



## Taylor's World Revisited

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Textbooks often provide readers with first impressions or introductions. Therefore, the portrayal of Frederick Winslow Taylor in management textbooks might explain why many hold Taylor and his ideas in low regard. Rather than recognizing Taylor as one of the first thinkers to study work in and of itself, the textbooks in our sample reduce him to little more than the inventor of time-and-motion studies and a more scientific approach to management. This, however, fits with the mainstream of the historical profession, which eyes Taylor suspiciously. Both historical and management literature, nevertheless, often fail to see that Taylor sought to overcome the irreconcilability of the interests of workers and managers with his new system of management.

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For over a century, the name Frederick Winslow Taylor has drawn vastly different reactions depending on who one asks. From fuming union leaders to probing congressman or from harried foremen to curious academics, “Taylor” has prompted revulsion or worship. Perhaps the great range of opinions regarding Taylor suggests he belongs among the names of similarly-revolutionary albeit better-known thinkers – Darwin, Marx, Freud – whose mention could (and can) prompt equally diverse reactions. Nevertheless it seems that Taylor’s ambitions – the philosophical core of “Taylorism” – remains somewhat misunderstood or under-appreciated today. Amidst the extreme inequality of the Gilded Age, frequent and sometimes violent labor disruptions thrust “the labor question” to the forefront of many minds. Yet few explored the nature of work as Taylor did. In some sense he was the first thinker to try to study “work” in and of itself – his “scientific management” grew from a similarly “scientific” examination of job tasks. Through the study of work, Taylor aimed to dispense with the drudgery and overexertion

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that had defined much work throughout history, envisioning a sort of industrial utopia. Granted, workers needed to comply with managerial prerogatives by following his “one best way.” Nevertheless, one of his primary goals was trying to remove the friction between labor and capital.

As such an influential and consequential thinker, perhaps it is unsurprising that “Taylorism” should have taken on an almost pejorative connotation to some. Largely, however, such impressions of Taylor seem based on a misreading of his work or goals. Recently, for example, journalist Nikil Saval wrote in *Cubed* that the “ideology of Taylorism all but ensured a workplace divided against itself, both in space and in practice, with a group of managers controlling how work was done and their workers merely performing that work.” Thanks to Taylorism, Saval concludes, “work was always, frankly, going to suck.”<sup>1</sup> But a closer reading of Taylor’s own writing gives the impression that he would be dismayed, or at least perplexed, by such a rendering of his ideas. Taylor’s scientific management aimed to eliminate conflict between management and labor through, in Taylor’s words, “close, intimate, personal cooperation between the management and the men.”<sup>2</sup> Taylor theorized that this would lead to broad prosperity that would be “better for all the people.”<sup>3</sup> He believed that the goal of management was maximum prosperity for both the employer and the employee. This is not, of course, to suggest that some employers did not distort or twist Taylor’s efficiency methods. Rather, properly implemented principles of scientific management aimed to generate, through efficient production, greater returns that could be, if desirable, shared between management and workers.

With scientific management, new managerial techniques complemented existing skills and production methods. Taylorism depended on management gaining full control of the production process – an affront to machinists’ tradition of craft control, even though Taylor thought workers would gain higher wages and less intense work through cooperation. But because of deep-seated distrust, machinists were skeptical of the bargain. Scientific management depended on workers believing that management would share with them the value gains derived from greater efficiency.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, to gain workers’ cooperation in the quest for greater efficiency, Taylor called for “high wages” and “favorable working conditions.”

The recent literature in management education, however, reveals that journalists and academics have not been the only folks to misunderstand Taylor. A review of course syllabi at top-ranked business schools suggests that few courses assign Taylor’s own writing as required reading, but he appears in numerous management textbooks that do appear on such required reading lists.<sup>5</sup> Management textbooks, of course, do not heap

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<sup>1</sup> Nikil Saval, *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace* (New York: Doubleday, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1911), 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> William Lazonick, *Competitive Advantage on the Shop Floor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 225.

<sup>5</sup> Don Hellriegel, Susan Jackson, and John Slocum, *Management: A Competency-Based Approach* (Thomson, 2005); Edward Knod and Richard Schonberger, *Operations Management* 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001); Lee Krajewski and Larry Ritzman, *Operations Management: Strategy and Analysis* 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Addison-Wesley, 1999); Charles

opprobrium on the man as a kind of arch-exploiter of labor in the manner of some journalists and academics. But they similarly ignore the focal point of Taylor's method: cooperation. Taylor, like other thinkers before him, recognized the innate irreconcilability of the interests of labor and capital. He understood that conflict, given the coercive nature of the wage relationship, was inevitable from the start. But through cooperation – gained with the compromise of exchanging high effort for high wages – such conflict could be overcome or diminished. For Taylor, “close, intimate, personal cooperation between the management and the men” was a critical principle of scientific management, and acutely aware of the importance of incentives, he called for both “high wages” and “favorable working conditions.” Yet the burden of a high-wage bill would not make such remuneration unfeasible because the incentives would result in better work and greater productivity, leading to increased profits. In Taylor's view, scientific management would create such large returns that its division between workers and management would generate little, or at least less, friction. But today's management textbooks make it seem like Taylor's only legacy is the scientifically-attained “one best way” to complete a task.

It wasn't always this way. In the mid-twentieth century, management consultant Peter Drucker understood Taylor's aims and importance. In his 1973 book *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, he wrote that “Taylor was the first man in the known history of mankind who did not take work for granted, but looked at it and studied it.”<sup>6</sup> Taylor, according to Drucker, “started out with social rather than engineering or profit objectives” in an effort “to free the worker from the burden of heavy toil.”<sup>7</sup> “Taylor's hope,” Drucker concluded, “was to make it possible to give the laborer a decent livelihood through increasing the productivity of work.”<sup>8</sup> So transformative were Taylor's ideas that Drucker considered scientific management the most important American contribution to Western thought since the Federalist papers.<sup>9</sup>

Yet despite Drucker's popularity, this interpretation of Taylor did not take hold in the management literature. Some management writers decried the so-called “nefarious influence of... scientific management.”<sup>10</sup> Most, however, simply divorced Taylorism from its more utopian implications. For example, aside from mistakenly calling Taylor a “top manager at General Motors” (a firm more or less in its infancy at Taylor's death), *The Portable MBA in Strategy* (2001) reduced Taylor to just someone who “sought to simplify and standardize work through the decomposition and measurement of tasks.”<sup>11</sup> A more or less similar reduction appears in many operations management textbooks. The

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Swanson, Leonard Territo, and Robert Taylor, *Police Administration: Structures, Processes, and Behavior* 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Pearson, 2012); William J. Stevenson, *Production Operations Management* 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Peter Drucker, *The Practice of Management* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 280.

<sup>10</sup> Cieran Parker, *The Thinkers 50: The World's Most Influential Business Writers and Leaders* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 22.

<sup>11</sup> Liam Fahey and Robert M. Randall, ed., *The Portable MBA in Strategy* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2001), 325.

textbooks in our sample almost uniformly used a discussion of Taylor to introduce time-and-motion studies.<sup>12</sup>

In the 2005 textbook *Management: A Competency-Based Approach*, Don Hellriegel, Susan Jackson, and John Slocum defined scientific management as “a philosophy and set of management practices that are based on fact and observation, not on hearsay or guesswork.”<sup>13</sup> After describing Taylor as the originator of time-and-motion studies, they discussed Taylor’s monetary incentives. But because Taylor used material incentives to elicit higher effort, the authors write, Taylor “failed to recognize that workers also have social needs and that working conditions and job satisfaction often are as important, if not more important, than money.”<sup>14</sup> “Managers today,” they add, “can’t assume that workers are interested only in higher wages. Dividing jobs into their simplest tasks and setting clear rules for accomplishing those tasks won’t always lead to a quality product, high morale, and an effective organization.”<sup>15</sup> This risks an anachronistic portrayal of Taylor, for he wrote during the Gilded Age, when managers were relentlessly squeezing workers. Some of his own bosses at Midvale Steel struggled to understand why Taylor wanted to pay workers more. While historians remember the workers who opposed scientific management at shops like the Watertown Arsenal, few mention the opposition of many managers who disliked the idea of paying workers more or ceding greater power to engineers. Reflecting higher management’s skepticism of Taylor’s aims, only two firms actually introduced a scientific management program in its entirety: Tabor and Link-Belt.<sup>16</sup>

In another textbook, Edward Knod and Richard Schonberger’s *Operations Management* (2001), Frederick Taylor is called an “innovator,” but because he “documented and timed human work tasks, which, in turn, led to the creation of standards that are essential for training, workforce planning and staffing, budgeting, and job bidding,” rather than because he devised a solution to “the labor question.”<sup>17</sup> The authors concede that Taylor “laid the cornerstones for modern human resources management,” though the reason – Taylor’s effort to solve the “labor question” – is not probed.<sup>18</sup> Scientific management came about, according to Knod and Schonberger, as an effort “to standardize the labor element of operations: standard methods and standard times. Nonstandard labor practices were simply too expensive and wasteful.”<sup>19</sup> Yet taken

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<sup>12</sup> Fahey and Randall, ed., *The Portable MBA in Strategy*; Hellriegel, Jackson, and Slocum, *Management: A Competency-Based Approach*; Knod and Schonberger, *Operations Management*; Krajewski and Ritzman, *Operations Management: Strategy and Analysis*; Swanson, Territo, and Taylor, *Police Administration: Structures, Processes, and Behavior*; Stevenson, *Production Operations Management*.

<sup>13</sup> Hellriegel, Jackson, and Slocum, *Management: A Competency-Based Approach* (Thomson, 2005), 44.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> David Noble, *America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 271.

<sup>17</sup> Knod and Schonberger, *Operations Management* 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001), 38.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

a step further, the standardization of methods could, in Taylor's view, produce such a bountiful managerial surplus that it could be divided to the great benefit of both managers and workers. Yet despite this economic innovation, the textbook authors commend Taylor only for playing a "central role in the development of methods study and time standards, which...have been instrumental in providing the documentation for training."<sup>20</sup>

An even more reduced treatment of Taylor appears in another operations management textbook, where Taylor appears as a stock figure in a discussion of "job design." The authors, Lee Krajewski and Larry Ritzman, defined scientific management as "the philosophy that any operation can be improved by breaking it into components and studying the work content of each component to improve work methods."<sup>21</sup> The authors recognized that Taylor "believed that scientific management would work only if the economic benefits of increased output were shared by both management and workers – that is, workers received greater pay for increased productivity."<sup>22</sup> Yet rather than a discussion of how this was Taylor's solution to "the labor question," the authors then use Taylor to discuss the time study method of work measurement.

Many management textbooks focus on the means of scientific management rather than the ends. They pass down to the next generation of managers time study measurements and the quest for the "one best way," divorced from the fact that Taylor studied work because he recognized that conflict between workers and managers plagued the production process and hindered economic growth. He knew that if both sides cooperated, profits would grow. Taylor believed this would generate large returns that could be spent to elicit high effort from workers; simply put, high effort in exchange for high pay. But the means of measuring work and applying standards is the lasting legacy of scientific management when one looks at today's management textbooks. A 2012 police administration textbook, for example, asks if traffic ticket quotas are "the new scientific management?"<sup>23</sup>

A fairer assessment of Taylor's thought comes in William Stevenson's *Production Operations Management* textbook (2005). Stevenson saw Taylor's scientific management as "an enlightened and more systematic approach to management" that emphasized "achieving cooperation between management and workers."<sup>24</sup> Stevenson errs, however, in casting scientific management as more concerned about "the technical aspects of work design" than "the human element in job design."<sup>25</sup> Taylor's quest to solve technical problems was rooted in an effort to solve a fundamentally social problem: the seemingly inescapable conflict between labor and management. Taylor recognized the material roots of this social problem, and therefore sought a technical solution. In this sense, two divergent schools of thought that gained currency in management education – the *efficiency* school, focused on logical job design, and the *behavioral* school, which

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 414.

<sup>21</sup> Krajewski and Ritzman, *Operations Management: Strategy and Analysis* 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Addison-Wesley, 1999), 174.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>23</sup> Swanson, Territo, and Taylor, *Police Administration: Structures, Processes, and Behavior* 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Pearson, 2012), 177.

<sup>24</sup> Stevenson, *Production Operations Management* 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), 19.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 20.

sought more meaningful and rewarding work – might, despite obvious differences, be based on a false dichotomy.

Yet after this mostly fair assessment, Stevenson does something surprisingly common among the authors of operations management textbooks: the equation of Taylorism with Fordism. Stevenson discusses Taylor and Henry Ford in the same paragraph and, like other textbook authors, casts scientific management and the assembly line as a pair. But Taylorism and Fordism were fundamentally different. With scientific management, new managerial techniques complemented existing skills and production methods. With the assembly line, on the other hand, managers discarded existing skills and production methods in favor of automation. While Taylor would have asked, “how can a worker complete the task more efficiently,” Ford’s engineers would have asked, “why should a worker complete the task at all when we can mechanize it?” Taylor used piece and differential rate incentives to encourage speed and efficiency, but the assembly line left no room for piece-rates because it set the pace of production, establishing effort norms for all workers.

Despite rapid productivity growth and significant increases in workers’ standard of living since Taylor’s death, the lack of attention to the humane implications of Taylor’s ideas reflects that the focal point of Taylor’s thought – the achievement of cooperation between workers and managers – continues to elude many workplaces. Stevenson uses Taylor to introduce stopwatch time studies in his textbook. “The analyst who studies the job,” he writes, “should be thoroughly familiar with it since it is not unusual for workers to attempt to include extra motions during the study in hope of gaining a standard that allows more time per piece.”<sup>26</sup> Deeply ingrained mutual suspicion between workers and managers hindered the implementation of scientific management at many firms during Taylor’s lifetime.

Taylor was dismayed by those who misunderstood his work. When congressmen investigated scientific management, his defense that it demanded a “mental revolution on the part of both workers and managers” reflected a belief that “both would eventually recognize their mutual interest in increased productivity.”<sup>27</sup> Judging by his portrayal today in many management textbooks, Taylor’s principal work and his contributions continue to remain unrealized. In Stevenson’s textbook, the equation offered for calculating the normal time to complete a task multiplies the average, or observed time, by a performance rating. “The reason for including this adjustment factor,” Stevenson writes, “is that the worker being observed may be working at a rate different from a ‘normal’ rate, either to deliberately slow the pace or because his or her natural abilities differ from the norm.”<sup>28</sup> Taylor, of course, wanted to overcome such obstacles in his own time. Yet he might have thought that a century later, “the labor question” might too have been overcome, replaced by mutually beneficial cooperation and sharing of gains between workers and management. In many instances, labor-management relations today remain far from Taylor’s ambition, but perhaps greater attention to the more important implications of Taylor’s thought in today’s management textbooks could ease the way.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>27</sup> Noble, *America by Design*, 275.

<sup>28</sup> Stevenson, *Production Operations Management*, 317.

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