

# Fordist to post-fordist production

Government, Capitalism



Work and employment have become areas of society that sociologists have become increasingly more focused on. The growing interest is a direct consequence of the realisation that occupation is closely related to social status, class position and many other important issues in both cause and effect. The change from an agricultural society, to an industrial and, as some argue, a post-industrial one has had lasting effects on all types of industry. It has also changed the expectations we as consumers have of both the production and service industries.

Fordist production, or Fordism, has had one of the greatest influences on methods and means of production of all industrial movements, with its ideas still permeating concepts of management and factory layouts. Although it is bound almost inevitably with both industrialism and, more importantly, Capitalism, it has a distinct entity within the market place. Conceived and developed by Henry Ford in 1908, it involves mass production of consumer durables, made on 'moving assembly line techniques operated with semi-skilled labour of the mass worker' (Fulcher & Scott 1999: 528). He applied his ideas to the production of the famous Model T, breaking overall production process down to hundreds of smaller and specialised tasks and thus lowering costs and raising profits. Workers were discouraged from interacting on the factory floor and pay was minimal.

In the short term such profit-maximising theories were seen to be revolutionary and completely sustainable, however there were major problems with Ford's underestimation of the diversity of consumers. The machinery used was not updated and so became almost obsolete when faced with competition from newer companies. So too did the

standardisation of the product itself as the Model T became a victim of its own success when the consumer market became over saturated and consumers no longer desired the same car as their neighbours and friends.

One of the most negative features of Fordism, however, was the human cost of a high production rate: workers in such factories were given minimal pay and isolated from their fellow workers. As a consequence they suffered mass alienation and de-skilling, which will be discussed later on in this essay. As stated earlier, the Fordist movement has its roots in Industrial capitalism, and many of its fundamental principles are intrinsic to the Capitalist theories of production. The industrial setting of most factories and workplaces also provided the perfect environment in which to initiate the new, proficient and prolific method of production (Allen 1992: 172).

Capitalism and Industrialisation are sometimes mistakenly understood to be identical in form and function, yet while they do share certain similarities it is important to differentiate between the two if a thorough analysis of the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist production is to be undertaken. The basic feature of capitalism is the 'financing of economic activity by the investment of capital in the expectation of profit' (Fulcher 1999: 504).

In other words, profit drives the economy and private ownership of the means of production separated the bourgeoisie from the proletariat. It existed before the Industrial Revolution, as the workshops and working households of 16th and 17th century Europe became increasingly financed and controlled by owners of capital (Fulcher 1999: 505). Industrialisation referred to the new method of organising production that became fully

established in the 19th century. It is more relevant to discuss the power driven machinery and systematic division of labour or the concentration of production which characterise industrialisation, as opposed to purely capitalist ideals like wage labour and conflict of interests (Fulcher 1999: 503).

Marx (1848) believed Industrial capitalism was 'historically superior' (cited in Edgell 1994: 5) and noted its tendency to change the status of the self-employed to employed, something he referred to as proletarianisation. This process occurred at a political, social and occupational level, and Marx emphasised the importance of machines, or 'dead labour', as the reason for work becoming de-skilled and decreasingly autonomous.

His theories were published almost a century before Fordism became heavily used in industry, yet his predictions as to the future of capitalism seem eerily prophetic with regards to the apparent alienation and conflict that became more and more evident with the implementation of Fordist approaches to the workplace. Though his conflict theory rested more on the class tensions between wage labourer and capitalist factory owners, alienation became a prominent focal point of later studies of industry.

Marx stated that when a worker lost control over the product of their labour, which becomes an 'alien object' (Fulcher 1999: 504), they experience alienation whereby there is a lack of pride and attachment towards both the product and the process. This loss of product control also caused the disintegration of social integration and co-operation within the workforce and

the competitive nature of capitalism eliminated any possibility of autonomy or creativity.

Durkheim (cited in Allen 1992: 165) later argued this point, believing instead that a growing division of labour actually created a new interdependence between workers and created a sense of participation in a common enterprise, hence increasing the sense of meaningfulness to the individual worker. His organic solidarity theory used the organic analogy of highly specialised organs functioning in harmony for the greater purpose to illustrate his stance. Yet he also admitted that such division of labour is only meaningful if people carry out a freely chosen task according to their ability, something which was not allowed within the Fordist model.

Blauner (1964) further developed Marx's theory of alienation, which were sometimes accused of being too vague to facilitate any real measurement of the phenomenon, with his own research study. According to Blauner there were four historically significant stages of production which all still existed today: craft production, machine based factory production, assembly plant production and automated production.

He proposed that alienation did exist, but to differing degrees within the confines of separate industries. While some of the techniques used in his chosen industries of study (printing, textile, automobile and chemical production) the main principles behind each one remains unchanged. He aimed to show the four ways in which the work situation could effect the worker: powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement. These were observed through the use of pre-ordained indicators, e. g.

powerlessness was manifested by a lack of control over employment and so on. He used an attitude survey of workers in the U. S. and case study material and found overwhelmingly that assembly line workers suffered the highest levels of alienation when compared to their peers in craft based, machine based and automated industries. They had low levels of control and little job security, as well as highly sub-divided and repetitive work rotas in large, anonymous plants.

He was criticised, however, by another sociologist, Braverman (1974) who was sceptical of Blauner's argument that automation led to a meaningful work experience (Fulcher 1999: 513). In his view the early stages of automation lead to a small number of highly skilled jobs concerned with installing and programming machinery and planning work process. Once the automation began the operations became routine and de-skilled.

De-skilling is characterised by the separation of mental and manual work, a notable side effect of Fordism. Mechanisation meant work required little training and almost no mental effort, while the employers were able to recruit cheap labour and exercise more control over the workforce. Thompson, in 1983, (cited in Fulcher 1999: 517) argued that Braverman did not take into account the levels of resistance to de-skilling by workers and the possibility that the technological change resulted in new skills being generated.

Although so far only the idea of Fordism has been expanded upon, many social scientists argue that we live in a post-Fordist era, where the reorganisation of production to meet the requirements workers, including

increased flexibility and a higher standards of skill. Essentially the indicators of a major shift from Fordist to post-Fordist production, according to Fulcher (1999: 528) and Boyer (1997: 7), would be a greater level of product diversity, the prioritising of quality over inexpense and quantity, multiple and varied work tasks, integrated and flexible labour force and co-operative industrial relations.

Post-Fordism challenged the idea that capitalism automatically equated a continually de-skilled and degraded labour force, and national surveys conducted by Gallie (1996) indicated a rise in skill level and job satisfaction, with the significant exception of unskilled and semi-skilled workers.

Thompson (1993) again criticised this view as he stated that requiring workers to complete a wider range of tasks is not synonymous with an upgrade in skill, he thought it was more representative of multi-tasking than multi-skilling.

Wood (1989) was also sceptical that production has moved into a post-Fordist situation, believing instead that work organisation and management are merely modifications to the basic principles of Fordism to create a neo-Fordism. In fact there is evidence of a resurgence of Fordist methods of production (Gabriel, 1989 cited in Allen 1992: 18). This is occurring not on the factory floor, but in the service sectors, for instance catering. This transference of the highly impersonal, detached features of Fordism to what is basically an personal service industry may seem surprising, but in fact simply reflects the tendency for larger corporations to favour standardised

efficiency over individualistic creativity and craftsmanship, in order to gain the highest profit.

Many companies now realise the advantages of a flexible, autonomous workforce, and have followed one of several approaches in order to modernise their business. The most popular and relatively successful method focuses on the Japanese style of industrial relations (Fulcher 1999: 527). In Japan there are extremely obvious differences to big industries with regards to their workers. The idea of life-time employment, where employees remain with one company for the duration of their careers, and company welfare, for example a company providing housing for workers are advocated as extracting maximum loyalty and dedication from labourers at every level of the occupational hierarchy. In the social context of work itself there is a trend for the social integration of managers and their staff and even a common uniform worn by all to eliminate perceived divisions between higher and lower levels of employees.

Basset (1987) found these principles translated into the British work system with the single union agreements and binding arbitration agreements (where a neutral arbitrator referees internal conflicts). There was also a move towards consultation and participation in the form of worker committees who were separate from any union organisation. Unskilled and semi-skilled labourers also received equal conditions of employment and benefits.

The move from increasing worker power is aided by the evolution of post-industrialism, signified by the switch in consumer demand from the production industry to the service industry, teachers and I. T. workers for



example. Such 'white collar workers' contribute a higher level of skill and thus demand greater control over their working conditions. More scope is given to technological advances and the subsequent need for constant diversification and upgrading of both machines and labourers, making the Fordist model somewhat redundant.

Changes such as these highlight the gradual shift from Fordist to post-Fordist modes of production, however one should not underestimate the vast weight carried by Fordism for capitalist employers as an effective method of profit maximisation. Fordist production offers lucrative short-term economic and technological gains, and the recent influx of part-time workers has opened up a market for the re-emergence of the assembly line industries which once epitomised the banality and worker dissatisfaction of Henry Ford's own factory.