Manual labour

Detail from *Labor*, Charles Sprague Pearce (1896).

Manual labour (in British English, **manual labor** in American English) or **manual work** is physical work done by people, most especially in contrast to that done by machines, and to that done by working animals. It is most literally work done with the hands (the word "manual" comes from the Latin word for hand), and, by figurative extension, it is work done with any of the muscles and bones of the body. For most of human prehistory and history, manual labour and its close cousin, animal labour, have been the primary ways that physical work has been accomplished. Mechanisation and automation, which reduce the need for human and animal labour in production, have existed for centuries, but it was only starting in the 19th century that they began to significantly expand and to change human culture. To be implemented, they require that sufficient technology exist and that its capital costs be justified by the amount of future wages that they will obviate.

Although nearly any work can potentially have skill and intelligence applied to it, many jobs that mostly comprise manual labour—such as fruit and vegetable picking, manual materials handling (for example, shelf stocking), manual digging, or manual assembly of parts—often may be done successfully (if not masterfully) by unskilled or semiskilled workers. Thus there is a partial but significant correlation between manual labour and unskilled or semiskilled workers. Based on economic and social conflict of interest, people may often distort that partial correlation into an exaggeration that *equates* manual labour with lack of skill; with lack of any potential to apply skill (to a task) or to develop skill (in a worker); and with low social class. Throughout human existence the latter has involved a spectrum of variants, from slavery (with stigmatisation of the slaves as "subhuman"), to caste or caste-like systems, to subtler forms of inequality.

Economic competition often results in businesses trying to buy labour at the lowest possible cost (for example, through offshoring or by employing foreign workers) or to obviate it entirely (through mechanisation and automation).

Relationship to low skill and low social class

For various reasons, there is a strong correlation between manual labour and unskilled or semiskilled workers, despite the fact that nearly any work can potentially have skill and intelligence applied to it (for example, the artisanal skill of craft production, or the logic of applied science). It has always been the case for humans that many workers begin their working lives lacking any special level of skill or experience. (In the past two centuries, education has become more important and more widely disseminated; but even today, not everyone can know everything, or have experience in a great number of occupations.) It has also always been the case that there was a large amount of manual labour to be done; and that much of it was simple enough to be successfully (if not masterfully) done by unskilled or semiskilled workers, which has meant that there have always been plenty of people with the potential to do it. These conditions have assured the correlation's strength and persistence.

Throughout human prehistory and history, wherever social class systems have developed, the social status of manual labourers has, more often than not, been low, as most physical tasks were done by peasants, serfs, slaves, indentured servants, wage slaves, or domestic servants. For example, legal scholar L. Ali Khan analyses how the Greeks, Hindus, English, and Americans all created sophisticated social structures to outsource manual

labour to distinct classes, castes, ethnicities, or races.[1]


Peasants harvesting crops, by Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel, 17th century

The phrase "hard labour" has even become a legal euphemism for penal labour, which is a custodial sentence during which the convict is not only confined but also put to manual work. Such work may be productive, as on a prison farm or in a prison kitchen, laundry, or library; intrinsically senseless, with the *only* purpose being the effect of the punishment on the convict; or somewhere in between (such as chain gang work, treadwheel work, or the proverbial "breaking rocks"—the latter two of which are almost certain to be economically senseless today, although they sometimes served economic purpose in the preindustrial past).

There has always been a tendency among people of the higher gradations of social class to oversimplify the [partial] correlation between manual labour and lack of skill (or need for skill) into one of equivalence, leading to dubious exaggerations such as the notion that anyone who worked physically could be identified by that very fact as being unintelligent or unskilled, or that any task requiring physical work must (by that very fact) be simplistic and not worthy of analysis (or of being done by anyone with intelligence or social rank). Given the human cognitive tendency toward rationalisation, it is natural enough that such grey areas (partial correlations) have often been warped into absolutes (black and white thinking) by people seeking to justify and perpetuate their social advantage.

Throughout human existence, but most especially since the Age of Enlightenment, there have been logically complementary efforts by intelligent workers to counteract these flawed oversimplifications. For example, the American and French Revolutions rejected notions of inherited social status (aristocracy, nobility, monarchy), and the labour movements of the 19th and 20th centuries led to the formation of trade unions who enjoyed substantial collective bargaining power for a time. Such counteractive efforts have been all the more difficult because not *all* social status differences and wealth differences are unfair; meritocracy is a part of real life, just as rationalisation and unfairness are.

Social systems of every ideological persuasion, from Marxism to syndicalism to the American Dream, have attempted to achieve a successfully functioning classless society in which honest, productive manual labourers can have every bit of social status and power that honest, productive managers can have. Humans have not yet succeeded in instantiating any such utopia, but some social systems have been designed that go far enough toward the goal that hope yet remains for further improvement.

At its highest extreme, the rationalised distortion by economic elites produces cultures of slavery and complete racial subordination, such as slavery in ancient Greece and Rome; slavery in the United States (which was defeated in 1865); or slavery under Nazism (which was defeated in 1945). Concepts such as the Three-fifths compromise and the Untermensch defined slaves as less than human.


Rail track construction, Kansas, 1974

In the middle of the spectrum, such distortion may produce systems of fairly rigid class stratification, usually rationalised with fairly strong cultural norms of biologically inherited social inequality, such as feudalism; traditional forms of aristocracy and monarchy; colonialism; and caste systems (e.g., Apartheid, separate but equal/Jim Crow, Indian caste). One interesting historical trend that is true of all of the systems above is that they began crumbling in the 20th century and have continued crumbling since. Today's forms of them are mostly greatly weakened compared to past generations' versions.

At the lowest extreme, such distortion produces subtler forms of racism and *de facto* (but not *de jure*) inequality of opportunity. The more plausible the deniability, the easier the rationalisation and perpetuation. For example, as inequality of opportunity and racism grow smaller and subtler, their appearance may converge toward that of meritocracy, to the point that valid instances of each can be found extensively intermingled. At such areas of the spectrum, it becomes ever harder to justify efforts that use *de jure* methods to fight *de facto* imbalances (such as affirmative action), because valid instances can be highlighted by all sides. On one side, the cry is ongoing oppression (ignored or denied) from above; on the other side, the cry is reverse discrimination; ample valid evidence exists for both cases, and the problem of its anecdotal nature leaves no clear policy advantage to either side.

Recognizing the potential for skill

A willingness to recognise that manual labour can involve skill and intelligence can take a variety of forms, depending on how it handles multifaceted questions of dignity and (in)equality.

- In its healthier forms, it recognises the dignity and intelligence of blue-collar workers (that is, that those workers as a group have just as much potential for dignity and intelligence, despite the fact that any individual workers may or may not display such traits), and it recognises their civil (and civic) equality with white-collar workers. Yet it simultaneously leaves room in society for meritocracy, allowing both upward and downward social mobility (as a sustainable meritocracy requires).
    - An example of such systems is provided by well-run instances of professional sports teams, because there is a perennial meritocratic turnover of players, coaches, and staff, both within the sport and as input and output through its boundaries, whereby all participants have dignity even though all of the required talents may not exist in each individual. (For example, the talents of the physical therapists, statisticians, elderly coaches, and young adult players are not equal, but they are complementary from a systems engineering perspective.)
- In its more pathological forms, it may only admit that there can *be* a science of manual labour, but not acknowledge or allow adequate social mobility (both upward and downward) between the blue-collar and white-collar classes. On the other hand, and equally pathologically, it may willfully deny the natural differences between individuals, allowing no hope for meritocratic justice, which is not only dispiriting to talented and hard-working people, but also highly injurious to macroeconomic performance.
    - An example of the first pathology is that the earliest forms of applying science to the practical processes of industry and commerce fell victim to an incomplete understanding, as exemplified by Frederick Winslow Taylor's version of the "science of shoveling".[2] Taylor correctly recognised that the physical (athletic) talents for shoveling (on one hand) and the mental talents for analyzing and synthesizing best shoveling techniques and workflows (on the other) often would not coexist in the same person. Some people would have only the first; others, only the second. Therefore, (speaking metaphorically), players usually should not be their own coaches. Unfortunately, Taylor stepped from that valid realisation to envisioning a system of business administration that might easily have failed to filter people into the right roles based on their individual talents (or lack thereof). Taylor's versions of scientific management, had they succeeded in persisting, may well have eventually left some smart people stranded in an underclass (crassly equated with draft animals,[3] which was fashionable at the time) at the same time that it let some incompetent but silver spooned people remain in positions of middle or senior management. Whether Taylor was capable of predicting and preventing that problem is unclear, but it is clear that not all of his imitators and admirers were thus capable.
    - An example of the second pathology are 20th-century variants of communism, such as Leninism and Stalinism.

- Somewhere between the extremes of health and pathology mentioned above are the realities in most developed economies today, where various themes and tendencies are in constant competition, and people disagree on which ones predominate and what actions should be taken (if any) to try to even the balance or reduce the pathologies.

Relationship to mechanisation and automation

Mechanisation and automation strive to reduce the amount of manual labour required for production. The motives for this reduction of effort may be to remove drudgery from people's lives; to lower the unit cost of production; or, as mechanisation evolves into automation, to bring greater flexibility (easier redesign, lower lead time) to production. Mechanisation occurred first in tasks that required either little dexterity or at least a narrow repertoire of dextrous movements, such as providing motive force or tractive force (locomotives; traction engines; marine steam engines; early cars, trucks, and tractors); digging, loading, and unloading bulk materials (steam shovels, early loaders); or weaving uncomplicated cloth (early looms). For example, Henry Ford described his efforts to mechanise agricultural tasks such as tillage as relieving drudgery by transferring physical burdens from human and animal bodies to iron and steel machinery.[4] Automation helps to bring mechanisation to more complicated tasks that require finer dexterity, decision making based on visual input, and a wider variety of intelligent movements. Thus even tasks that once could not be successfully mechanised, such as shelf stocking or many kinds of fruit and vegetable picking, tend to undergo process redesign (either formal or informal) leading to ever smaller amounts of manual labour.

Relationship to offshoring, worker migration, penal labour, and military service

Many of the methods by which socioeconomically advantaged people have maintained a supply of cheap labour over the centuries are now either defunct or greatly curtailed. As discussed and linked earlier, these include peasantry, serfdom, slavery, indentured servitude, wage slavery, or domestic servitude. But motives to get labour cheaply still remain (and always will(?)). Today, although businesses can no longer get away with using (for example) *de jure* slavery, economic competition ensures that they will always try to buy labour at the lowest possible cost or to obviate it entirely (through mechanisation and automation). Various present-day methods of ensuring lowest cost exist, as detailed below.

The first and most basic method is the domestic labour market within one country (or region thereof), in which workers compete with each other for jobs. Within this market, further market segmentation is possible. Businesses try to avoid overtime (when practical). They often try to avoid employing full-time employees (FTEs) in favor of part-time employees (PTEs) or contingent workers (for example, temporary workers, freelancers, cottage workers, contractors (who may have subcontractors), or day labourers), all of which usually entail less obligation for employee benefits (compensation beyond the wages themselves). Agencies tasked with enforcing labour law are supposed to be perennially on guard against the avidity with which employers find clever ways to make people function like FTEs but carry nominal labels as contractors, freelancers, or PTEs (e.g., dishonest worker classification, unpaid overtime). Other avenues of discount labour are the institutions of apprenticeship and cooperative education (including work-study programs), and (relatedly) the informal tradition of the "broke college student who works for peanuts". Here, the low wages are often credibly justified by the inexperience and incomplete training of the worker; but it is also true that such forms of employment always have at least some potential to be "milked dry" by those with the upper hand. For example, there has been a long history of 3rd- through 7th-year apprentices performing valuable, competent work at sub-journeyman rates.

1894 illustration of chain gang performing manual labor

The domestic labour market may also extend beyond "normal" workers to various kinds of employing prisoners (e.g., penal labour, work release). Even military employment, most especially by conscription or other mandatory national service, is a means of employing labour at lowest cost (compared to costlier alternatives such as all-volunteer militaries).

The next step beyond domestic labour markets (within countries) is the global labour market (between countries), in which all workers on Earth compete with each other, albeit via imperfect competition. Differences between regions and countries in standard of living and (relatedly) prevailing wage rates provide a perennial incentive for businesses to send manual tasks to remote workers (via offshoring) or to bring remote workers to the manual tasks (via immigration of foreign workers, whether illegal [undocumented workers] or legal [guest-worker programs codified with work permits). The nature of the work determines its relative degree of geographical transferability; for example, manual assembly work in factories can usually be offshored, whereas tillage and harvesting are anchored to the location of the crop fields. One characteristic of offshoring and worker migration that is especially useful to businesses is that they can provide employers with (fuzzy-boundaried) subpopulations of inexpensive workers without resorting to biological-inheritance-based rationalisations (such as racial slavery, feudalism and aristocracy, or caste-based division of labour). Modern businesses in the global economy are quick to point out that they respect the humanity of their offshore or immigrant workers every bit as much as that of their developed-economy-native workers (which may not be that much, in reality, but *is* equal, and is pretended to be substantial).

Penal labour is an intersection of the low skill/low social class idea (serfs, slaves, wage slaves) and the class-neutral labour-cost reduction idea (offshoring, foreign workers, contingent workers). Like offshoring and guest worker programs, penal labour is an opportunity for businesses to get cheap manual labour without denying the humanity of the workers—and in some cases even seeming civically responsible ("providing second chances to live right and work honestly"). Thus socioeconomic systems, regardless of their capitalist, socialist, or syncretised ideological bases, need to remain vigilant that they resist any tendency toward the overimprisonment of workers, because it could align with the financial interests of businesses, government, or both, stoking the same human mechanisms of specious rationalisation that justified slavery or wage slavery.

Military enlistment (whether conscription, other mandatory service, or volunteer service) shares some similarities with penal labour when viewed from this perspective, in that it may synergistically provide (1) discount labour for a government or its contractors at the same time that it also provides (2) opportunities to the workers or soldiers themselves (for example, more job security, better-quality health insurance, better-quality retirement-savings plans, and/or more educational opportunities [most especially technical training, but sometimes also broader university education as well]). These many benefits cannot accurately be pigeon-holed as all good or all bad. They are inevitably double-edged blades, and must be dynamically managed and monitored to keep them from leaving the healthy range of the spectrum and moving into pathological ranges. For that to succeed, there must also exist some decent level of employment opportunity, compensation, and psychological security in the private sector, especially non–defense community businesses.

Paramilitary, police, and corrections (prison guard) service are other segments of employment that reflect the traits of military service in this respect.

See also

- Automation

- Industrialisation
- Construction worker
- Domestic worker
- Elbow grease
- Laborer
- Mechanization
- Proletariat
- Roughneck
- The Idler (1993)
- The South African Wine Initiative
- Shadow work

References

1. ↑ Khan 2006.
2. ↑ Taylor 1911, pp. 64–75.
3. ↑ Taylor 1911, p. 59.
4. ↑ Ford & Crowther 1922, pp. 26, 204, 278.

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- Taylor, Frederick Winslow (1911), *The Principles of Scientific Management*, New York, NY, USA and London, UK: Harper & Brothers, LCCN 11010339, OCLC 233134. *Also available from Project Gutenberg.*

External links

- Musculoskeletal Disorders
- LaborFair Resources (Fair Labor Practices)