

## INTRODUCTION

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# The Point of Production

*Charles Levenstein*

In our previous book *The Point of Production*, John Wooding and Charles Levenstein (1) sought to locate workers' health and safety problems in the broad political economy, arguing that without a deep understanding of the social/political/economic context of particular industries and/or workplaces, we would not understand the process of recognition and control of industrial hazards. We postulated a system of interaction of economic players/agencies constrained by environmental factors, from which emerged the rules, problems and possibilities for change at a micro level. The approach was borrowed from the industrial relations systems analysis developed by John Dunlop (2) but we gave it a decidedly leftist twist in our discussion of the American economy. We emerged with an analysis of occupational health and safety in a system dominated by "the boss."

The analysis became more interesting, of course, when it became clear that the factors that we thought of as constraints were going through enormous change—and, therefore, even "etiological" research required the uncovering of layers of social causality. Following the industrial relations systems approach, we had hypothesized a more or less stable broad environment composed of (1) the state of technology in the society; (2) the level of development of the market; (3) the distribution of power among social classes in the society; and (4) the over-riding ideology of the society. We also consider the role of the state as a primary instrument of contested terrain for changing working conditions. While we acknowledged the new "globalization" of economies, we did not play through the ways in which each of the four categories were changing. And,

all of our hypothesizing was constructed on our understanding of advanced capitalist economies and the occupational injuries and disease prevalent at the point of production.

In addition, we suggested that struggles over the control of technology at the point of production were reflected in one way or another in the wider society—so that studying the micro-environment of industrial hazards could deepen our understanding of many problems in the society and general environment. Indeed, we viewed it as a window in which we could expose the many contradictions negatively affecting the lives and livelihoods of worker and community. We thought, for instance, that this approach was particularly useful for understanding the issues of environmental justice and “cleaner production.” The relationship between inequality and health, apparently news to social epidemiologists, comes as no shock to students of work environment policy.

Further, the scandalous problems of science in a society dominated by capital were indicated, if not fully examined. We reviewed the roles of scientists as they were subservient to the interests/demands of employers, insurance companies and, frequently, multinational capital. In this analysis the capitalist state was theorized as a vehicle for maintaining the viability of the dominant system of production and market relations, but that it was not omnipotent. Our focus was on the U.S. and, to some extent, informed by the experience of European democracies.

Various criticisms of *The Point of Production* pointed out the inadequate attention to gender issues in production, to the failure to fully explore the implications for environmentalism of this approach to analysis, and to questions about the applicability of the approach to developing countries. And that, in focusing within the U.S., we inevitably provided a bias toward the American experience and a rather static model of the way in which our broader categories interacted around the problems of the work environment. Perhaps more important, however, was that a series of case studies was undertaken, primarily by doctoral researchers in Work Environment Policy at UMass Lowell, all of whom used one variant or another of the POP framework to investigate particular problems or industries. This book collects some of the work achieved by these researchers and published in *New Solutions Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health Policy*. The POP approach also informed research that Levenstein engaged in with other colleagues. Some of the resultant papers were published in *New Solutions* and are presented here as part of the collection.

It became evident in the course of the research that the profound changes in the national economies of now *post*-industrial societies raised new problems or perhaps focused attention on old problems that had become more important for worker health and safety. Industries which previously had not received much

attention were now of concern, such as health care and other service industries. And, because the industries and associated problems involved services rather than the production of goods (commodities), the adequacy of the point of production analytical scheme could be questioned.

Perhaps one of the most glaring problems in POP was the failure to address the changes in the global economy. The focus of the authors at the time was on explaining the usefulness of understanding capitalist dynamics to occupational health practitioners. What became plain in the subsequent years is that we now have to discuss imperialism, not simply national capitalist systems. Furthermore, what we took as well-defined social “actors” in advanced industrial economies were not so clear in, for instance, the emergent market systems of Central and Eastern Europe. In these systems the development of a clear capitalist class was a phenomenon that occurred only since the 1990s. On the other hand, in some developing countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, the development of a working class only accompanied new efforts at industrialization. And in both Second and Third Worlds, the role of the state was being transformed by global economic and political forces. While “globalization” is not new, the speed and depth of the changes it has engendered mark it as a very different beast to that of the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, the “normal” system of industrial relations— and hence, of the determination of working conditions—was in flux in much of the world—and not so “normal” any longer.

In the production of commodities, the central hazards involve the uses of chemicals, radioactive materials, and metals; the generation of dusts and fumes; dangerous machines; the organization of routine work (Fordism, scientific management). The overlay of racism and sexism, of course, aggravated problems, as did the decline of trade unions. In the production of services, hazards are inherent in the relationship between the worker delivering a service to a client, a patient, a customer—the hazard is inherent in the relationship with the person being served. Violence—which has always been an aspect of the industrial scene—had achieved new prominence. Job stress—always evident as an aspect of work relations and hierarchy—now receives great attention. New forms of repetitive injuries as old tasks become modernized also created new vectors of disease and injury. Increased technological surveillance and monitoring give new meaning to the subservience workers experience in the workplace—they also generate new levels of stress and alienation. Health care in all its aspects is an industry noted for a multitude of hazards. Teenagers working in retail stores or delivering pizza have attracted the attention of occupational health researchers. And immigrant workers, particularly those working in domestic service or in nursing homes and other health care facilities, have also begun to receive attention.

In this book we present research developed by authors as they apply, test, and revise the research approach developed in *The Point of Production*. We believe that the following materials represent a rich exploration of the social/economic/political determinants of workers health and safety in the new global economy. Further, this research suggests that it possible to elaborate an extension of the point of production framework which will help to elucidate the hazards in the service industries—that is, at the point of consumption. In other words, we ask the question: Is this new world of work so dramatically different from the manufacturing world?

The first section of this book features chapters that address the issues surrounding globalization. Siqueira, Lemus, and Levenstein look at the impact of privatization on health and safety of workers in Brazil and Mexico. Markkanen’s study focused on homework in the Asian shoe-making industry. Machado and Levenstein report on the spillover of violence from the community to the buses in Brazil.

The next section of the book addresses an area mentioned but neglected in *The Point of Production*. Rosenberg examines the unintended effects of environmental regulation on workers in agriculture. Slatin examines the situation of hazardous waste workers and emergency responders at the intersection of occupational and environmental health. Campbell and Levenstein report on the implementation of legislation that addressed environmental problems at the point of production—toxics use reduction. Armenti and colleagues discuss their study of the role of workers in pollution prevention.

The third section begins with Spangler’s discussion of the intersection of labor relations with gender relations, thus developing an important subject that was, again, mentioned but not much developed in *The Point of Production*. Similarly, Edwards and Quinn discuss the relevance and importance of gender for the “cleaner production” agenda. Moir and Azaroff report on participant action research involving women in construction.

In the fourth and final section, Quinn, Levenstein, and DeLaurier examine some of the practical issues involved in conducting occupational health research in the contested terrain of the workplace.

This collection does not include all of the work undertaken within or elaborating upon the framework provided by *The Point of Production*. The book series, *Work, Health and Environment*, edited by Levenstein, Forrant, and Wooding, and published by Baywood, includes longer studies, some of which explore the hypotheses originally posed by Wooding and Levenstein. In addition, work by Lemus, Dembe, Barreira, Cedillo, Barbeau, Campbell, Moure Eraso, and others have been published in *New Solutions* as well as other journals. The studies using this framework are increasingly focusing on the service sector and it is evident that the approach requires even more elaboration for effective use in those industries.

## REFERENCES

1. John Wooding and Charles Levenstein. *The Point of Production, Work Environment in Advanced Industrial Societies*. Guilford, New York, 1999.
2. John T. Dunlop. *Industrial Relations Systems Analysis*. Holt, New York, 1958.