THE RED TAYLORIST

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THE RED TAYLORIST: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF WALTER NICHOLAS POLAKOV

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About the Author

Diana Kelly has researched and taught in history, industrial relations, and management over many years, as well as having numerous organisational and collegial roles, mainly at the University of Wollongong.

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Bulletin of the Taylor Society and other important institutional material of the early twentieth century. Ancestry and allied sites allowed insights into Polakov's life not available elsewhere.

I hope the belief of so many in this project proves justified, and you too, believe Walter's story needed to be told.

Introduction

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under given circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past.
>
> – Marx (1926), *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

The first half of the twentieth century was the dawn of the American century, and a troubling, hopeful time in the United States. In the melting pot, there was growing rejection of immigration while the land of free speech built up social and ideological bulwarks against radicals, especially of those of the leftish persuasion; the home of individualism allowed millions to starve and become homeless in the recessions and Depression. Like a gawky teenager, the United States was full of contradictions and flashes of self-destruction. But also like a gawky teenager, the United States also offered opportunity for men and women to make their own history, to build on emerging wisdom or develop new wisdoms.

This chapter seeks to explain briefly how and why a biography of Walter Nicholas Polakov (1879–1948) is a reflection of that half century, and how and why Polakov offers good insights into scientific management or Taylorism, and why this is important. It begins with a bare bones study of scientific management in history, noting the debates in the conceptualisation of the ideology. This chapter, then briefly explores the nature and uses of biography as a genre, before concluding with a discussion of sources and an overview of the book.

One of the new wisdoms diffusing through the dawn of the American century was scientific management, the ideology of science and planning in business, industry and society. Scientific management, sometimes called Taylorism, was first written about by Frederick Winslow Taylor. He was a curious polymath – a scientist, inventor, and sportsman, although forever after labelled by some as seeing workers as lowly oxen or gorillas. Taylor practised and wrote about the new kind of management emerging in the later nineteenth century, when industry was expanding rapidly in terms of technology, plant size, capacity, and employment. From the first, the ideology of scientific management was, perhaps wilfully or naively, misused, and, wilfully or naively, misinterpreted. It is not surprising. Any analysis which seeks to deconstruct work processes, machines and relationships, while also researching production processes for optimal output, is likely to be viewed in askance. When such analysis is founded on planning, and the means to undertake

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better and fairer ways to achieve production, it is bound to be subjective. Taylorists of the Taylor Society formed by Taylor's earliest colleagues in 1912, sought, mostly manfully, to explain their philosophy, their wish to bring science and planning to workplace and industry.

The material covering the scientific management ideology has been a great and uneven thing, and so has been the writing of its history. For some, scientific management never went past the stopwatch or time study, deskilling or control over workers and the labor process (e.g., Burris, 1993; Janoski & Lepadatu, 2013, pp. 5–14; Kanigel, 2005; Littler, 1978; Wood, 1982). At the other end of the various continua, scientific management offered the potential for a planned and equitable society using science and research as a first order (e.g., Nyland, Bruce, & Burns, 2014). Reflecting the many conceptions of scientific management, it is not surprising that its historiography is vast and well beyond the scope of this biography. Indeed a supplementary objective of this book is, in general, to tread lightly among the many debates, but rather, to offer a perspective for consideration.

In doing so, this book seeks to meet four objectives. First and foremost, it aims to tell the life of Walter Polakov, who was a socialist, a unionist, and a deeply committed scientific manager, and how he lived within the economic, cultural, and political imperatives and demands in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Secondly, I seek to understand what Polakov's Red Taylorism was, and how he interpreted and practised his scientific management. Thirdly, this book hopes to offer a contribution to the genre of historical biography, showing in the process how biography is valuable history. And finally, I hope to raise interests of historians more broadly to the worth of history from the perspective of scholarship in the history of business and management ideas.

Life of Walter Nicholas Polakov

At the heart of this book is a scientific manager, a "Red Taylorist," Polakov, the Marxist socialist engineer who arrived in United States from Russia in 1906. Born to the Russian intelligentsia in July 1879, Polakov learned his ideals in the ferment of Moscow in the late nineteenth century, and perhaps built on them during his university years in Dresden around the turn of the century. Within one or two years of his arrival in the United States, Polakov was practising "power plant betterment" under guidance of foundation scientific management figures. He rose to relative fame as a consultant scientific manager and author until an ill-chosen venture, bringing scientific management to USSR from late 1929, led to a loss of employment on his premature return in May 1931. During the 1930s, Polakov often struggled for work, although he had roles in several New Deal programs, and published his third and fourth books, *Power Plant Management* (1932f) and *The Power Age* (1933a), as well as a dozen or more articles. He was also employed for ten years by the United Mineworkers of America, during which time he also experienced FBI surveillance until he died almost alone and penniless in Palo Alto, California, in 1948. In his forty-two years in the United States, Polakov lived through the Russian Revolution, two world wars, Red Scares, recessions and the Great Depression. His experiences as a consultant scientific manager or

management engineer, as a public servant, a union official and prolific author reflect those changes. His activities and writings reveal how he dealt with those changes.

Perspectives of Scientific Management

Among my intellectual heroes are Antonio Gramsci, Harry Braverman, and Howard Zinn – activist left-wing scholars who could write with vividity and clarity. But they were wrong about some things, and what irks me most, is that they were wrong about scientific management. They all saw and portrayed scientific management as rabidly anti-worker and unrelentingly pro-business. They portrayed this ideology as a narrow system of overt workplace repression. They also asserted that scientific management represented purposive disempowerment of working class in society. Gramsci (1999) was perhaps the most damning when he claimed that:

> Taylor is in fact expressing with brutal cynicism the purpose of American society – developing in the worker to the highest degree of automatic and mechanical attitudes … reducing productive operations exclusively to the mechanical, physical aspect.… A forced selection will ineluctably take place; a part of the old working class will be pitilessly eliminated from the world of labour…. (Gramsci, 1999, p. 598)

Braverman (1974) wrote at much greater length in his mammoth book. Well over 400 pages of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* includes over 50 pages (pp. 85–138) wholly focused on scientific management. Braverman brought a strong Marxist perspective to exploring the "essential effort to strip the workers of craft knowledge and autonomous control," and the resultant consequences for the working class. But his reliance on selective quotes from Taylor, rather than Taylorism, gives a seriously cockeyed view of what scientific managers did and thought. Zinn (2003) was of similar mind. He drew on Braverman to explain that:

> the purpose of Taylorism was to make workers interchangeable, able to do the simple tasks that the new division of labor required-like standard parts divested of individuality and humanity, bought and sold as commodities. (Zinn, 2003, p. 324)

These ideas have been worked and reworked through the various disciplines beyond history of management to organisational behaviour, labor history, sociology, and so forth. So widespread and effective has been the depiction of scientific management as an anti-worker control system, that it has gone beyond the scholarly research into the public literature and areas with no clear scholarly links to Taylorism. For example, in his massive (1,175 pages) and magisterial history of New York City *Greater Gotham* which covers fin de siècle and early twentieth century, Mike Wallace notes in his discussion of the Bureau of Municipal Research (pp. 131–140) that "the BMR was enamored of industrial efficiency like Frederick Taylor, who advocated that managers appropriate workers' craft knowledge in

order to gain control over the production process" (Wallace, 2017, p. 138). Like many scholars, what Wallace does fleetingly, is conflate scientific management with a contested perception of Taylor and an assumption of deskilling.

Yet despite widespread acceptance of these beliefs, alternatives can be posited. One alternative accedes that a group of engineers, managers, and academics saw Taylor as a founding spirit of a set of principles which combined to comprise an ideology, in the foundation sense of the term (Adorno et al., 1950, p. 2). As we know, "men make their own history …." (Marx, 1926, p. 23), and the scientific managers who followed Frederick Winslow Taylor, all interpreted the ideology of scientific management each in their own way, as we will see for example, in the discussion over Horace Drury's paper in Chapter 2. If that is so, then scientific management was no more Taylor's than Romantic poetry movement was Percy Shelley's or women's liberation was Betty Friedan's. Certainly, while Taylor sought to convince and influence fellow engineers and managers of his belief system, he always saw it as evolutionary, not fixed. Similarly, Taylor was firm that scientific management was an ideology that was relevant beyond the workplace and industry, with its set of "fundamental principles … applicable to all kinds of human endeavor" (Taylor, 1911, p. 7). This is evident too, in the work of early colleagues and dedicated followers, such as Henry Laurence Gantt and Morris Llewellyn Cooke. These indicate that from the first, scientific management was a richer and far more nuanced ideology than Braverman and Gramsci ever perceived.

Perhaps not surprisingly a body of literature has arisen over the last 30 years or so, as scholars using forgotten or unused primary documents have shown Taylorism to offer broad potential for economic planning and social idealism. Scholars such as Bruce (1995, 2006), Nyland, 1989, 1995, 1998), and Schachter (1989, 2000, 2018) and their colleagues have comprehensively and proactively demonstrated the breadth of Taylorism and its potential for achieving gains for workers, societies and economies. As Nyland et al. (2014, p. 1164) noted:

> The Taylorists began as scholar-practitioners who had the enterprise as their focus, but when this concentration proved incapable of addressing the problems besetting their respective societies, they looked beyond this limitation and developed management as both a micro and macro science.

The life and times of Polakov reinforce these ideas. Polakov began his working life and learned his scientific management in the United States on power plants and locomotive production plants under direction of scientific managers. He had also arrived in the United States burning with Marxist socialism. Perhaps, not so surprisingly, he too, soon saw the macro potential of his new passion, scientific management. An objective of this book is to show how these passions evolved and developed.

Biography

That brings us to a consideration of the genre of historical biography. Renders and de Haan (2014, p. 2) define the biography as:

> the study of the life of an individual, based on the methods of historical scholarship, with the goal of illuminating what is public, explained and interpreted in part from the perspective of the personal.

Biography has been subjected to waves of popularity and scorn (Skidelsky, 1988, pp. 1–2). At their broadest, debates over biography took place between traditionalists who sought empirical facts and descriptions, and Marxists after the Annalistes who wrote of "deceitful fallacies that intoxicated true scientific knowledge with an all too vague 'novelistic approach'" (Hayden White, 1990 cited in Sardica, 2013, p. 384). Equally biography for some years got short shrift from post-modernists who despised facts as "re-presentations," subject to limitless interpretations (see, e.g., Himmelfarb, 2010; Le Goff, 1995; Munslow, 2003; Sardica, 2013). In recent times, biography seems to have been retrieved, and brought with it some of the ideas of the both Annalistes and post-modernists. There is awareness of good biography as performance and as narratives of "facts," and an acceptance that biography is subjective. Finally, it is recognised today that biography is appropriate for all of society, not just the celebrities of the past.

In the researching, presenting, and explaining a life, biography requires the researcher to be aware of the possibilities (and pitfalls) of a focus on one person. In particular, the biographer must find the balance between detachment and commitment to their subject. The grand hagiographies of the past monarchs and great men (almost always), needed to be replaced by a critical lens. And that lens needs to work towards understanding their subject, within their own context, not the biographer's times. In these ways, the biographer seeks to know how men and women make their history within the constraints and opportunities they find.

But of course this depends on the skill of the historian, even as it reflects the biases of the historian. This is because there can be no objectivity in in biography. Indeed, as Lazaromas and Gioielli (2012, p. 653) have noted "history is the most political of subjects … not least because multiple interpretations of certain individuals make it so." In biographical research, the choice of evidence, of which documents to accept and which to ignore, become part of the bias, and the author's re-presentation of the subject's life. This is part of what every historian does. To reconstruct the past requires judgement choosing sources, but the bases for those choices are inevitably subjective. What historians bring to those choices are experience and skills in the craft of history, knowing how to add reasoning and historicity to intuition and judgement. Sardica (2013, p. 393, drawing on Himmelfarb, 2004) has noted, "… biography ought to be solid in research, judicious but imaginative in interpretation, artistic in the way it presents…." (see also Caine, 2010, pp. 85–97; France & St Clair, 2002; Renders & de Haan, 2014).

If we achieve good biography, then we can enhance the reader's understanding of the life under consideration, and their understanding of the historical and institutional contexts. What the biography can also do that is special, is to bring insights to an epoch or an argument or an institution. The life history of an individual cannot explain the world, but we can see aspects of the individual's world

and so enrich our understanding of that world. The life of Polakov seeks to offer these sorts of insights.

Biography in the History of Management Thought

In scientific management history, the use of biography has been very uneven. Biographies of Taylor abound. Some are what could be called anti-hagiographies, such as those by Wrege and Greenwood (1991) and, particularly, Merkle (1950) and Kanigel (2005). These are thoroughly researched and lively, especially in their distaste for their subject. They offer a contrast and an antidote to Copley's admiring and bowdlerised opus of 500 pages of close detail. Kakar's (1970) curious psychological biography reflects the era when psycho-biographies were favoured. It seeks to take Taylor's achievements back to fundamental psychological issues which influenced his creativity (see also Urwick, 1957).

Of other scientific managers, there have been rather fewer book-length studies. Both Trombley (1954) and Christie (1983) wrote of Cooke, Polakov's mentor and an early colleague of Taylor's. Engineer, Leon Pratt Alford (1934) wrote a long, descriptive biography of his colleague, Gantt, while Cathy Carpenter (2004) sought to offer a rounded picture of Lillian Gilbreth. But that is about the extent of lengthy published biographies. There have been no recent biographies of Horace King Hathaway, Carl G. Barth nor, perhaps most surprisingly, of Harlow Person, long time stalwart of scientific management and Director of the Taylor Society.

There have been numerous dissertations on Gantt, Taylor, and others, but the most useful for this work, was Quigel's dissertation on Harrington Emerson. It offers a fascinating insight into the scientific management of this efficiency engineer and close friend of Polakov's. Emerson was never part of the Taylor Society but was important internationally for diffusion of Taylorism for the workplace and wider society.

There have been numerous journal articles on scientific management which include biographical material in the historical analysis. They include Nyland and Rix (2000) on Mary van Kleeck and Lilian Gilbreth, Nyland, and Heenan (2005) and Bruce (2006) on Henry Dennison, as well as Wren and Bedeian on C. Bertrand Thompson. Alchon's articles on Mary van Kleeck are also useful (Alchon, 1991, 1993). The recent critical article-length biographies of Gibson et al. (2015, 2016, for example) on Lilian and Frank Gilbreth are unusual in putting biography at the center. From this brief overview, it would seem that with a few exceptions, management history scholars have tended to veer away from biography. Yet, given the importance of understanding management thought in the context of its time, perhaps this dearth might be addressed.

Sources for a Biography

The resources available, and then chosen for a biography have a major effect on its structure and direction. In some cases, especially in the last century or so, the subject of the biography has left significant and detailed papers, diaries, drafts, and publications, whereas the research resources for earlier subjects or those with

few personal papers will be much thinner. Research for this book began with a major gap in resources, relative to what is normally expected of a twentieth century subject. There are no evident Polakov papers extant. It seems possible that Polakov had kept and collated his papers – he clearly had a large library and, time and again he propounded the importance of record-keeping. Perhaps his hasty departure from Fairfax Station, Virginia in 1947 meant material was left behind, with some expectation of getting it later.

Despite having married three times, there is little material on Polakov's family, and almost nothing about his wives, Antoinette, who divorced him, or Barbara, who suicided in 1945. His third wife, Yvonne or Savon (Aunt Bobby on some family history files) died in 2012. She had married a total of five times. As her second husband, Polakov appears to rate little in family interests. A picture of Polakov's adopted daughter Catherine as the woman who married Leonard Kuvin is available, but little else.

On the other hand, there is a wealth of other kinds of material. Polakov himself wrote four books and published well over 50 articles, in which insights into the author would often slip through. Further clues as to the tenor of the man came in his contributions in discussions and debates recorded in meetings and published in journals such as *Bulletin of the Taylor Society* (see, e.g., Polakov, 1917), *Industrial Management* (see, e.g., Polakov, 1919, 1920), and *American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) Journal* (see, e.g., Polakov, 1921a, 1921b, 1921c, 1921d). In these publications, Polakov comes across as a confident, knowledgeable and professional commentator. What assist further in understanding Polakov and his contemporaries are the records of debates in professional society meetings which took place after the presentation of a paper (see, e.g., Polakov, 1917; 1920 "Saving the Man"). These offer valuable insights into their subject's personal perspectives and imperatives, for the historian a hundred years on. They can provide a nuanced understanding of who is included and praised, or who is excluded or perhaps damned with faint praise. What helps the historian today is that all these kinds of documents, previously only available in microform or on paper in distant libraries, are now readily accessible through a great range of online scholarly and university sites (all blessings to the archivists who maintain them and make them available).

Perhaps, the most useful insights can be found in correspondence. What characterised the professionals of the first half of the twentieth century was their tendency to write letters to each other in the expectation usually, that they would be delivered in a day or two. They also responded to letters. Indeed the voluminous correspondence files of Cooke, Emerson, and Taylor, for example, leaves scholars wondering how these men ever found time to write articles, develop ideas, undertake consulting or attend meetings. There is no evidence of correspondence between Polakov and Taylor, but the latter certainly knew of Polakov and even requested him, via the medium of Gantt to translate Russian material into English for him.

Further, the correspondence between Gantt and Taylor offers useful material, even beyond an understanding that they maintained cordial and regular correspondence long after there was supposed to be a break in their relationship. Given

the difficulties with the Gantt archives, it is not surprising that there seems to be no correspondence between Polakov and Gantt despite Polakov's evident lifetime admiration for Gantt. Certainly there is nothing of the caliber of Polakov's letters to and from Cooke, although their correspondence ceased after 1933.

Other close correspondents were philosopher, Alfred Korzybski and statistician Ralph Winstead. The expansive collection of Harrington Emerson's papers at Penn State University were helpful, especially his close correspondence with Polakov until just before Emerson's death. All of these letters revealed the sharing of ideas and fears, acknowledged borrowing money or gave or sought advice. In doing so, they provided valuable understanding for a biographer. Other sources of correspondence also proved useful such as the papers of King Hathaway, another core Taylor Society member. The files of the firm Day and Zimmerman contain much correspondence revealing the often intimate and positive relationships within the Taylor Society luminaries.

An unexpected and extremely useful source in understanding Polakov came from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). At its holdings in St Louis, Missouri, NARA have the records of every civilian employee who ever worked for the American government in Official Personal Files. In this respect, I struck gold because not only was Polakov employed, albeit briefly, in the Shipping Board in 1918 but he was then employed on a series of contracts in the 1930s. These not only offer insights into Polakov but also into the ideas of the times. For example we can infer the level of suspicion and perhaps anti-"socialistic" tendencies, in how employment applications are treated. One example is that the Tennessee Valley Authority contacted all NINE of Polakov's referees with extensive questionnaires in 1933, including questions about his "socialistic" tendencies. The referees all answered the questions in their replies, some rather extensively. Most were highly complimentary.

Three other extremely useful primary sources were found in the Hoover Institution archives. The first was a dossier developed by Myers G. Lowman who had dossiers on dozens of public organisations and people, including another Taylor Society member, Mary van Kleeck. The file on Polakov included pictures, newspaper cuttings, and information on recent activities. Other unusual finds, among a wealth of good material, at Hoover were a series of letters from Polakov, and between senior officials about Polakov, in the development of the American Relief Administration plans for the Russian famine of 1920–1922 (see Chapter 3). Another Hoover Institution find was a survey of engineers who had been in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. As one of dozens of such engineers, Polakov completed the survey which again provides a helpful, if somewhat rose-coloured, understanding of what Polakov was trying to convey about his work and about the potential and problems of the Soviet Union.

Just as useful as the dossiers of radical conservatives, were Polakov's FBI papers, revealing as they did their assumptions, their sources and their approaches to surveillance and to ideologies, as well as the intense oversight of "subjects" by Director, J. Edgar Hoover. The final collection of useful primary sources was the papers of the United Mine Workers (UMW) of America which came from several libraries.