers, the popularity of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* transcended dis-

ciplinary lines and national boundaries. While Braverman's work left its imprint on Canadian labour studies, significant contributions to this area issued from a group of young and talented scholars whose approach to theory and research was more historically grounded than Braverman's analysis. Operating within a political economy perspective and representing several disciplines, these scholars began to construct Canadian labour studies upon a foundation whose key elements included the examination of political and economic developments, workers' activities, class struggles, and transformations of the labour process. This approach has matured rapidly, as evidenced by an impressive stock of theses, monographs, and collections of articles, as well as by the excellent materials published since 1976 in the journal *Labour/Le Travail* (originally named *Labour/Le Travailleur*).

Before the completion of the first edition of *The Tyranny of Work*, only an abbreviated version of Braverman's book published in the *Monthly Review* was available, and the birth of *Labour/Le Travail* had not yet been celebrated. Over the past ten years or so, social, economic, and political developments and the outpouring of labour studies research meant that a second edition of *Tyranny* would necessarily entail much more than a cosmetic modification of the original. The scope and richness of these developments dictated selectivity — and I make no claim to having incorporated all the relevant materials. Still, most chapters were altered substantially. While the new materials enabled me to provide a more detailed and nuanced description and analysis of activities, events, and trends, they contained no compelling logical or evidential bases for a major restructuring of the text's conceptual framework. Alienation is at least as pervasive today as it was a decade ago, and the constellation of sources of alienated labour — market forces, the capitalist division of labour, and narrowly held ownership and control of the means and ends of production — if anything have become more potent determinants of the organization and content of work.

Labour studies surged forward at the tail end of an era of progressive ideas and movements. Hopes for a better future were dashed by the onset of the world economic crisis in the mid-1970s and by the rise of neoconservative ideologies, political forces, and governments. It is hard to be optimistic today. The goals of a democratically planned economy and worker-managed enterprises may seem more remote now than in the past, but the idea is no less compelling. I continue to believe that alienation is not inherent to the human condition, that human beings are not eternally doomed to toil under conditions of wage labour, and that ordinary people have the capacity and the desire to govern their own

lives — on and off the job. These ideals inform the text of both editions of *The Tyranny of Work*.

The events of the past twelve years as well as the ideas of friends, colleagues, and students — too numerous to mention by name — have influenced this new edition. So too has the bi-annual Conference on Workers and Their Communities. Founded in the early 1970s to bring together labour-oriented people from trade unions, political organizations, and universities to share experiences and ideas, the Conference symbolizes the growth and vitality of Canadian labour studies and has been a continuing source of personal inspiration and knowledge. Finally, I would like to thank Keith Thompson of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Canada, for convincing me to undertake the revisions for a second edition. I am also indebted to Chris Huxley for reading the revised manuscript and for offering at every point sound, constructive criticisms and advice.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Work is an enormously complex activity. To even begin to understand its complexities requires the use of theories or models, which always isolate and amplify some aspects of reality at the expense of others. I have chosen to examine the institution of work from the perspective of a theory of alienated labour. The central focus of this theory is power; the problem of alienated labour is inextricably bound to the issue of who determines the way work is organized and the purposes for which work is undertaken.

Conventional approaches to the study of work either completely ignore alienation, relegate it to the remote past, or locate it in an atypical segment of today's labour force. In contrast, a major theme of this book is that alienation is a *statistically normal* condition in modern society. This is not to suggest that some jobs are not better than others or that work is completely devoid of gratification. Clearly, variations in the content and milieus of work do exist in contemporary society. At the same time, there is this striking sameness to work: The overwhelming majority of people — both those who wear blue collars and office personnel — do not exercise control over the process and purposes of their labour. It is this fact that must be grasped in order to comprehend work and its discontents. And it is this fact that establishes work as a major social problem, for the way work is structured is wasteful of human talent and impervious to human needs.

If only a handful of writers recognize or admit that work adversely affects large numbers of people, fewer still believe that anything can be

done to correct the problem. Troubles in the realm of labour are ordinarily viewed either as being inherent to the human condition or as an inevitable consequence of high technology. One of my objectives is to expose the fragile edifice of data and logic upon which such pessimistic beliefs are based. Unfortunately, many of that small group of academicians who reject the notion that discontents with work are an ineluctable feature of modern life lodge their faith in “top-down” solutions. In this book I have tried to show the weaknesses and dangers of schemes to reduce worker dissatisfaction that are formulated by an “intellectual” elite and addressed to the managerial elite. Alienation can only be overcome through the efforts of ordinary people to humanize and control the workplace and the community. That ordinary people have the ability and the desire to govern their own lives is a central tenet of this book, and one whose validity I have tried to demonstrate.

Acknowledgements are due to friends and colleagues who helped me write this book. First, I want to thank Seymour Faber. My initial interest in the sociology of work was stimulated by Seymour, and my orientation to the field was shaped by our discussions, which have spanned nearly a decade. Together we planned the contours of this book. And during the research and writing stages we engaged in a continuous dialogue over the substance of the manuscript. For critically evaluating sections of the manuscript I am indebted to Craig McKie, Joan Stelling, Peter Archibald, Richard Hamilton, Glenn Goodwin, Laura Hollingsworth, Lane Millet, and John Gartrell. For furnishing me with an insight into the complexity of history, particularly that of pre-industrial society, I am grateful to Donald Avery, Richard Alcorn, and José Igartua. I want to thank Peter Warrian for providing guidelines and sources for the study of the development of industrial capitalism in Canada. I am especially indebted to Bryan Palmer, who carefully read portions of the manuscript, offered valuable suggestions for revising them, and pointed out sources I otherwise would have overlooked. Thanks are also due to Judi Smith, who did minor editing and typed the manuscript. Finally, I want to thank Carol Rinehart for managing our household and for simply persevering during the period of time it took to write this book. While all of these people contributed materially to the manuscript, responsibility for its final form is my own.

A Note from the Publisher

Thank you for selecting *The Tyranny of Work: Alienation and the Labour Process*, Third Edition, by James W. Rinehart. The author and publisher have devoted considerable time to the careful development of this book. We appreciate your recognition of this effort and accomplishment.

We want to hear what you think about *The Tyranny of Work*. Please take a few minutes to fill in the stamped reader reply card at the back of the book. Your comments and suggestions will be valuable to us as we prepare new editions and other books.

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WORK AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

Work has always been a central human activity and one that differentiates human beings from all other forms of life. Only humans can take raw materials from the environment, transform them, and in the process change their own conditions of existence. By changing the world they live in through labour, human beings at the same time alter their own nature, for the lives of people are influenced both by what they produce and how they produce. As we develop the means to cope with and control the physical environment in order to satisfy basic needs, we simultaneously produce the very conditions that create new needs and aspirations, as well as new ideas, traditions, and institutions.

Work has always had a profound impact on the lives of those who perform it. How could it be otherwise? Today employed adults ordinarily spend at least one-third of their waking hours on the job. What people do during these hours often penetrates to the very core of their personalities. Work can offer a sense of accomplishment or meaninglessness; it can be a source of pride or shame. And an activity that consumes such a large portion of time cannot help but spill over into nonwork spheres of life. How people work affects the way in which they spend their time away from work, for it places constraints on the enjoyment of "free time" and conditions the overall mode of adjustment to life.

IDENTIFYING WORK AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

We know that work is a central human activity, but is it also a social problem? Whenever large numbers of people are adversely affected by a social condition we can speak of the objective existence of a social problem; that is, the undesirable condition exists independent of the recognition of it as problematic. It is one of the objectives of this book to reveal the manner in which the nature and organization of work have adversely

affected Canadian people both in the modern era and the pre-industrial period. But there is another important dimension to social problems. The manifold consequences of any social problem, particularly those that prod individuals to rebel or to seek reforms, are only fully operative when an objectively undesirable situation comes to be perceived as such and regarded as amenable to change. In the brief discussion that follows, we examine in broad terms variations in the extent to which work has been perceived as a problematic condition and the sociohistorical circumstances that influenced this recognition among groups of people differentially located in the class structure of this society.

Since its inception in Canada in the latter part of the nineteenth century, industrial capitalism and the organization of work associated with it have generated continuing protests from working people. Initially, grievances centred around the excesses of the new industrial order — child labour, low wages, long hours, harsh discipline, and physically debilitating and dangerous conditions. Ultimately, the state and employers were compelled to recognize the legitimacy of workers' complaints, and some of the most blatant excesses of the industrial system were corrected through legislation.

As the twentieth century progressed, workers continued to press for changes in their terms and conditions of employment. Governments and employers just as persistently sought to contain or suppress expressions of discontent, while academicians virtually ignored them.¹ Officially, work was no longer regarded as genuinely problematic, since the conditions under which it was carried out had been improved by legislative action. If problems were recognized at all, they were seen as deriving from workers and their responses to work rather than from the nature of work itself. "Defective" traits such as laziness, low intelligence, or lack of respect for authority were attributed to those who protested against their conditions of employment.² There was also a complementary belief: protests were explained away by reference to agitators (often of foreign extraction) who played on the emotions of "irrational" workers to *artificially* create crises. These concerns reached a peak in the aftermath of the 1919 Winnipeg general strike. But the decline in unionization and strikes in the 1920s and the appearance of dazzling mass-produced commodities, especially cars, for the masses once again obscured workplace issues.

Work, or more accurately, the lack of it, resurfaced as a critical, recognized social problem during the Great Depression. Naturally, the major concerns during this period were jobs and financial security. Nevertheless, during this period large companies tried to mask oppressive working

conditions and purchase worker diligence through welfare programs and company unions, and the human relations school issued the first of a long line of remedies for workplace malaise.

With the economic recovery brought on by World War II and the enactment of welfare state programs — such as unemployment compensation, health care insurance, and old age pensions — and legislation guaranteeing labour the right to collective bargaining, the average Canadian was now protected from the *immediate* threat of being unable to provide for his or her family.

The public was exposed to repeated pronouncements of the arrival of the affluent society in which the majority of people purportedly had attained — or at least were on the threshold of achieving — the comfortable trappings of the middle class. Moreover, a virtual explosion of white-collar jobs and a growing demand for highly trained scientists, technicians, and professionals combined to obscure official awareness of problems generated by the nature of work. What these changes seemed to imply was the eventual elimination of the most unpleasant, mindless, and insecure jobs.

Only in the 1960s did it become abundantly clear that the “Just Society” was not about to materialize, and we were once again alerted to the full dimension of the problems of work. Poverty was “rediscovered.” And the unemployment rate in Canada, which since the mid-1950s had been consistently higher than that of any other Western nation, served as a constant reminder that economic maintenance remained problematic for many people. Work stoppages intensified in the 1960s, culminating in a series of strikes that rocked that nation in 1965–66. Other manifestations of labour unrest became particularly obvious during the sixties. Working to rule, tardiness, absenteeism, labour turnover, insubordination, and product sabotage reached epidemic proportions in some sections of the economy. These conditions prompted an alarmed federal government to launch a comprehensive study of industrial relations whose aim was to arrange a truce between labour and management through the implementation of reforms.³

Unrest among working people continued to be a source of official apprehension in the 1970s. In 1973 provincial and federal cabinet ministers agreed to support a broad investigation seeking to uncover the causes of illegal work stoppages as well as the sources of job dissatisfaction. Senator David Croll, who directed the Senate’s massive investigation of poverty in Canada, called for another special senate study — this time of the work ethic. Noting that Canadians are increasingly reluctant to take just any job, Croll warned that a technologically advanced soci-

ety “makes work as a means to any end other than putting food on the table and paying the bills, most uninviting.”⁴ These state responses were accompanied by a growing number of accounts on the topic in the popular media and in reports of social scientists. *Canadian Forum*, *Fortune*, *Time*, *Canadian Business*, and *Newsweek* all featured articles probing the scope and sources of unrest among manual labourers.⁵ But labour unrest was not restricted to blue-collar workers. *Fortune* magazine published an article with the revealing title, “The Fraying White Collar.” *Weekend* magazine ran a feature on “white-collar factories” in Canada. The article examined the deteriorating market situation and working conditions of white-collar employees. The circumstances of working women became the focus of numerous books and government documents, including the 1970 Royal Commission Report on the Status of Women in Canada. These problems led to the emergence of various groups (including management consultants, personnel departments in large firms, university bodies, and government centres) that promoted reforms to improve the content and conditions of work. These “quality of work life” (QWL) initiatives ostensibly were oriented to making work a more satisfying experience, but their underlying agenda was an attempt to restore corporate competitiveness and profitability.

The world recession, which took hold in Canada around 1975, deepened in the early 1980s, and in the mid-1980s the economy showed only modest signs of recovery. Business and government leaders regarded inflation as the most insidious aspect of the recession and argued that increased government spending and high workers’ wages were the root of the problem. Attempting to restore the basis for highly profitable investment, the government raised interest rates, enacted wage-restraint measures, restricted collective bargaining, and slashed expenditures on social programs.⁶ Among the predictable outcomes of this policy were a decline in real wages and soaring unemployment, which, by 1985, affected nearly one and a half million Canadians. The seriousness of the situation prompted Catholic bishops to issue a stinging indictment of our economic system and of government nostrums that deliberately sacrifice jobs for corporate profits.⁷

The modest recovery of the late 1980s was followed by a deeper and more durable recession in the 1990s. An increasingly globalized economy, two free trade agreements, and neoconservative restraint policies by governments of all political stripes escalated the shift in the already unbalanced power relationship between labour and capital in favour of the latter. Ironically, these conditions had the effect of masking workplace problems. Job insecurity muted worker resistance, as more and

more people considered themselves fortunate to have jobs in an era of mass unemployment. Strikes declined dramatically in the 1990s, and unions were driven to adopt a more defensive approach to collective bargaining. Instead of aggressively pursuing improvements in wages and working conditions, most unions' goal was simply to hang on to gains achieved in the past.

Throughout this century more and more women have sought paid jobs. Since World War II women's labour force participation, particularly that of married women, has risen dramatically. By 1991 about six of every ten women were working outside of the home, and they made up nearly half (45 percent) of the Canadian labour force. Their presence is most evident in routine office jobs and in "women's jobs" in elementary schools, hospitals, and restaurants that entail functions analogous to those performed in the home.⁸ A growing number of women today hold jobs characterized by subordination, low wages, and lack of opportunities for advancement. More and more of these jobs are part-time. When women do work alongside men they are subject to a gendered division of labour in which they often are slotted into the least desirable and poorest-paying jobs. Moreover, women's job skills often are unrecognized and unrewarded. Action to correct gender wage disparities has been opposed by the business sector and driven by feminists and labour and coalitions of these two groups. As a consequence, the workplace situations of most women remain unchanged. Only in rare instances have unions managed to negotiate equal-value contractual clauses, and pay equity legislation outside Ontario applies only to the public sector or segments of it and includes a lengthy list of exemptions.⁹ To make matters worse, women must contend with what is essentially a double day of paid labour and unpaid housework.¹⁰

WORK: ITS FUNCTIONS AND MEANINGS

To understand the problematic aspects of work we must initially seek to establish its personal and social ramifications.¹¹ The most obvious function of work is an economic one. Throughout history, labour has been intimately linked with the provision of goods and services (and income) essential to the maintenance of human life. Today, one's occupation determines the extent to which life will be consumed by a struggle for maintenance. The availability of work and the differential economic rewards attached to occupations establish differential life chances and opportunities — to receive a decent education, to be healthy, to enjoy leisure activities, and in general to maintain oneself and one's family in a manner commensurate with acceptable community standards of living.