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Q8(a)

What is Taylorism? Analyze its merits and demerits

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- What is Taylorism? Analyze its merits and demerits
- Keep the analysis within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

- **Taylorism is scientific management:** timed tasks, planning separated from doing, incentive pay.

Merits are higher measured output, faster training, and plant predictability.

Demerits are deskilling, bodily wear, speed-up conflict, and neglect of informal groups.

Braverman and **Marx** read it as expropriation of skill and alienation of the labour process.

Apps and warehouses extend the same logic without always keeping the old industrial wage.

Introduction

- **Taylorism is scientific management as stated by Frederick Winslow Taylor:** the breaking of work into timed tasks, the separation of planning from doing, and the use of incentive pay to enforce the one best way. It reorganised the factory in the early twentieth century and still organises warehouses, call centres, and apps. Merits and demerits belong to productivity and to the worker's skill and body.

Body

What it is

- **Time and motion study** measures each element of a job and sets a standard time.
- Management gathers the craftsman's knowledge into rules, which Harry **Braverman** later called the expropriation of skill.
- A planning office tells the shop floor what to do. The worker executes.
- Differential piece rates reward meeting the standard and punish falling short.
- Henry Ford's assembly line was a related mass-production form, not identical in every detail, but joined in public talk as Fordism.

Merits

- Output per worker rose in many machine shops, which cut unit cost and cheapened some goods.
- Training time for a narrow task fell, which allowed rapid expansion of industrial employment.

- Managerial control made large plants predictable for owners and for some states that wanted standardised munitions and public works.
- Safety rules and rest pauses could be written once tasks were visible, though they were often ignored.
- Later operations research and today's algorithmic scheduling still use the same logic of measured time.

Demerits

- Deskilling reduces the worker to a timed motion, which **Marx** had already analysed as alienation from the labour process.
- The body wears out through repetition. Fatigue and injury are regular, not accidental.
- Conflict rises when the standard is used as a speed-up. Strikes against the stopwatch were part of early labour history.
- The **Hawthorne studies** showed that informal groups and meaning still shape output, which Taylor's isolated individual missed.
- Gender and caste can be built into who gets the timed cheap job and who gets the planning office.
- In the twenty-first century, gig apps revive Taylorism without the stable wage of the classic plant.

Analysis

- Merit is control and measurable productivity for capital and for some cheap consumer goods.
- Demerit is the degradation of work, health cost, and the fiction that the worker is a machine without a group or a politics.
- **Weber's** bureaucracy is the office twin of this shop-floor rationalisation. Merton's trained incapacity appears when the one best way cannot meet a new product.

Judgement

- Taylorism is an efficient tool of domination of labour time. It is not a complete science of work.

Flow diagram

Taylorism -> Time study one best way
Time study one best way -> Higher measured output
Time study one best way -> Deskilling fatigue
Braverman -> Deskilling fatigue
Hawthorne informal group -> Limit of isolated worker

Conclusion

Taylorism is scientific management of timed tasks, separated planning, and incentive control. Its merit is raised measured output and cheap mass goods. Its demerit is deskilling, fatigue, and conflict, which **Braverman**, **Marx**, and Hawthorne each show. The form continues in digital scheduling. Efficiency for the firm is not welfare for the worker.

Facts & figures

F. W. Taylor

Author of The Principles of Scientific Management and of time-study practice in United States plants.

Time and motion study

Measurement of job elements to set a standard time and method.

Braverman

Argued that scientific management transfers craft knowledge to management and degrades work.

Hawthorne studies

Showed that output responds to informal social relations, not only to the stopwatch.

Ford assembly line

Mass-production pacing of tasks, often paired with Taylorism in industrial sociology.

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