Taylorism, Progressivism, and Rule by Experts

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The Progressive movement at the turn of the twentieth century—the doctrine from which the main current of modern liberalism developed—is sometimes erroneously viewed as an "anti-business" philosophy. It was anti-market to be sure, but by no means necessarily anti-business. Progressivism was, more than anything, managerialist.

The American economy after the Civil War became increasingly dominated by large organizations. I've written in *The Freeman* before about the role of the government in the growth of the centralized corporate economy: the railroad land grants and subsidies, which tipped the balance toward large manufacturing firms serving a national market ("The Distorting Effects of Transportation Subsidies," November 2010), and the patent system, which was a primary tool of consolidation and cartelization in a number of industries ("How 'Intellectual Property' Impedes Competition," October 2009).

These giant corporations were followed by large government agencies whose mission was to support and stabilize the corporate economy, and then by large bureaucratic universities, centralized school systems, and assorted "helping professionals" to process the "human resources" the corporations and State fed on. These interlocking bureaucracies required a large managerial class to administer them.

According to Rakesh Khurana of the Harvard Business School (in *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands*), the first corporation managers came from an industrial engineering background and saw their job as doing for the entire organization what they'd previously done for production on the shop floor. The managerial revolution in the large corporation, Khurana writes, was in essence an attempt to apply the engineer's approach (standardizing and rationalizing tools, processes, and systems) to the organization as a system.

And according to Yehouda Shenhav (*Manufacturing Rationality: The Engineering Foundations of the Managerial Revolution*), Progressivism was the ideology of the managers and engineers who administered the large organizations; political action was a matter of applying the same principles they used to rationalize their organizations to society as a whole. Shenhav writes (quoting Robert Wiebe):

> Since the difference between the physical, social, and human realms was blurred by acts of translation, society itself was conceptualized and treated as a technical system.

> As such, society and organizations could, and should, be engineered as machines that are constantly being perfected. Hence, the management of organizations (and society at large) was seen to fall within the province of engineers. Social, cultural, and political issues . . . could be framed and analyzed as "systems" and "subsystems" to be solved by technical means. . .
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> During this period, "only the professional administrator, the doctor, the social worker, the architect, the economist, could show the way." In turn, professional control became more elaborate. It involved measurement and prediction and the development of professional techniques for guiding events to predictable outcomes. The experts "devised rudimentary government budgets; introduced central, audited purchasing; and rationalized the structure of offices." This type of control was not only characteristic of professionals in large corporate systems. It characterized social movements,the management of schools, roads, towns, and political systems.

The managerialist ethos reflected in Progressivism emphasized transcending class and ideological divisions through the application of disinterested expertise. Christopher Lasch (*The New Radicalism in America*) wrote:

> For the new radicals, conflict itself, rather than injustice or inequality, was the evil to be eradicated. Accordingly, they proposed to reform society . . . by means of social engineering on the part of disinterested experts who could see the problem whole and who could see it essentially as a problem of resources . . . the proper application and conservation of which were the work of enlightened administration.

In Shenhav's account this apolitical ethos grew out of engineers' self-perception: "American management theory was presented as a scientific technique administered for the good of society as a whole without relation to politics." Frederick Taylor, whose managerial approach was a microcosm of Progressivism, saw bureaucracy as "a solution to ideological cleavages, as an engineering remedy to the war between the classes." Both Progressives and industrial engineers "were horrified at the possibility of 'class warfare'" and saw "efficiency" as a means to "social harmony, making each workman's interest the same as that of his employers."

The implications, as James Scott put it in *Seeing Like a State* (about which much more below), were quite authoritarian. Only a select class of technocrats with "the scientific knowledge to discern and create this superior social order" were qualified to make decisions. In all aspects of life, policy was to be a matter of expertise, with the goal of removing as many questions as possible from the realm of public political debate to that of administration by properly qualified authorities. Politics, Scott writes, "can only frustrate the social solutions devised with scientific tools adequate to their analysis." As a *New Republic* editorial put it, "the business of politics has become too complex to be left to the pretentious misunderstandings of the benevolent amateur."

It's true that Progressivism shaded into the anti-capitalist left and included some genuinely anti-business rhetoric on its left-wing fringe. But the mainstream of Progressivism saw the triumph of the great trusts over competitive enterprise as a victory for economic rationalization and efficiency—and the guarantee of stable, reasonable profits to the trusts through the use of political power as a good thing.

In the end the more utopian or socialistic Progressives found they'd become "useful idiots." Their desire to regiment and manage was given free rein mainly when it coincided with the

needs of the corporatist economy created by Rockefeller and Morgan. These needs were for what Gabriel Kolko (*The Triumph of Conservatism*) called "political capitalism," the guiding theme of Progressive-era legislation. Political capitalism aimed to give corporate leadership "the ability, on the basis of politically stabilized and secured means, to plan future economic action on the basis of fairly calculable expectations" and to obtain "the organization of the economy and the larger political and social spheres in a manner that will allow corporations to function in a predictable and secure environment permitting reasonable profits over the long run."

Mainstream Progressivism, far from embracing a left-wing vision of class struggle, saw class conflict as a form of irrationality that could be transcended by expertise. To quote Shenhav again:

> Labor unrest and other political disagreements of the period were treated by mechanical engineers as simply a particular case of machine uncertainty to be dealt with in much the same manner as they had so successfully dealt with technical uncertainty. Whatever disrupted the smooth running of the organizational machine was viewed and constructed as a problem of uncertainty.

As Hilaire Belloc said (*The Servile State*) of its Fabian counterparts in Britain, the mainline of the Progressive movement quickly accommodated itself to the impossibility of expropriating big business or the plutocratic fortunes and found that it could be quite comfortable as a junior partner to the plutocracy, directing its lust for regimentation against the working class:

> Let laws exist which make the proper housing, feeding, clothing, and recreation of the proletarian mass be incumbent upon the possessing class, and the observance of such rules be imposed, by inspection and punishment, upon those whom he [the Fabian] pretends to benefit, and all that he really cares for will be achieved.

As Scott put it, the managerial classes' virtually unbounded planning instincts were directed mostly downward:

> Every nook and cranny of the social order might be improved upon: personal hygiene, diet, child rearing, housing, posture, recreation, family structure, and, most infamously, the genetic inheritance of the population. The working poor were often the first subjects of scientific social planning. . . . Subpopulations found wanting in ways that were potentially threatening—such as indigents, vagabonds, the mentally ill, and criminals—might be made the objects of the most intensive social engineering.

Progressivism was a branch of what Scott called the "high modernist" ideology, which "envisioned a sweeping, rational engineering of all aspects of social life in order to improve the human condition." High modernism carries with it an aesthetic sensibility in which the rationally organized community, farm, or factory was one that "looked regimented and orderly in a geometrical sense," along with an affinity for gigantism and centralization reflected in "huge dams, centralized communication and transportation hubs, large factories and farms, and grid cities. . . ." If you've read H. G. Wells's "Utopias" or looked at Albert Speer's architecture, you get the idea.

High modernism was scientistic, not scientific, based on, writes Scott, a "muscle-bound . . . version of the beliefs in scientific and technological progress" of the Enlightenment, centering on

"a supreme self-confidence about continued linear progress . . . , the expansion of knowledge, the expansion of production, the rational design of social order, the growing satisfaction of human needs, and, not least, an increasing control over nature (including human nature) commensurate with scientific understanding of natural laws." The high priesthood of this ideology was precisely the same as Progressivism's social base: "planners, engineers, architects, scientists, and technicians [high modernism] celebrated as the designers of the new order."

One aspect of Scott's analysis of high modernism, his use of the concept of *metis*, is especially relevant to us here. Scott's book, more than any other I can think of, should be read as a companion to Hayek's discussion of what's variously called distributed, tacit, or idiosyncratic knowledge in "The Use of Knowledge in Society." (As Hayek put it, this is the knowledge of circumstances necessary to make a decision that exists "solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete . . . knowledge which all the separate individuals possess.")

Scott distinguished *metis* from *techne*, which is a body of universal knowledge deducible from first principles. Metis, in contrast, is (largely irreducible) knowledge acquired from practical experience, concerning the particular, the variable, and the local, and involving a "feel" for the unique aspects of situations obtained over a prolonged period.

High modernism tended to see *metis* as an enemy and sought to supplant it by central schemes of planning and control, whether at the level of society as a whole through State social engineering or at the level of the firm by Taylorist managers.

High modernism, Scott writes, placed remarkably "little confidence . . . in the skills, intelligence, and experience of ordinary people." The dispersed, local knowledge of the general population was, at best, to be patronized as prescientific and purified of its partial or local character by codifying it into a set of universal rules that could in turn be reduced to a verbal formula and transmitted as knowledge by the priesthood.

What we know as Taylorism is one facet of the larger high modernist project in this regard. One feature of high modernism, Scott notes, was "a narrow and materialist 'productivism' [which] treated human labor as a mechanical system which could be decomposed into energy transfers, motion, and the physics of work," so that work could be simplified into "isolated problems of mechanical efficiencies" and brought under scientific control. Taylorism, in particular, attempted a "minute decomposition of factory labor into isolable, precise, repetitive motions." Taylor's goal, in his own words, was for management to "assume . . . the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, formulae. . . . Thus all of the planning which under the old system was done by the workmen, must . . . be done by management in accordance with the law of science."

The idea was that understanding and decision-making should be divorced from the performance of tasks. The managerial caste determines "best practices" and breaks tasks down into the most efficient possible set of simple sub-processes, and workers perform the tasks as instructed without the intervention of critical thought.

But by its nature, Scott says, high modernism is reductionist or "schematic" and "always ignores essential features of any real, functioning social order." Progressivism, as a high modernist ideology, makes no allowances for hidden knowledge.

In the case of Taylorism, this means that the suppression of metis sacrifices the distributed, job-related knowledge possessed by workers whose consideration is indispensable to any adequate governance of the production process. Taylorist management can no more render the production

process amenable to central control without the dispersed knowledge of its workers than a central planning office can render a national economy transparent to its understanding and control.

According to David Noble (*Forces of Production*), large-scale computer numeric-controlled (CNC) machine tools were introduced in mass-production industry (first and most heavily in the military-industrial complex, mind you) as a way of supplanting metis with centralized control by managers and engineers, and of overcoming the knowledge rents inherent in distributed knowledge. The CNC tools were intended to shift the balance of power upward by putting production under the control of engineers and deskilling master machinists on the shop floor.

Unfortunately for this design, CNC machinery did not eliminate the need for *metis*. As Noble pointed out, management quickly found out that the only thing the machines could produce "automatically," without ongoing worker intervention and concrete judgment, was scrap. When workers withheld their *metis* on a "work-to-rule" strategy, scrap rates went through the roof.

(Ironically, today we're in the early stages of the shift of a great deal of manufacturing capability from mass-production industry to small job-shops—with small-scale CNC tools, in the latter, operated by skilled craftsmen.)

So it seems metis or distributed knowledge, in the end, is one of those stubborn traits of human action that outlasts all attempts to supersede it.

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