

Workers' Consciousness in Algeria: Intra-Factory Divisions and Extra-Societal Extensions

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Abstract:

This article investigates how industrial workers perceive their objective and subjective status within the industrial enterprise (the workplace). This perception must be analyzed as the complex product of dialectical contradictions and structural incongruities between techno-economic forces on one hand, and socio-cultural determinants on the other. Such cognitive perception may neither facilitate the workers' technical mastery of their tasks nor foster their sustained loyalty to collective class action; nor does it purely motivate utilitarian conduct, provided that workers lack basic employment stability, job security, and the material capacity to reproduce their labor power outside the shop floor. Most worker behaviors and practices—both within and outside the enterprise—are direct expressions of a lifestyle and consumption pattern rooted in the prevailing societal culture. Rather than outright rejecting technology per se, this cultural paradigm actively resists and negotiates managerial labor organization through diverse everyday strategies.

Keywords: Workers, Industrial Enterprise, Technological Determinism, Labor, Class Consciousness, Sociological Framing, Sonatrach.

1. Introduction

Examining the question of workers' consciousness offers a comprehensive framework not only for debating the influence of socio-cultural variables on the mastery of modern industrial technology, but also for challenging the epistemological validity of utilitarian approaches and technological determinism. These latter perspectives contend that the traditional working class has dissolved, and with it, class conflict within the workplace has withered away, primarily because workers' aspirations have supposedly shifted toward their positions as market consumers. Conversely, classical Marxist contributions challenge this thesis, maintaining that workers' genuine perception of their status is determined strictly by their

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objective relations to the means of production and their location within shop-floor power dynamics. Yet, the orthodox Marxist framework tends to overemphasize material-economic factors as the exclusive determinants of class structure, while underestimating the profound impact of socio-cultural forces operating within the broader society.

In this context, it is argued here that one cannot reduce or dismiss the socio-cultural forces that shape workers' subjective dispositions, attitudes, and sensibilities. Empirical field data reveal that the dialectical tensions, structural ambivalence, and cognitive disharmony dominating workers' consciousness cannot be attributed solely to the immediate physical work environment or the deployed technological apparatus. Rather, workers' actions and everyday responses to shop-floor grievances are forged at the nexus of their relationship with the means of production, technological systems, dominant ideological apparatuses, and entrenched cultural values and beliefs. When combined, these factors coordinate a distinctive lifestyle that often impedes the crystallization of cohesive, homogeneous labor collectivities capable of mastering the production process.

When conceptualizing class as a relational dynamic, the emergence of such shop-floor labor collectivities represents the foundational nucleus for any class formation—a process generated concurrently by material and socio-cultural determinants. This analytical formulation leads to the rejection of the 'instrumental privatism' and 'embourgeoisement' theses, which claim that market and societal stratifications erode class solidarity by transforming workers into aspiring middle-class strivers. This critique is especially relevant to workers operating advanced, precision technologies, such as those at the national hydrocarbons company Sonatrach—the empirical reference point of this study—who are frequently depicted as 'affluent' due to their relatively higher wage levels. Departing from this problematique, this study analyzes the sociological approaches to workers' workplace perceptions, examines the technical nature of labor and internal divisions within Sonatrach, and concludes with an assessment of the subjective meanings of work and forms of labor struggle.

2. Instrumental Privatism in Workers' Consciousness

The conceptualization of instrumental privatism emerged predominantly within the neo-Weberian tradition, notably through the seminal investigations of John H. Goldthorpe and David Lockwood on British automobile assembly workers, famously synthesized in the 'Affluent Worker' research program (Goldthorpe, 1966; Goldthorpe & Lockwood, 1966). This thesis posits that workers' perceptions of their internal factory status are merely an external projection of an articulated cluster of ideas and beliefs regarding society at large and their perceived standing within it. Consequently, to the extent that market situations fragment workers' societal standings, traditional class relations lose their analytical relevance.

Goldthorpe and his colleagues deliberately selected an empirical research setting suited to validate the affluent worker thesis. Grounded in Weberian sociological precepts, this perspective was synthesized into what became known as the 'action frame of reference.' At its core, this framework holds that collective class action is contingent upon workers' subjective definitions of class. Because social relations in market economies are infinitely variegated and saturated by individualized market capacities, classical notions of unified class consciousness and structural class struggle are deemed obsolete. The ultimate aim of this thesis was to spotlight the lived experience of the modern 'instrumental worker' in the

automotive industry, contrasting it sharply with the traditional, solidaristic proletariat conceptualized by Karl Marx. Under this paradigm, workers' experiences are stripped of collective class identity, as each individual pursues private economic utility, identifying primarily as an autonomous consumer with idiosyncratic domestic needs and living standards.

Without delving into the exhaustive minutiae of the 'Affluent Worker' studies, two pivotal arguments deployed to reject Marxist class analysis must be emphasized. First is the contrast drawn between the affluent car workers in the Luton suburb and the traditional proletariat, the latter of whom could coalesce into a unified force only under historically specific conditions. Second is the mechanism through which workers construct a mental image of societal stratification and their subjective location within it, based on divergent orientations to work (Goldthorpe, 1966). Goldthorpe and his associates assert that workers' divergent social imagery is not forged within the immediate work setting—where social relations are structurally circumscribed—but originates from their broader societal milieu. Workers categorize occupations and craft hierarchies according to their preexisting mental model of society. Hence, workers engaged in standardized tasks inhabit specific structural configurations that merely reflect localized forms of consciousness. An individual's orientation to work is thus a primary determinant that decisively governs how they respond to shop-floor conditions. The significance of perceptual divergence lies in the prior expectations and dispositions that workers import from the wider society, which in turn confer subjective meaning upon labor.

Evidently, this theoretical framework sought to dismantle Marxist class theory by redefining class as an interpretive construct rooted in consumption and market position, treating the worker's role as a producer inside the workplace as a secondary reflection of their consumer identity. While it retained the notion of class as a relation, it posited that this relation is generated almost exclusively outside the workplace.

3. Dialectical Contradictions and Cognitive Incongruity in Workers' Perception

The instrumentalist thesis fundamentally diverges from Marxist sociological theory, which anchors social stratification in relations to the means of production within the productive enterprise. Although Marxist theory insists that authentic class relations must be tested at the point of production—where labor directly confronts capital and management—it simultaneously acknowledges that class dynamics outside the workplace are far from coherent. Rather than operating as logically unified mental schemas, as Goldthorpe contends, extra-workplace perceptions constitute a fragmented, ambivalent, and contradictory ensemble of ideas. In this regard, even if the 'money model' described by Goldthorpe and his collaborators captures instrumental attitudes in specific empirical contexts, it does not represent an unambiguous, integrated understanding of societal contradictions. The cognitive incongruity of workers cannot be dismissed, as it masks divergent social imagery that cannot be reduced to the simplistic 'cash nexus' (Goldthorpe, 1966).

In contrast to instrumentalism, Marxist sociologists emphasize that the workplace remains the definitive crucible where workers discover their collective identity, and that shop-floor experience fundamentally imprints their consciousness of society. Viewing class purely as an external relation while examining the impact of affluence often oversimplifies the dialectical relationship between objective class

structure and subjective class consciousness. As Theo Nichols and Huw Beynon (1977) critically observe: 'The problem with this view of things is that it fails to ground consciousness in the real-world class structure where experience is characterized far more by contradiction than by harmony and coherence' (p. 171). An individual's subjectivity routinely harbors conflicting emotions and ideas that are not exclusively generated by economic forces—a premise corroborated by extensive empirical workplace studies (Nichols & Beynon, 1977).

Consequently, understanding class as a relation requires analyzing the social relations founded on structural exploitation and examining how human agents subjectively interpret that exploitation. Class consciousness signifies 'the way in which people understand themselves and their place in society and history through their concrete experience of that society.' As Huw Beynon (1975) notes, although 'social classes are subordinate to economic forces, they find their expression in the real situations of people's daily survival' (p. 14). Beynon recognized that because of the conflicting pressures workers experience in daily struggles, the mobilization of Ford assembly workers at Halewood rarely transcended the boundaries of the factory. It is therefore futile to expect industrial workers to act like a perfectly coordinated football team, or to brand them as politically unconscious when they fail to do so. In reality, objective structural contradictions impede the maturation of class consciousness, including: 1) structural contradictions intrinsic to factory production, and 2) internal contradictions within workers' consciousness, generated by coordinated institutional activities in the factory and wider society that facilitate labor exploitation.

4. Technological Determinism and Workers' Subjectivity

Numerous sociologists have explored the nexus between technological typologies, production processes, and labor consciousness. Proponents of technological determinism (e.g., Blauner, 1964) argue that continuous-process technology and automated assembly lines systematically depress working-class consciousness. They advance two main arguments: first, that automated environments offer employment stability and comfortable conditions, fostering compliance toward management; second, that the instrumental privatism observed in these sectors stems from modern consumption patterns that strip workers of traditional class consciousness.

Empirical evidence directly contradicts these deterministic claims. In their study of London chemical workers, Nichols and Beynon (1977) revealed that workers performed arduous, hazardous tasks subject to rigid, intrusive managerial surveillance. Far from being privileged, these workers experienced the same structural exploitation and inequality found in other industrial sectors. Because the heavy concentration of capital in high-technology industries is driven by profit maximization, industrial conflict and contested workplace interests remain structurally inevitable.

Similarly, assertions that modern petrochemical and automated industries produce 'enriched jobs'—thereby expanding shop-floor autonomy—have been critically contested. Serge Mallet (1975) famously argued that advanced technology integrates fragmented tasks, counteracting deskilling and fostering 'polyvalent skills' that give the 'new working class' holistic control over complex production. Yet, workers themselves vigorously reject this romanticized portrayal. Nichols and Beynon (1977) quote an industrial worker who captures this reality: 'You move from one boring, dirty, routine job to another exactly like

it, and they expect you to feel your job has been enriched. I never felt any enrichment; all I felt was completely exhausted' (p. 76). Duncan Gallie's (1978) comparative study of petrochemical workers further demonstrated that upskilling was restricted to a narrow technical stratum, while the vast majority of shop-floor operators experienced deskilling and downward occupational mobility.

5. Labor Force Heterogeneity and Structural Divisions in Sonatrach

The industrial workforce is structurally fragmented and internally heterogeneous. The pervasive divisions observed within industrial enterprises represent natural outgrowths of everyday contradictions experienced both on the shop floor and in the external community. The absence of basic collective solidarity and the failure to build robust labor coalitions cannot be blamed solely on managerial tactics, union co-optation, or instrumental attitudes. These cleavages are continually reinforced by socio-cultural practices, including divergent social origins, the domestic pressures of the family milieu, and the struggle to secure the material means necessary for reproducing labor power (Benachenhou, 1983; Chikhi, 1982).

Within enterprises like Sonatrach, this structural heterogeneity manifests along several key lines of cleavage:

- **Occupational and Technical Cleavages:** A sharp divide separates skilled maintenance personnel possessing tacit technical know-how from production line operators subjected to extreme hyper-specialization.
- **Temporal and Shift Cleavages:** Continuous shift-work (3x8 rotation) disrupts normal biological and social routines, generating severe psychological distress and familial dislocation compared to standard daytime schedules.
- **Spatial and Disciplinary Surveillance:** The enterprise functions as a panoptic micro-city, segmented into geographically isolated units monitored by perimeter checkpoints, security gates, and surveillance cameras that strictly restrict worker mobility. Control room operators endure acute sensory isolation, monotonous noise, and mental fatigue.
- **Generational Stratification:** A profound sociological demographic fissure exists between older cohorts and the young workforce, which constitutes the overwhelming majority.

Younger workers exhibit heightened material aspirations regarding lifestyle, consumption, career stability, and wage levels. Crucially, these demands must not be misconstrued as 'bourgeois aspirations' in the Goldthorpean sense; they reflect urgent material necessities, including the imperative to secure housing, furnish domestic spaces, and afford marital expenses. In Algerian industry, approximately 70% of the industrial workforce is under the age of 35, yet only 27% remain unmarried. Marriage serves as an indispensable social imperative enforced by traditional normative mechanisms, as protracted bachelorhood remains socially stigmatized. While traditional extended family structures are gradually eroding, patriarchal authority and reliance on familial kinship networks persist, reinforced by precarious wage regimes that fail to guarantee the autonomous reproduction of labor power.

These structural hardships are further compounded by wider societal shortages in basic food commodities, deficits in public health infrastructure, and inadequate transportation networks. Consequently, workers are driven to rely on kinship solidarity rather than workplace unionism.

Furthermore, widespread cultural-religious norms that discourage family planning exacerbate financial pressures as family sizes expand.

When recruiting this youthful labor force, state planners assumed that young workers would readily adapt to modern industrial technologies and scientific management. In practice, the lack of structured vocational training and psychological readiness left these workers ill-equipped for the grueling demands of industrial labor. Planners failed to realize that the massive importation of turnkey technology was accompanied by a severe deficit in hands-on technical training. Enterprise managers openly acknowledge their reliance on a technically impoverished workforce lacking the tacit knowledge (*savoir-faire*) and scientific expertise (*savoir scientifique*) necessary to master the productive apparatus (Benachenhou, 1983). The formal curricula taught in vocational centers and technical institutes bear little relevance to the actual requirements of the production process. Lacking autonomous technical control, workers are deprived of structural bargaining power against management.

Furthermore, empirical investigations into the social origins of Algerian industrial workers reveal no statistically significant divergence between workers of rural versus urban extraction (Chikhi, 1982). The universalization of wage labor, broad access to schooling, and mandatory National Service have homogenized rural youth to match their urban peers. Rural recruits have largely severed traditional ties to agrarian land and norms, sharing identical aspirations for workplace stability and fair wages. The fundamental analytical axis is not the rural-urban divide, but the dialectical tension between an enduring traditional normative consciousness and the pervasive spread of modern consumerist lifestyles.

6. Everyday Forms of Labor Struggle and Resistance

The meanings that workers assign to their labor find expression in diverse, informal modes of shop-floor resistance. In the pre-pluralist era, the structural asymmetry of power between labor and management—manifested in the state co-optation of the official trade union (UGTA), legislative bans on strikes, and state backing of managerial authority—prevented the emergence of formal collective bargaining. Confronting this structural impasse, the heterogeneous workforce naturally resorted to localized, individualized, and informal modes of resistance:

- **Structural Absenteeism:** While some analysts interpret absenteeism as a primary substitute for outlawed strikes, this overstates its political coherence. Absenteeism often represents an individualized retreat that undermines emergent shop-floor solidarity and weakens collective control over the labor process. More importantly, it is driven by exogenous structural constraints: acute family emergencies, public transit failures, and religious obligations. Notably, during religious observances such as Eid al-Adha, shift attendance in Algerian industrial complexes drops below 20%. In an economic climate characterized by rising unemployment and job scarcity, absenteeism reflects structural necessity rather than mere disciplinary apathy.
- **Contestation of Work Reclassification and Task Refusal:** Workers frequently resist managerial commands following post-reclassification policies. This resistance stems from two key factors: first, authoritarian and threatening managerial communication styles that violate traditional norms of mutual dignity and respect (*karamah*); second, tactical invocations of newly established labor regulations to refuse extra-contractual tasks. Shop-floor disciplinary committee records document

that worker representatives consistently defend operators who refuse uncompensated tasks or refuse to cover for absent colleagues without formal managerial concessions.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the consciousness of Algerian industrial workers cannot be categorized as an orthodox, unified class consciousness, because deeply rooted socio-cultural norms continually mediate worker action and fragment class solidarity into localized, informal struggles. Nor can it be characterized as purely instrumental privatism, for the objective condition of workers as market consumers is considerably more precarious than their condition inside the enterprise. Likewise, it is not determined by technological determinism, given that hazardous working conditions, monotony, and low wages remain pervasive across technologically advanced sectors.

Ultimately, achieving genuine technological mastery requires that labor organization be harmonized with the cultural values, ethical norms, and social realities of the domestic workforce. Whenever industrial organization falters, managerial strategies must address the socio-cultural variables governing workers' collective consciousness. The culture of the industrial enterprise cannot be treated in isolation; it remains an organic extension of the wider society in which it is embedded.

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