
PROLETARIANIZATION: THEORY AND RESEARCH

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August 1979

CRSO Working Paper No. 202

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Social Organization
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prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the
American Sociological Association, Boston, August 1979

My argument is as simple as a needle . . . and, I hope, as sharp. Like a needle in a thicket, however, the argument easily gets lost in details, elaborations and qualifications. So let me start with a bald statement, then elaborate.

Proletarianization is the set of processes which increases the number of people who lack control over the means of production, and who survive by selling their labor power. From the perspective of ordinary people's lives, proletarianization is the single most far-reaching social change that has occurred in the western world over the past few hundred years, and that is going on in the world as a whole today. Sociologists have provided no coherent account of proletarianization's causes, forms and consequences. In fact, sociologists have given very little attention to this dominant social process. The models of large-scale change prevailing in North American sociology, with their stress on differentiation and integration, are utterly inadequate to deal with proletarianization. The problem does not lie in poor data or inappropriate methods, although both are obstacles to our understanding. The problem resides in bad theory. Outside of sociology -- and notably in history -- historically-grounded Marxist theory has so far shown the greatest promise of dealing adequately with proletarianization. Get yourself some good theory; data and methods will fall into place.

Is that statement bald enough? Now let's put some hair on it.

Plenty of sociology consists of crystallizing folk beliefs, and then organizing the evidence for and against them. That is not all to the bad. Folk beliefs, after all, accumulate experience the way stumps accumulate lichens: the lichens eventually change the contours of the stumps.

Yet reliance on crystallized folk beliefs, decorated as science, brings the risk that we accept the ideas as much for their comfortable

familiarity as for their intrinsic merits. Witness this passage from a ten-year-old standard text on the sociology of economic development:

What we are witnessing is the increasing differentiation of functions, which constitutes the basic process of social change associated with economic development. It is quite true that agriculturalists in a backward economy perform a wide range of functions, but this is also one of the reasons that their labor is so low in productivity. Increases in human productivity appear to require an increasing division of labor and specialization of function. And this is a process that is quite pervasive in a society, not simply a matter of work alone. At the higher levels of human productivity, then, we find societies in which individuals carry out a limited number of more specialized tasks. This makes them more dependent upon one another and requires that they be brought more into contact with one another through a wide range of social mechanisms. This also means that they will be interacting with one another in quite limited aspects of their broader lives as individuals (Ness 1970: 11).

The passage crystallizes western folk wisdom, and contemporary sociological theory, concerning the historical association between prosperity and changes in the organization of work. Differentiation causes increasing productivity, which causes prosperity. Differentiation, runs the account, also causes changes in the structure and quality of routine social life. What causes differentiation is less clear; it may be an inevitable consequence of increasing social scale, a standard response to pressing social problems, or a deliberate invention adopted with an eye to stepping up production.

In that summary, our author does exactly what the author of a text on the sociology of economic development should do: he states the view

prevailing among specialists in the field. He also remains faithful to the field in another regard: he ignores the process of proletarianization. Proletarianization is an increase in the number of workers who depend for survival on the sale of their labor power, a decrease in the number of workers who exert substantial direct control over the means of production. In order to grasp the importance of the process, we must shake off the recent habit of thinking about "the proletariat" as composed exclusively of people working at subdivided tasks in large manufacturing units under close time-discipline. Those people are latecomers, essentially creatures of the last century. The current world-wide process of proletarianization, however, has been going on for five centuries or so -- beginning mainly in western Europe, accompanying the advance of capitalism into other domains, taking place chiefly in small towns and rural areas over most of its history, transforming agriculture and small-scale manufacturing long before the era of factory and mill. In terms of impact on the quality of everyday life, proletarianization is -- and was -- the most powerful process in the complex of changes we vaguely and variously call industrialization, economic development, or the growth of capitalism.

Proletarianization is and was a powerful process in two regards: quantitative and qualitative. In quantitative terms, the last few hundred years have brought an extraordinary proletarianization of our world. In 1700, according to Paul Bairoch's estimates, the world's labor force was about 270 million people. By 1970, the number was just under 1.5 billion -- a sextupling since the start of the eighteenth century (Bairoch 1971: 965). As of 1700, it would be surprising to discover that more than 10 percent of the world's labor force consisted of people who survived by selling their labor power. As of 1970, depending on how we define the relationship of workers in socialist countries to the means of production,

we can reasonably guess that either a majority or a fat majority of the world's labor force was proletarian. Most likely the world's proletariat multiplied thirty or forty times as the labor force sextupled. The fact that at least half the world labor force was then still in agriculture, and that we often use the loose term "peasant" for workers in relatively uncaptialized, labor-intensive agriculture, should not divert our attention from the large proportion of Third World agriculturalists who are essentially wage-laborers without effective control over the land. During recent decades, the rapid increase in their numbers has no doubt constituted the largest single contribution to the proletarianization of the world.

Qualitatively, the creation of a proletariat has transformed all arenas of social life: reducing the likelihood that children would take over the economic enterprises of their parents; snapping the links among marriage, inheritance, and reproduction; swelling the numbers of people who must buy most of their food, and are therefore vulnerable to swings in food prices; altering the character and pacing of work itself. The paths, paces, and penalties of these changes have varied greatly from one time and place to another, depending on the existing systems of production and reproduction, as well as on the kind of production involved. It is a long way from the creation of an eighteenth-century textile industry in Swiss highland villages to the rise of export-oriented rice production in twentieth-century Vietnam. But both were active sites of proletarianization.

Eighteenth-century Switzerland and twentieth-century Vietnam had in common a two-sided situation: concentration of capital and/or land on one side, expropriation of workers from the means of production on the other. (That the villagers in both places should often have participated actively in their own collective proletarianization by snatching at chances for wage labor, by competing for the available land, or by having many children, only emphasizes the power and generality of the process.) Concentration of

capital and/or land does not necessarily entail expropriation of workers. The remarkable increase in the importance of family farms in the world grain market over the past century demonstrates the possible coincidence of concentration and de-proletarianization. Nevertheless, historically speaking, proletarianization has linked itself very closely to the concentration of land and capital. It is precisely the contingency of that strong link which lays down a challenge to theory and research.

To be sure, we often attribute the changes for which I am making proletarianization responsible to "industrialism" or "modernism" in general. Our folk beliefs certainly run in that direction. "Industrialism", however, hardly seems a good name -- much less a good explanation -- for transformations which occur so regularly in the agrarian sector. As for "modernism" or "modernization", the idea is so vague and global as to lack theoretical bite. For my part, I see an historically specific relationship between the changes in the quantity and quality of social life reviewed earlier and the development of capitalism. But, for the moment, that connection is not essential to the argument. All we need agree is that, whatever else was happening, the proximate process which brought the changes about was the increase in the number of workers dependent on the sale of their labor power for survival. It was proletarianization. Yet our standard texts ignore the process.

The texts represent the state of our field. If we look to Gerhard Lenski, as he constructs a general account of the links between systems of stratification and modes of production, we find no discussion of proletarianization, and an implicit reliance on the standard view of differentiation. The growth in the scale of economic organization, reports Lenski, "has facilitated another development, intensive specialization. According to the Department of Labor, there are currently more than twenty

thousand different kinds of jobs in this country, most of them extremely specialized in nature" (Lenski 1966: 301). Later he tells us that the problem most workers face is that their jobs are not only specialized, but also relatively easy to learn; as a result, workers are easy to replace (Lenski 1966: 377). But of the alienation of labor power, we hear not a word.

If we open one of the innumerable symposia on industrialization from the mid-1960s, all with interchangeable names -- Industrialization and Society, Society and Industrialization, and so on -- we will encounter the ubiquitous Wilbert Moore. One of his many summary statements avoids asking how an industrial labor force comes into being in the first place by means of a standard sociological device: it presents an ideal sketch of full-scale industrial organization, and then discusses the fit between that structure and the character of "newly developing areas". "The worker is," runs the passage closest to our subject, "in addition to his relations to the machine and to fellow-workers, related to the productive organization in other ways. He has a financial relation, through the payment of his wage or salary. He is likely to be the object of various staff services. Above all, he is subject to a structure of authority" (Moore 1966: 306). The process by which these social arrangements come into being simply disappears.

In Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, Max Weber titled a discussion Expropriation der Arbeiter von der Beschaffungsmitteln, expropriation of workers from the means of production -- ostensibly right on the mark (Weber 1968: I, 137-140). When we turn to that discussion, however, we discover an enumeration of the technical rationales for producing by means of expropriated labor, rather than an analysis of how and why the expropriation occurs. At its very best, in short, the literature of sociology mentions proletarianization and then rushes on to deal with other problems.

The analysis of proletarianization, to be sure, stands at the very

heart of Karl Marx' historical work. The first volume of Das Kapital, especially the sections on primitive accumulation, returns again and again to the means by which English landlords, merchants and manufacturers expropriated their workers and substituted alienated labor power for production by smallholders, artisans and others who exercised some substantial control over the means of production. Marxist historians and economists have continued to pay serious attention to these changes and their successors -- not only to the initial creation of a proletariat, but also to the subsequent standardization, segmentation and surveillance of work. Marxist interest in proletarianization has not, however, seeped into sociology's mainstream. At least not until recently. For most of the discipline's history, sociologists have shown little interest in one of the dominant processes going on in their own world.

Could that be because the answers are obvious? I think not. Let us narrow our attention to European proletarianization, since that is the process I know best, and since it often serves, implicitly or explicitly, as a model for the analysis of proletarianization elsewhere. One of the crispest and most telling questions we can ask about the European experience is the standard components-of-growth question: how much of the net increase in the European proletariat in one century or another was due to migration into and out of Europe? How much to natural increase? How much to reclassifications -- to changes in status which occurred in people's own working lives? More concrete questions follow immediately from the big components-of-growth questions. How often, for example, and under what circumstances did the children of artisans or peasants spend their own working lives as proletarians? Did the fertility and mortality patterns of nineteenth-century wage-workers mean that they more than reproduced themselves? Did those patterns, and their consequences for recruitment

into the proletariat, change significantly from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries? In the various rural "emancipations" of the nineteenth century, what proportion of the formerly servile workers actually ended up in control of enough land for a household's survival? Do proletarianization and rapid population growth ordinarily go together? If so, is it possible that proletarianization is not merely a result of "population pressure", but a cause of rapid natural increase?

Important further issues hang in the balance: a proletariat which swells its numbers mainly through its own relatively high fertility, for instance, is a more plausible bearer of continuous working-class culture than one which draws all its increase from skidding artisans and peasants. But that self-augmenting proletariat would presumably have little exposure to an experience which commonly fosters class-conscious militancy: the threat of losing control over one's land, craft, tools, or other means of production. Such theoretical choices matter both for their own sake and because they have become the hidden pivots of important historical debates. E.P. Thompson's magnificent making of the English working class, for example, requires a good deal of continuity, of cumulative experience, on the part of the members of that class. The counter-interpretation of Luddism or Chartism as relatively incoherent responses to rapid industrialization, on the other hand, points toward much greater discontinuity. At present, we have many fragments of answers to the components-of-growth questions and their derivatives, but no clear indications as to which way the general answers will run.

Many other features of European proletarianization remain problematic. We cannot yet say, for example, to what extent the factory was the dominant site of proletarianization, since we know for certain that many people entered the proletarian world via agricultural wage-labor, cottage industry,

inflation of the apprentice system, or urban service work. We sometimes suppose, but do not really know, that school, church, and police colluded to train the sorts of docile, prudent, time-conscious workers that capitalists prefer. We cannot now be sure that the sort of "family economy" analyzed by Le Play, Chayanov, and Carle Zimmerman disintegrated as proletarianization advanced. All these are pressing questions. They are sociological questions. Yet the literature concerning them comes almost entirely from historians. Moreover, most recent work on the question follows a broadly Marxist approach -- at least to the extent of taking for granted that changing relations of production profoundly influence other aspects of social life.

Why historians should plunge into the study of proletarianization and its consequences while sociologists avert their eyes is an interesting question. The answer no doubt lies partly in the bad political odor of Marxism in the world which has nurtured sociology, and partly in the greater comfort of sociologists with ideas that crystallize folk beliefs. But if those are the fundamental explanations, then it is all the more puzzling that historians should have concerned themselves so freely, and so well, with proletarianization. Surely historians are not, on the average, excessively cordial to Marxism, or notably hostile to folk theories. We have to consider at least one other possibility: that sociology is not the fact-grubbing field it seems to be. Perhaps something about its fundamental theories limits sociology's ability to deal with such processes as proletarianization.

How easily can the standard theories and methods of contemporary sociology deal with proletarianization? Not very easily. The basic problem is theoretical. The chief theories available to sociologists who wish to analyze large-scale processes of change come from a tradition we

can conveniently trace back through Emile Durkheim, Durkheimian theories build on a conception of a vague social unit called a society. That society responds to internal problems and external pressures through sequences of differentiation and integration. In most versions of the theory, including Durkheim's, the differentiation produces stress, strain, malintegration and deviance to which the society responds with some combination of social control and further differentiation. In most versions of the theory, as applied to recent social change, occupational differentiation is absolutely central. In one of Talcott Parsons' later formulations:

The critical development was the differentiation of labor (or, more technically, of services) from the diffuse matrix in which it had been embedded. This differentiation involved distinguishing the work-role complex from the family household and also increased the "mobility of labor" -- the readiness of households to respond to employment opportunities by changing residences or learning new skills . . . These processes established what sociologists call the occupational role, specifically contingent upon status in an employing organization structurally distinct from the household. Usually the employing organization has only one member in common with the household; it also has premises, disciplines, authority systems, and property distinct from those of the household. Typically the employed person receives (according to his employment status and role performance) a money income that is the main source of his household's access to the market for consumer goods. The employing organization markets its product and pays the employee wages or a salary, whereas the typical peasant or artisans sold his own products. The organization thus comes between the worker and the consumer market (Parsons 1971: 77).

Let us forget about criticizing Parsons' analysis in its own terms, as useful as that task would be. Note how the argument runs. First, it hides the effective human actors and depersonalizes the process by which the change occurs. Second, Parsons adopts the same retrospective device we saw Wilbert Moore employing earlier: he describes the social arrangements which eventually emerged, and attempts to identify the essential prerequisites and concomitants of those arrangements. Third, his account strips the hypothetical process of differentiation from its historical context, making no concession to the possibility that where and when the process occurred significantly affected its character or outcome. Finally, Parsons assumes the classic Durkheimian model of structural differentiation.

Placed together, the four planks become a nearly impermeable barrier to an effective analysis of proletarianization. For in that process real people -- landlords, rich peasants, master artisans, manufacturers, merchants, capitalists -- seize control of the means of production, and exclude others from that control. A valid analysis of proletarianization has to lay out the alternative ways in which the seizure of control and the exclusion take place. A valid explanation of proletarianization specifies the causes of the seizure and the exclusion. In all this, differentiation is a red herring: although on the average firm and household became more distinct from one another, much of the actual historical experience in question consisted of de-differentiation. In the case of Europe, the enormous growth of cottage industry and the homogenization of agricultural labor are obvious illustrations. Whatever the overall trend, the proximate conditions for the proletariat's growth were not differentiation, but concentration and expropriation. I believe the same is true today. If so, what has to be explained is how capitalists and landlords increased

their control over the means of production, how they dispossessed workers from that control, how they drew workers into full-time wage labor.

The data and methods to which sociologists studying large-scale social change commonly turn make it more difficult to grasp the actual workings of proletarianization. Administratively-generated series concerning health, wealth, production and income at the national level, one-time sample surveys, and even well-conducted censuses shed only the most indirect light on processes of concentration and expropriation. Vital records and enumerations of the labor force sometimes come closer, but only on condition that their analysis be integrated with information on local conditions of production and consumption. The frequent, nefarious practice of substituting comparisons of different social units at the same point in time for the tracing of change in the same units over time virtually guarantees ignorance about concentration and expropriation -- not to mention the fact that arraying the units as if they were at different positions along the same evolutionary track assumes precisely what must be proven. The retrospective case study in which evidence is thick for the present and thin for the past provides little better purchase on such processes as proletarianization. Glossing standard historical works on industrialization, economic growth and the development of capitalism is not a bad way to start thinking about proletarianization, but it is a poor way to do the requisite research. In short, the standard tools fit the problem badly.

The chief difficulty, however, is not methodological. It is theoretical. Sociologists continue to use data and methods which fail to grasp the realities of proletarianization because sociologists' theories make no room for the process. Prevailing models of differentiation and integration systematically mislead us as to the loci and character of alterations in the organization of production. We need models which are

historically grounded, both in the sense that they explicitly take into account the time and place in which a process occurs as an influence on its course, and in the sense that they direct our attention to evidence concerning the ways that concrete social experiences changed over considerable periods of time. We need models which feature power, exploitation, coercion and struggle. That is why Marxist theory, for all its unresolved problems, has so far served as our most reliable guide to the historical study of proletarianization; Marxist models generally attend to history, at least to the extent of treating the development of a given mode of production, such as capitalism, as historically specific; and Marxist models always feature power, exploitation, coercion and struggle.

When it comes time to reflect on sociological theory and research, the study of proletarianization offers a distressing object lesson, and a stirring challenge. Proletarianization played a large part in bringing our own social world into being, and continues to transform life throughout the globe. Sociology's contribution to the understanding of proletarianization has so far been largely negative: misleading theories, inadequate methods, massive avoidance of the problem. Bad theory, especially, stands in the way. What a shame . . . and what an opportunity!

GENERAL NOTE: I am grateful to Ann Allen and Gayl Ness for help with bibliography, to Rose Širi for assistance in producing the paper, to Louise Tilly for criticism and editorial advice, to Robert Cole, Martin Whyte and Mayer Zald for reactions to an initial statement of the problem. The Horace Rackham School of Graduate Studies, University of Michigan, and the National Science Foundation have supported different aspects of the research on European social change which lies behind this paper.

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