

The Taylorization of Vladimir Ilich Lenin

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In 1913, Lenin's view of scientific management could only be termed scornful. By 1918, his views had changed dramatically: Importation of the Taylor system was fundamental to the success of the Revolution; without it, socialism would be impossible. I contend that the scientific claims of Taylorism meshed with Marxist claims to scientific socialism in the transformation of views.

IN MARCH 1913, THE SOON-ENOUGH-TO-SUCCEED REVOLUTIONARY LENIN took note of F. W. Taylor's scientific management in a short article in *Pravda*. This article, entitled "A 'Scientific' System of Sweating," heaped scorn on Taylor's "scientific system." "The most widely discussed topic in Europe," he wrote, "is the latest methods of exploiting the workers: . . . It is sweating in strict accordance with all the precepts of science" (Lenin 1968:Vol. 18, pp. 594–5).

Fast forward now to March 1918, where we find Lenin addressing *The Immediate Tasks of Soviet Government* as some successes in the Civil War have given hope that the Revolution might endure more than a few months. Chapter VIII of *Immediate Tasks* looks at the resources available to the poor and lonely Soviet state in contrast to those available to western European countries where (unfortunately) the Revolution had been slow to arrive. The solution: "We must to a considerable extent, take a lesson in socialism from the trust managers, we must take a lesson in socialism from capitalism's big organizers. . . . [I]n order to solve the practical

*Industrial Relations Center, University of Minnesota. E-mail: JScoville@csom.umn.edu. I think the late Adolf Sturmthal (University of Illinois) may have first suggested to me that Lenin had been a proponent of scientific management. John T. Dunlop (Harvard) added to my curiosity by remarking that Stalin was a Taylorite, but he was not sure about Lenin. Discussions with Victor Devinatz (Illinois State) suggested there might be something worth a look. Rebecca Custer took a first cut at Lenin's *Collected Works* as my research assistant at the University of Minnesota.

problems of socialism, when the organizational aspects of it are pushed to the fore, we must enlist to the service of the Soviet power a great number of bourgeois intellectuals, especially from among those who were engaged in the practical work of organizing large-scale capitalist production . . ." (Vol. 42, p. 77).

After wrestling with the fact that it may be necessary to pay these experts very well (much more than "the best sections of the working class") but that it will be well worth it "in the interests of the national economy," Lenin goes on:

Big capitalism has created systems of work organization, which, under the prevailing conditions of exploitation of the masses, represent the harshest form of enslavement by which the minority, the propertied classes, wring out of the working people surplus amounts of labour, strength, blood and nerves. At the same time, they are the last word in the scientific organisation of production, and as such, have to be adopted by the Socialist Soviet Republic. . . . For instance, the famous Taylor system, which is so widespread in America, is famous precisely because it is the last word in reckless capitalist exploitation. One can understand why this system met with such an intense hatred and protest on the part of the workers. At the same time, we must not for a moment forget that the Taylor system represents the tremendous progress of science, which systematically analyses the process of production and points the way towards an immense increase in the efficiency of human labour [Vol. 42, pp. 79–80].

Summing up, Lenin thought that "the Taylor system, properly controlled and intelligently applied by the working people themselves, will serve as a reliable means of further reducing the obligatory [in the context of labor conscription] working day for the entire working population, will serve as an effective means of dealing, in a fairly short space of time, with a task that could roughly be expressed as follows: six hours of physical work daily for every adult citizen and four hours work in running the state" (Vol. 42, p. 80).

According to the editors of *Collected Works*, *Immediate Tasks* was not published until 1933, but Lenin's enthusiasm for well-managed Taylorism comes through in a speech delivered to the Supreme Economic Council (SEC) a few days after the preceding words were written. In discussing a draft decree on labor discipline, Lenin insisted that "[t]he decree should definitely provide for the introduction of the Taylor system, in other words, every use should be made of the scientific methods of work suggested by this system. Without it, productivity cannot be raised, without it, we shall not be able to introduce socialism. In the application of this system American engineers are to be enlisted" (Vol. 42, pp. 86–7).

Was it the mere shift from Bolshevik social and economic critic to a position where he needed to run an economy that changed Lenin's mind?

After all, in that same April 1, 1918 speech to the SEC, he made two other proposals: first, that piece rates be introduced everywhere without exception (bonus systems where truly impossible) and, second, that penal measures for breach of discipline be made stricter. (“Under the capitalist system dismissal was a breach of a civic agreement. Now, a breach of discipline, especially with the introduction of compulsory labour service, will be a criminal offense subject to a definite punishment.”)

Stark reality may have been a part of Lenin’s revised opinion of Taylorism, but the fact that he had studied it in some detail during the interim appears to have been an important component as well. During the first part of 1916, Lenin had amassed considerable material for *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* in a large number of notebooks (which for the most part make up Volume 39 of *Collected Works*). As a part of this study, he had made notes on three sources dealing with scientific management:

Frederick W. Taylor, *Shop Management*, 2d ed., translation and additions by Wallich. Berlin, 1912.

Rudolf Seubert, *The Taylor System in Practice*. Berlin, 1914.

Frank B. Gilbreth, “Motion Study as an Increase of National Wealth,” *Annals of the American Academy*, May 1915.

By contrast, the 1913 *Pravda* piece appears to draw solely on a paper given by “Mr. Semyonov” in the “assembly hall of the Railway Engineering Institute in St. Petersburg,” probably earlier in 1913.

Lenin’s notes on the three sources make up slightly more than 8 of the 768 text pages of Volume 39. How might we characterize the comments and observations that he found important enough to record for his own future use and reference? The listing below reflects an effort to put the 8 pages of notes into a limited number of general themes.

	From Taylor	From Seubert	From Gilbreth
Examples of productivity increase, reduction in labor inputs, and/or labor cost	4	1	3
Worker and union resistance, strikes, go-slows	8	0	0
General difficulty of transition period	3	2	0
Important functions of foremen “in workshop and in office”	1	0	0
Importance of using a much larger number of “nonproductive” workers: foremen and supervisors	3	0	0
. . . Resulting increase in possibility of promotion	1	0	0
. . . Particular difficulties that German system of social stratification will pose to workers becoming foremen	0	1	0
Need to select high-productivity workers for the experiment and pay increased wages (about one-third higher)	2	1	0

Importance of written performance evaluation, even if brief, to ensure fairness	2	0	0
Difficulty of time and motion studies; need to study smallest parts of the work	1	5	1
Importance of fines as a disciplinary tool	1	0	0
U.S. higher labor productivity compared with German	0	1	0
Free-standing quote: "the science of work"	0	1	0
Detailed discussion at length of "micro-motion clocks" and "chronocyclographs"	0	0	1
Value to society of time and motion studies	0	0	1
Waste of duplication, need for U.S. government to standardize time and motion research	0	0	1
Similarity among trades and professions "on the mechanical side"	0	0	1
Need for young workers to be trained (in school) to be "fingerwise," i.e., "training [their] muscles [to] respond easily and quickly to demands for skilled work"	0	0	1

Note that these themes do not purport to summarize the overall work of each author; instead, they reflect an attempt to summarize what Lenin thought worth writing down while reading each author's work. Thus the fact that "the science of work" appears in his notes on Seubert could conceal the reality that "the science of [many different specific kinds of] work" is pure Taylor: It appears everywhere in *Scientific Management* and *Shop Management* (see the "Story of Schmidt" for an example).

Running throughout this set of themes is one interwoven with the others: Americans are the people who do this; America has Taylorism to teach the world. This point is, of course, picked up directly in Lenin's April 1, 1918 speech to the SEC summarized earlier.

Turning to other themes, it would seem from their frequency that Lenin especially valued the concrete examples of results, especially those bearing on productivity (without which, no socialism). However, he drew strong attention (by means of heavy marginal lines) to Seubert's report on Taylor's work with the Tabor Manufacturing Company. Figure 1 shows how it appears on page 157 of Volume 39 of *Collected Works*.

This passage embodies several key themes: the resulting productivity improvement, the necessary wage increase, the difficult transition to scientific management, and the incredible importance of adequate numbers of supervisors and staff. (It is interesting that today's neo- or proto-Marxists put an entirely different twist on the comparatively high and rising share of nonproduction workers in the United States—not only, it appears, do they not know their Taylor, it seems they also do not know their Lenin either!)

What is equally interesting about the 8 pages devoted to scientific management is the almost total lack of negative, caustic, or pejorative

Figure 1

p. 30: "On the average" the Taylor reform takes "five years". The Tabor Manufacturing Co. was "in danger of bankruptcy" because of the expense of introducing the Taylor system. !!

The Tabor Manufacturing Co. was founded in the 1890s. In 1904 there was a strike (half-won). Things were going badly. Taylor offered to provide money if he were allowed to reorganise (32). Accepted.

After five years: production increased 80%;
costs decreased 30%;
wages increased 25%;

in 1912 { 45 workers (33)
48 (!sic!!!) officials and fore-
men ((usually 1 : 3)) (clerks) (office work-
ers and foremen).

Next come copies of the "keys" (abbreviations), formulas, papers, instructions—a mass of written material, highly complex ... office workers call it the "talmud" (p. 35)....

comment, particularly about the three authors personally. When Lenin quotes Taylor about the likelihood of "resistance . . . especially from the backward section of the workers," a couple of marginal lines are accompanied by "sic!!" Wallich's supplementary chapter to his translation of *Shop Management*, noting that some 60,000 U.S. workers are employed in "reorganized institutions," draws a marginal comment: "N.B. Under capitalism a 'torture or a conjuring trick' only 60,000 workers." And Seubert's observation (as recorded by Lenin) that "the method must be put into effect cautiously, in keeping with American *democratic* customs, so that it shall not be regarded as "torture" "earns three marginal lines and a "sic!!!! N.B."

This is pretty mild stuff. Compare it with Lenin's evaluation of Joseph Schumpeter's *Theory of Economic Development* (Leipzig, 1912), a significant work by a major twentieth-century economist: "Also *nil*. Deceptive title. Examination revealed something in the nature of 'sociological' chatter. Might have to consult again, but on the subject of development *nil*" (Vol. 39, p. 75). Or his summary of Robert Liefmann's *Holding and Financing Companies* (Jena, 1909): "The author is a double-dyed idiot, who makes a great fuss about definitions—very stupid ones—revolving about the word 'substitution'. His factual data, however, mostly quite raw, are valuable. Opponent of the labour theory of value, etc., etc." (Vol. 39, p. 373).

When he encounters a book and author he really does not like, Lenin gets pretty thorough—here are the opening and closing paragraphs bracketing his notes on G. von Schulze-Gaevernitz's *British Imperialism and English Free Trade at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Leipzig, 1906):

Scoundrel of the first order and vulgar to boot, Kantian, pro-religion, chauvinist—has collected some very interesting facts about British imperialism and has written a lively, readable book. Travelled in Britain and collected a mass of material and observations. You've done a lot of plundering, you British gentlemen; allow us, too, a bit of plundering—with Kant, God, patriotism, and science to “sanctify” it = such is the sum and substance of the position of this “savant”!! (Also a lot of needless verbiage.) [Vol. 39, p. 446]. . . .

. . . In general, everything of scientific value has been *stolen* from Hobson. He is a plagiarist in the cloak of a Kantian, a religious scoundrel, an imperialist, that's all [Vol. 39, p. 457].

In comparison, the three authors on Taylorism escape censure almost entirely, perhaps no more than the equivalent of an occasional slightly raised eyebrow. In this treatment, Taylor, Seubert, and Gilbreth are on a par with the three American or English economists found in the name index to Volume 39. Richard Ely and Henry George are mentioned not unfavorably in passing; Robert Giffen's estimates of national incomes and wealths are summarized at length and (I think) invariably strictly dispassionately. Taylor, Seubert, and Gilbreth are treated essentially as scientists—of work, to be sure.

Why is this so? Perhaps it stems from Lenin's apparent attention to the outcomes of the Tayloristic experiments, especially the productivity enhancements that are a necessary condition for the establishment of socialism—much more so for the achievement of Lenin's vision of the 6 + 4 hour day referred to earlier. However, there is doubtless more to it than that. We need to focus our eyes on the importance of the concept of “science” in the intellectual framework of Marxism. Marx had conducted the scientific analysis of capitalism; the Marxists had developed the basis for “scientific socialism.” When “the science of work” comes along, it is straightforwardly adopted as a natural part of the whole schema. Put alternatively, the *unscientific* management of work would surely be *un-Marxist*.

Scientific management, so reprehensible under capitalism, is not—as a cynic might charge—suddenly and inconsistently acceptable for the socialist state but is in fact a necessary feature of such a state.

REFERENCES

Lenin, V. I. 1968. *Collected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. References throughout are to this 45-volume set.