Fordism/Post-Fordism

Concept: Fordism/Post-Fordism

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Description The human landscape of the early twenty-first century owes much of its present character to the production processes now referred to as Fordism and Post-Fordism.

Henry Ford first introduced the continuous-flow assembly line in 1914. This move to the utilization of standardized and interchangeable parts, products, and labour had revolutionary implications beyond the immediate efficiencies desired by the American automobile maker. The assembly line, in deskilling work and worker to create inexpensive and identical commodities, marked the full transition from traditional craft production to an era of mass production in which mastery over the manufacturing process was removed from the hands of the worker. The conveyor belt was accompanied by new rigid methods of labour management which further increased efficiency gains by reducing physical movements to their most basic elements.

The increased productivity and output brought about by these developments required increased demand for goods and allowed for the provision of higher wages and more affordable commodities. In the aftermath of the Great Depression, and working within the context of the welfare state, governments also sought to stimulate aggregate demand by increasing spending to encourage full employment and enacting progressive labour legislation to control labour militancy. The working class enjoyed a significantly higher standard of living as goods that were previously confined to a minority were now produced for an emerging mass market. However, just as the production process involved the imposition of alienating uniformity inside the factory, the exponential growth in ready-made consumer goods presupposed a purchased rather than locally created culture.

The spread of Fordism in the postwar period encompassed work, leisure, factory, and subdivision. In redefining the production and consumption practices of Western society, it became synonymous with a whole way of life experienced during the economic boom lasting until the 1970s.

It was not until the end of the twentieth century that a second transformation in production, facilitated largely by advances in transportation and information technology, forced the disintegration of Fordism in manufacturing and social organization. The spread of just-in-time production methods transformed the factory, and the growth of export processing zones diminished the role of North American and

Western European industrial centres. The increasingly liberalized global market, enacted in international agreements such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), facilitated the rapid movement of goods and capital across borders. Corporations became less tied to national markets and consequently began to withdraw their support for welfare state structures, favouring instead competitive conditions such as lower corporate taxes, relaxed regulatory standards, and looser controls over foreign ownership.

This new regulatory environment encouraged a process of transnationalization in which corporations downsized operations at home and relocated production to locations characterized by lower wages and poor working conditions. Inside the advanced capitalist nations, the reduction in core manufacturing employment led to a process of deindustrialization and rising income disparity. The new "sunrise" sectors were able to take advantage of the high levels of education, automation, and communication to develop smaller and more responsive units focusing on customized manufacturing, information technologies, and service provision.

The centrality of automation, communications, and information technology in the West has provided for a new highly paid class of technicians and managers responsible for the near seamless production and complex flows of Post-Fordism. Production in these areas tends to be characterized by increased worker participation, fluid task assignment, and elastic work schedules. However, in order to achieve the greatest efficiency and flexibility, these sectors have tended to erode job security by utilizing part-time, contract and outsourced labour.

As a social regime, Fordism aimed to increase the quantitative scale of household commodities available on a relatively undifferentiated mass market. Post-Fordism produces a multiplicity of goods and services geared towards the diversification of commercialized cultures and lifestyles. The stress on individuation and innovation has weakened many of the political structures and collective identities constructed within Fordist society, allowing for the emergence of a postmodern culture in which many of the rigid stratifications of class, sex, gender, and race have been replaced by celebrated differences from multiculturalism to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride.

Since the 1970s, the rise of transnational corporations, information technologies, and flexible production have marked a transition to Post-Fordism as a social regime. The reorganization along the lines of an international division of labour and niche consumption is now synonymous with the Western experience of globalization.

Suggested Reading:

Braverman, Harry. 1974. *Labour and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Harvey, David. 1989. *The condition of postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change*. London and Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
