

## **Contending Schools of Progressive Management: John R. Commons, Frederick W. Taylor, and the Adversarial Bargaining and Managerial Traditions**

Through most of the first half of the twentieth century the scientific management movement and its institutional home, the Taylor Society, were widely perceived to be key agents of the progressive management movement. By the 1960s this situation had changed markedly, as it had become orthodoxy that Taylorism was an autocratic and dehumanizing approach to management, undifferentiated from that embraced by Henry Ford. This paper builds on recent literature that has sought to explain how this sudden shift in perspective came about (Nyland 1998, Schachter 2002, Nyland and Heenan 2004). To further this goal, we add to the extant literature by examining how the prominent labor economist, John R. Commons, worked to demean and demonize the participatory approach to management advocated by the Taylorist school in the US. We suggest that by so doing, Commons helped lay the foundation for both the adversarial form of industrial relations that characterized the second half of the twentieth century, and the autocratic view of Taylorism that became orthodoxy through this period.

Nyland (1996 & 1998) has detailed how Commons depicted Taylorism as an authoritarian and mechanistic approach to management in the years prior to World War One. Nyland (1996) has also shown that Commons was willing to abuse academic standards to promote this position, a development that contributed to the 1916 suicide of the University of Chicago labor relations theorist, Robert F. Hoxie. Focusing on the period from Hoxie's suicide to the publication of Commons' *Industrial Government* in 1921, this paper further explores Commons' attempts to demean Taylorism and, in so doing, aims to uncover the roots of a tradition in labor and management history that continues to be sustained to this day. This tradition is the omission from the relevant literature of the rapprochement forged between US trade unions and the scientific managers during the First World War and the immediate interwar years. We suggest that after Hoxie's death Commons strove to shape the evolution of the management discourse by urging the Taylorists to supplant their commitment to joint management of the production process by collective adversarial bargaining. When the scientific managers refused to accept this

view and accused Commons of intellectual naivety, he sought to combat their growing influence within management and trade union circles by painting Taylorism as autocratic and mechanistic, linking it to socialism and un-Americanism, and advocating it had been superseded by his adversarial approach. We suggest Commons' views regarding the scientific management movement are important, because they informed the positions of many New Deal labor relations theorists and practitioners as to what was a reasonable compromise between the demands of labor and capital. Furthermore, Commons' views helped ensure that when the Cold War warriors turned on left-liberal management analysts and practitioners from the late 1940s onwards, their attention was drawn to the scientific management movement.