

Social and Political Implications of Technology – Taylorism

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Before commenting on this week's reading, I'd like to take a moment and introduce the class to Schmidt. Schmidt, a "little Pennsylvania Dutchman," was a character in Frederick Winslow Taylor's famous treatise *The Principles of Scientific Management*. Whether or not Schmidt was anything like the workers that Taylor supposedly observed at the Bethlehem Steel Company is questionable. But Taylor introduced him as a diligent laborer who worked hard, had goals in life (he was said to spend his mornings before and evenings after work building a small house) and "placed high value on the dollar." Though a bit lengthy, I think the story of Schmidt sheds light on Taylor's attitude towards those who would play a significant role in the success or failure of his system. One fine day in the pig iron handling area of the Bethlehem Steel works, Taylor took Schmidt aside, and something like the following conversation took place:

"Schmidt, are you a high-priced man?"

"Vell, I don't know vat you mean."

"Oh yes, you do. What I want to know is whether you are a high-priced man or not."

"Vell, I don't know vat you mean."

"Oh, come now, you answer my questions. What I want to find out is whether you are a high-priced man or one of these cheap fellows here. What I want to find out is whether you want to earn \$1.85 a day or whether you are satisfied with \$1.15, just the same as all those cheap fellows are getting."

"Did I vant \$1.85 a day? Vas dot a high-priced man? Vell, yes, I vas a high-priced man."

"Oh, you're aggravating me. Of course you want \$1.85 a day – everyone wants it! You know perfectly well that has very little to do with you being a high-priced man. For goodness' sake answer my questions, and don't waste any more of my time. Now come over here. You see that pile of pig iron?"

"Yes."

"You see that car?"

"Yes."

"Well, if you are a high-priced man, you will load that pig iron on that car to-morrow for \$1.85. Now do wake up and answer my question. Tell me whether you are a high-priced man or not."

"Vell – did I got \$1.85 for loading dot pig iron on dot car to-morrow?"

"Yes, of course you do, and you get \$1.85 for loading a pile like that every day right through the year. That is what a high-priced man does, and you know it just as well as I do."

"Vell, dot's all right. I could load dot pig iron on the car to-morrow for \$1.85, and I get it every day, don't I?"

"Certainly you do – certainly you do."

"Vell, den, I vas a high-priced man."

"Now, hold on, hold on. You know just as well as I do that a high-priced man has to do exactly as he's told from morning till night. You have seen this man here before, haven't you?"

"No, I never saw him."

"Well, if you are a high-priced man, you will do exactly as this man tells you to-morrow, from morning till night. When he tells you to pick up a pig and walk, you pick it up and you walk, and when he tells you to sit down and rest, you sit down. You do that right straight through the day. And what's more, no back talk. Now a high-priced man does just what he's told to do, and no back talk. Do you understand that? When this man tells you to walk, you walk; when he tells you to sit down, you sit down, and you don't talk back at him. Now you come on to work here to-morrow morning and I'll know before night whether you are really a high-priced man or not."

This seems to be rather rough talk. And indeed it would be if applied to an educated mechanic, or even an intelligent laborer. With a man of the mentally sluggish type of Schmidt it is appropriate and not unkind, since it is effective in fixing his attention on the high wages which he wants and away from what, if it were called to his attention, he probably would consider impossibly hard work.¹

Taylor goes on to explain in greater detail why one had to speak to laborers such as Schmidt in this fashion, and to consistently draw their attention towards the fact that they could earn more by working in a particular way and distract them from the other aspects of this work method (such as its being, as Taylor suggests, "impossibly hard"). But one can draw certain inferences from the passage above that, along with the details of Aitken's book, may help to explain the origins of what led to workers feeling disrespected by the time-keeping and other aspects of the Taylor system: Taylor himself appeared to have very little respect for workers, for labor in general, and treated them with an inappropriate degree of simplicity.

Both Shirley and Alex have noted that the thing most consistently missing from Taylorism and its applications as discussed in this week's reading is some

¹ From Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Norton, 1967 (1911)), 44-46.

understanding of human nature – or, a failure to recognize that any technological, industrial, scientific or management system also includes *people*. In Taylor's own writing, we see him expressing frustration over the fact that a worker might put more energy into playing baseball than in turning out "the largest possible amount of work" – as if work is and should be somehow as or more fulfilling than leisure activity. (Smith and Clancey, pg 270) His entire system relied on the assumption and expectation that all workers would be motivated by a single goal: obtaining higher wages. As he says to the fictitious Schmidt, everyone wants more money – how could they not? It is clear from the confusion and surprise among the managers that occurred at Watertown, however, that Taylor's predictions regarding worker behavior and motivations went no further.

Granted, the days of applying psychology to the understanding of organizations and individuals under conditions such as those at the Watertown Arsenal came many years after Taylor's most active period. Aitken does an exceptional job of demonstrating that this failure to compensate for the unpredictable human element in the Taylor system led to worker backlash, but I am still left wondering how such a critical part of the system which Taylor hoped to implement could have been so poorly understood, or so actively ignored. Was it just that Taylor harbored such negative feelings towards workers (as demonstrated in his invention of Schmidt as both an illustration of a "typical" worker and an object of jingoistic ridicule)? Did the firm believe that, as Aitken put it, "human activity could be measured, analyzed, and controlled by techniques analogous to those that had proved successful when applied to physical objects" supercede any considerations of the more subtle, immeasurable qualities of the workers themselves that came to disrupt the application of the Taylor system at Watertown? (Aitken, pg 16) Was the central problem that the Watertown managers did not implement everything in precisely the order and fashion as prescribed by Taylor – or, like the Iraq War, was it a "catastrophic success"?

In spite of the rise of psychological tools for understanding such behavior since the heyday of Taylorism, Aitken also leaves me wondering how much better are we at predicting this behavior *now*. Human behavior in response to

changes such as Taylorism, or to the introduction of new technologies in other areas, remains one of the least predictable aspects of any system. A lot of political science, as well as engineering in some respects, seems very much concerned with understanding how groups of people will react to particular changes or new circumstances. Given the failures evident in Aitken's book, and the failures that we continue to see unfolding in different contexts, can we say that we are any better at predicting human behavior now than Taylor was at the turn of the century? Perhaps Taylor's feelings about the reliability of his "scientific" methods and his negative attitude towards workers and unions were the only sources of his narrow view on the possible responses from workers once his system was implemented – but there is something that remains unsatisfying about that explanation, particularly since it seems that failures to predict the behavior of groups in various contexts continue to occur in spite of a perceived greater understanding of psychology.