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Absent hands: towards a history of industrial work

Manos ausentes: hacia una historia del trabajo industrial

Michael Weatherburn
Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine. Imperial College London
Michael.weatherburn08@imperial.ac.uk

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Resumen

Este documento aboga por la renovación de la historia de la producción industrial en Gran Bretaña, especialmente en lo relacionado con la historia de los procesos de trabajo. Se analiza cómo los procesos de trabajo industrial en Gran Bretaña del siglo veinte han sido sistemáticamente excluidos de la historia de la tecnología, las relaciones laborales, la historia laboral y

Abstract

This paper calls for a renewal of the history of industrial production in Britain, particularly related to the history of work processes. It analyses how industrial work processes in twentieth century Britain have been systematically excluded from the histories of technology, industrial relations, labour history, and business. I suggest that the history of work is a historiographical

de los negocios. Sugiero que la historia del trabajo es un campo historiográfico que ofrece muchas oportunidades para los historiadores de la tecnología y de la empresa para desarrollar nuevas vías de investigación. También estimo que una historia completa del trabajo industrial lleva a los historiadores a recurrir al conjunto de obras de la historia, tanto las sociales como las empresariales, y a la colaboración entre estas disciplinas.

Palabras clave: Gran Bretaña; industria; producción; tecnología, procesos de trabajo; historiografía

field which offers many opportunities for historians of technology and business to develop new avenues of research. I also suggest that a comprehensive history of industrial work requires historians to draw on both social and business history literatures, and for collaboration between these disciplines.

Keywords: *Britain, industry, production, technology; work processes; historiography*

1. Introduction

There is not a substantial academic interest in Britain's industrial past. This is ironic, given that most commentators would agree that the country is decidedly post-industrial. There is even less on twentieth century industrial work. This is in stark contrast to the focus of public historians and museum curators, for example the massive exhibits of Victorian factories at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, UK and the National Coal Museum in Blaenafon, UK. Yet public historians and museum curators have little to say about industrial work in the twentieth century, perhaps believing that it is not sufficiently in the past to merit its inclusion in a museum. They also do not begin to separate the different kinds of work, be it manual, industrial, agricultural, retail, or clerical.

2. The Current Scenario

Regarding the recent historiography of work, it should be a matter of some regret that McIvor (2001)'s call for a new history

of twentieth century industrial work did not successfully spur a new phase of historical research into this field[1]. He observed that previously ubiquitous discussions relating to capitalist oppression, class cohesion and deskilling had reached their lifespan and he suggested historians should instead move towards a new social history of work (McIvor, 2001, 2). With a few notable exceptions (Coopey, O'Connell, Porter, 2005), fresh approaches to the history of work have not followed. In fact, industrial work has been systematically excluded from most literatures, and this process is the subject of the present article.

Historians of industrial medicine such as McIvor have indeed researched the workplace, and this approach has focused on industrial welfare and factory reforms. From this history of medicine perspective there has been a consistent attempt to explore factories and workplaces as working environments, although these histories have persistently focused on government industrial policy or the failure thereof (McIvor, 1987; Long, 2011). Thus, from this literature we know much about how policymakers, unions, and other organisations wanted to change the workplace. However, we know little about what was happening on a day to day basis.

The particular work processes historians have studied have often been derived from the manufacture of certain iconic products. For example, historians of the 1970s and 80s extensively analysed the history of car manufacturing (Zeitlin, 1986; Lewchuck, 1987). This has left a literature misbalanced towards certain work processes.

Recent work on the history of technology by Edgerton (2006) allows us to approach the history of work from a new angle, and reopen the debates McIvor called for in 2001. In asking whether the atomic bomb was more important than the condom, Edgerton implicitly makes us address which gadgets have been most historically influential. Are cars and aeroplanes really more important than boxes of chocolates, pencils or cigarettes? More importantly to this discussion, should we judge which work processes should be interesting to historians by the alleged novelty of the items being produced[2]?

1. Of the 25 citations of the volume on Google Scholar, virtually all relate to either the history of industrial welfare or working class identity.

2. Edgerton also raises the important question of domestic work, and who has conducted it. Such questions go far beyond the scope of this paper.

Even if simply a balance is required, there is plenty of research which needs to be done in this area. If we shift our focus from histories of invention and diffusion to that of production and use, a whole world of analysis becomes available. For example, many histories tell us about the marketing of Rowntree's Black Magic chocolates (Collett, 2009, 15). Far fewer commentators can tell us how the Black Magic box was made, or how the chocolates were placed in the correct spaces in the box, let alone about the developing box-making industry in the period. Production within production is a process which historians have rarely attempted to understand.

In presenting an analysis of the historiography of work, this paper considers what elements of the history of industrial work historians have considered. It focuses specifically on twentieth century industrial work as performed by working class men and women. It demonstrates that many histories of work are in fact the social history of workers and not their work.

3. Historiographical review

One of the main issues relating to the history of industrial work is that many histories give us the impression of analysing past industrial work, and thus there is a collective illusion that historians need conduct no further research in this field. Indeed, the most frequent encounter most historians will have with the historiography of work processes is via textbook labour and social histories by well-known historians such as Samuel (1977) and Hobsbawm (1984). There was a particularly strong nexus around the Communist Party Historians' Group who have had a powerful influence on shaping subsequent historiographies but an influence which is yet to be fully ascertained. But these historians did not usually explore work processes explicitly, rather the effect that the certain kinds of work had on social cohesion and class identity (Thompson, 1963).

Many of these histories involve strikes and the prominence given to particular strikes is noticeable in a certain Marxian strand of social history (Frow, 1986). Yet Frow (Frow, 1986) and the many related works on the Marxian left were not so much histories of work, rather histories of workers not at work. In effect, the opening pages of these histories start with the workers downing their tools and marching out on strike, leaving the reader unclear as to how those workers used these tools on a daily basis.

Given that the 1970s and 80s saw periods of great industrial unrest in Britain, it is perhaps not surprising that young historians chose to research aspects of industrial relations in parallel prior periods, with a particular focus on World War Two. The resulting work challenged the official histories which followed Ernest Bevin's declaration that war production was «gripped and controlled from the top». One particular nexus of interest in the history of British wartime industrial relations was at Warwick University (see Croucher, 1982; Hinton, 1994). These were histories of wartime networks of workers: the Engineering and Allied Trades Shop Steward's' National Council and the Joint Production Committees respectively. At the same time, there was also a group of historians and labour process theorists at the London School of Economics who, in response to Braverman (1974), developed highly innovative ways to study the development of work processes over the prior century. These latter histories were, on the whole, anti-Marxist in their nature, but still closely engaged with the Marxian focus on industrial struggles and conflicts (see Littler, 1982; Glucksmann, 1990)[3].

The 1984-5 miners' strike saw a collapse not just in British coal production but also in the British ultra-left. In a related yet ironic phenomenon, the historiography of industrial relations collapsed as well[4]. For twenty years thereafter the historiography of industry was largely confined to the field of business history, principally taking its framework from influential works by Chandler (1962, 1977, 1994). Chandler stressed the importance of mass production and emerging corporate structures, both of which he argued were American in origin. Thus historians following Chandler attempted to explore the diffusion of American business practices to Britain, and assessed how readily British firms resisted or adopted these practices (Hannah, 1976; Kreis, 1992).

The majority of business histories focus only on business change, and work processes which have remained constant are largely excluded. They also tend to look at developing corporate structures and external corporate policies, leaving the factory floor unexamined. More recently, Scranton (1997) inspired a series of books published by British publisher Ashgate under the

3. Glucksmann correctly observes that industrial tasks given to men and women have often differed considerably.

4. There has been but one relatively recent revisiting of this issue, which is a new history of unions (REID, 2004).

overarching theme of a «new social and economic history». Taking Scranton as an attack on Chandler's emphasis on the importance of mass production, and the emergence of the corporation, these authors have then considered, for example, the relatively high productivity of the British bicycle industry when compared to the USA (Lloyd-Jones, 2000). There has also been recent work conducted on the productivity of inter-war British department stores, which were more productive than their American equivalents (Scott and Walker, 2012). However, this work has been published by established historians, and their influence on the next generation of historians is not yet known.

4. Conclusions

The call by McIvor (2001) for a new history of work had little impact but can be given impetus by drawing on recent histories of technology such as Edgerton (2006). It can also be given momentum by appealing to business historians to look at the micro-level, when they have overwhelmingly focused on the macro-level. Older histories from the Marxian left emphasised strikes and industrial disputes, which were really considering workers not at work. But the size and scope of this literature can mislead historians into thinking that the history of industrial work has been well-covered.

Business and social historians do not have a tradition of communicating with each other. By re-opening debates regarding the history of work, we have an effective way of inducing collaboration between different historical disciplines. Moreover, historians of business could elucidate on productivity by placing the question of macro-institutional productivity to one side. Instead they could consider micro-productivity, that is, how efficient individual workers were.

We know very little about the changes in industrial work methods in the twentieth century; as Scranton (1997) reminded us, the shift from batch to mass production and how this varied across numerous industries is largely untouched. We also do not know how this affected work places in industries which did not conform to this simplistic meta-narrative. In addition, too often processes such as *efficiency*, *efficacy*, *standardisation* and *flexibility* are conflated into *modernisation*, a conceptual bundle which historians of work could do well to unpack.

It is entirely possible that the recent resurgent interest in manufacturing as an alternative to finance in Britain will open up interesting new questions regarding the history of work. It would also be useful to begin to assess British industry's role as a global production node and how this has changed over time. This will require an innovative cross-disciplinary approach; a synthetic combination of the histories of business and technology.

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