

# Mel van Elteren, Managerial Control of American Workers: Methods and Technology from the 1880s to Today

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[See table of contents](#)

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1955 as Ford's 10,000 retiree, the 65-year old Wolfe, with 30 years in at Ford, told the assembled reporters that he retired because he was "ashamed of my house," and that he hoped to get work at his son's concrete business to supplement his inadequate pension and Social Security income.

Obviously, this is not what we are used to learning about postwar autoworkers. While many scholars have pointed out the extremely limited nature of the Fordist bargain and the categories of workers who rarely shared in its prosperity, Clark has extended that revisionist contribution. No longer can scholars complacently assume that even white working-class male autoworkers experienced nothing but good times, rising incomes, and improved status in these years. *Disrupting Detroit* breaks ground for exciting new research questions and debates in this crucial period of working-class history. Clark himself argues that criticism of the UAW for not taking greater shop-floor control, for example, is premised on the belief that the UAW was able to achieve its goals in this period. Rather Clark, somewhat convincingly, argues the UAW failed to secure its top priority, the stabilization of jobs and pay through a guaranteed annual wage. An obvious question raised by the book is how representative were Detroit's autoworkers of the broader working class? Thomas Sugrue has already demonstrated how deindustrialization affected the city beginning in the 1940s. What were the situations of autoworkers where the plants moved to, be they in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, or California? What about other groups of workers? How much of the oft-cited resentment and backlash of white working-class men stoked by in Nixon's "Silent Majority," ideology stemmed from the gap between the ideology of prosperity and the struggles of their lived experience? While Clark's work is limited in

geographical scope, it should prompt historians of the United States, Canada, and beyond to rethink and re-examine postwar working-class lives.

JEREMY MILLOY

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**Mel van Elteren, *Managerial Control of American Workers: Methods and Technology from the 1880s to Today* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company 2017)**

THE TWENTY-FIRST century workplace is driven by technological change that accelerates at a continually increasing rate. A desire to replace workers through automation while closely controlling and monitoring those who are still on the job is a key modern management objective. Frederick Winslow Taylor, former apprentice and stopwatch denizen, is with workers more than he was at the turn of the twentieth century. A bit of Taylorism is integrated into every GPS monitor on vehicles driven by workers and the countless algorithms used to monitor organizational efficiency. Mel van Elteren describes the historical development of management and technology with the bulk of his analysis on the period since the end of World War II. He has provided readers with a revealing, yet often alarming analysis.

Van Elteren's narrative is often an overview of existing literature on workplace change, and the work that he includes covers a wide swath from Harry Braverman to Peter Drucker. He consequently does not limit himself to just focusing on automation and work rationalization as he proceeds through fourteen chapters of analysis. This book brings new insights to the existing literature on automation and managerial control. For instance, for all of the many books and articles that have talked about the studies done at Western

Electric's Hawthorne Works in the 1920s under the ostensible oversight of Elton Mayo, there is comparatively little discussion of the Harwood studies done by Kurt Lewin in the 1930s and 1940s. Van Elteren shows how Hanover equaled Hawthorne in terms of how it informed the human relations movement. Lewin's work drew criticism, but it is important to note its importance, especially when considering the tendency of modern human resource management to continue to fawn over Mayo.

Van Elteren's main contribution is to build a narrative that spans a long time period. The tangled origins of Japanese management techniques are revealed through references to W. Edwards Deming and the way in which existing American practices such as Ford Motor Company's in-plant employee suggestion programs influenced visitors from Japanese firms. Indeed, van Elteren suggests that the 1980s fixation with Japanese management practices among American managers was misguided. Methods such as lean production were enthusiastically embraced, and not just in manufacturing. The idea of doing more work with fewer people found currency in a range of American industries by the end of the twentieth century, and usually to the detriment of workers.

Management theory was a topic that was principally confined to business and commerce departments prior to the 1950s, and some American corporate executives such as Chester Barnard wrote books and articles on management practice. Management theory became far more professionalized and prevalent after World War II, and thinkers like Drucker and Deming were discussed in popular media. As van Elteren illustrates, the theories promulgated by modern management thinkers appeared with increasing frequency as Management by Objectives (MBO) was supplanted in

popularity by Total Quality Management (TQM). What was not immediately clear with the many management systems that were implemented was that they rested on sophisticated, invasive forms of workplace control. Van Elteren describes the rise in information technology jobs by the 1980s, and the profound impact of computer programming languages like Common Business-Oriented Language (COBOL). His reference to the emergence of Big Data shows how computer systems can now produce unlimited reams of information that become part of the managerial control repertoire.

Van Elteren is clearly conversant with the subject of this book, but he sometimes hews too closely to an analysis of theories and the process of technological change. For example, much more could have been said about how technological change and managerial control were shaped by gender and race. Arlie Russell Hochschild's landmark book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* is referenced, but more such citations would have been welcome. Van Elteren provides examples of workplaces in which workers have a genuine voice in running their organizations, such as Western Electric in the United States and John Lewis in the United Kingdom, but this is largely a discussion of management perfecting methods to ride roughshod over workers. He correctly notes the campaign that management mounted in the 1970s to purge unions from workplaces, but more could be said about how organized labor responded to that threat. On the other hand, the basic answer is that unions did not know how to respond. Van Elteren mentions the failed Quality of Working Life movement (QWL), with which labor initially engaged, and it was confined to a limited range of industries and represents the last time that American corporations even pretended to get along with unions. Labor was still referencing a 1940s labour

relations playbook while management was busy drafting a new set of rules.

This book's relatively minor limitations do not diminish its considerable strengths. *Managerial Control of American Workers* effectively covers a broad topic in an accessible manner. It should in particular find its way on to the syllabi of undergraduate courses on business history, labor history, and the sociology of work. It likely will not be read in undergraduate business programs, even though students and instructors in those programs should be encouraged to pick up a copy of it. That is regrettable as students in business programs would quickly see that Frederick Winslow Taylor and Elton Mayo – possibly two of the biggest intellectual charlatans in American history – are shaping their lives more than Peter Drucker and W. Edwards Deming ever have.

JASON RUSSELL

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**Hanif Abdurraqib, *Never Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to a Tribe Called Quest* (Austin, University of Texas Press 2019)**

IN THIS BOOK, Hanif Abdurraqib explores the personal, political, and cultural impact of the celebrated Queens hip hop group, A Tribe Called Quest. More than a standard biography, Abdurraqib uses the group to comment on the expansive socio-political context in which their music was created. Through a series of essays, Abdurraqib unfolds the history of A Tribe Called Quest while weaving in personal anecdotes to tell a grander narrative on music, race, politics, culture, and relationships.

*Never Go Ahead in the Rain* begins by contextualizing A Tribe Called Quest within the storied history of black music in America. Abdurraqib makes interesting musical connections, noting that A

Tribe Called Quest combined funk and horns in the same way Buddy Bolden mixed ragtime and blues to create jazz. (10) The sounds of A Tribe Called Quest drew on this legacy of black music. They are known for their extensive sampling of jazz records, repurposing another generation's sounds for a new era. (10) One of the tools Abdurraqib employs to reassert the themes he is developing is to recount memories from his childhood. For example, he recalls that hip hop was not always permitted in his home – for a time, rap was taboo – but A Tribe Called Quest was always an exception. (9) They had a unique cross-cultural appeal which Abdurraqib attributes to the warm and vital feeling of their sounds. (9) The fact that they were paying homage to their influences also makes them the ideal subject for this book, allowing Abdurraqib to make his broader commentaries.

The honest and thoughtful analysis of each of A Tribe Called Quest's albums is a notable highlight of the book. These analyses serve as a platform to develop fascinating and perceptive interpretations of the group's music. *The Low End Theory*, the group's sophomore album, is explored through a series of alternating letters addressed to the groups two MCs: Q-Tip and Phife Dawg. In this chapter, Abdurraqib confronts the political meaning of the "low end." For Abdurraqib, the album title refers to the downtrodden – those not heard and those unseen. (58) The political commentary of this album is contextualized within the beating of Rodney King, occurring shortly before the album's release. Like the media attention given to King, which brought to light the struggles of harassment by the police, Abdurraqib feels *The Low End Theory* develops characters that speak to the various ways people try to survive. (58) For instance, in "Everything is Fair", Q-Tip raps about his romantic interest of Miss Elaine, who asks him to sell weed