



**ARCHITECT OR BEE? THE HUMAN/
TECHNOLOGY RELATIONSHIP**

Mike Cooley

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**LIVING THINKWORK: WHERE DO
LABOUR PROCESSES COME
FROM?**

Mike Hales

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The major themes of *Architect or Bee?* will be familiar to anyone who has kept even minimally abreast of ideas arising from the British labour movement over the last decade, especially those that bear on the nature and future of technical work. Cooley's book is in fact a collection of some of his speeches and articles, all of them marked by a distinctive synthesis of his socialist commitment and theory and his experience as an industrial designer. The sayings and concrete examples by means of which Cooley has focused the attention of many individuals and groups — workers, trade unionists and

others — are here in plenty. On technical advance: 'We have senior automotive engineers who sit in front of computerised visual display units "working interactively to optimise the configuration" of car bodies to make them aerodynamically stable at 120 mile an hour when the average speed of traffic through New York is 6.2 miles an hour. It was in fact 11 mph at the turn of the century when vehicles were horsedrawn'. And on technology, human needs and waste, he sharply counterposes the almost 7 million people who live in semi-slums in Britain to the fifth of a million people who have worked in the building industry who are unemployed. Production for social use is close to Cooley's heart, and problematic as the concept of 'use' may be, he has no difficulty in demonstrating that the present production system does not operate to fulfill many peoples' needs.

Again and again Cooley stresses that 'Science and technology is not neutral': it is not neutral in terms of the products that it yields and nor in terms of its application to work and working conditions. 'The historical tendency', he tells us, is 'to deskill *all* work' — including, he says to his fellow technical workers, *yours*. Many of those interested in the labour process might want to question the view that there is a ubiquitous tendency for jobs to be deskilled, but there is much to be said for judging the book in its own terms. It is a useful, critical and socially concerned introduction to technology and the labour process, the various parts of which it is good to have on paper and between two covers.

Cooley's vision, then, is one in which all jobs are deskilled and in which, in the most sophisticated intellectual work, even 'the natural biological process of growing old is now to be treated as a crime which must be economically penalised' (so, for some, it's not a matter of 'too old at 40', but of too old

at 23). Cooley has no doubt that the actual work content and the more or less immediate control function of scientists and technicians *via-a-vis* direct production workers are deeply enmeshed in capitalist social relations (he adds the now familiar point about the USSR, 'scientific management' etc). However, increasingly, he sees scientists, technological and professional workers to share a common plight with manual ones, and a common interest in a future society in which they too can fully engage, live out their potential and contribute usefully. The Lucas Corporate Plan, with which of course Cooley has himself been intimately engaged, does not figure large in this book, which is something of a disappointment, as is the omission of a clear statement of what Cooley sees to be its limits and possibilities. Rather his stress is on the lessons that such a Plan can teach, and on how the 'feel' and formal scientific knowledge of technical and other workers can potentially be fulfilled in socially useful production — though the relation between these groups of workers is not spelt out here.

Whatever the limits of the Lucas Plan, Cooley is trying to push *something* forward.

Hales is trying too, but his is a very different book. 'A very personal book' he calls it, and it is. At the bottom of Hales' theoretical contribution, however, for part of the book contains such, is the notion of 'pre-conceptualisation'. This is an impressive enough term to get across the way in which 'thinkworkers' (process design engineers etc) structure the work-world and consciousness of process (and other) workers, so that it takes on the appearance of a technically ordained and eternal reality over which, in the absence of considerable effort, they have little purchase. How this happens is worth spelling out in detail, even if it should come as no surprise except, as Cooley bluntly puts it in his book, to those who have 'no understanding of the manner in which scientists and technologists are used as mere messenger boys of the multinational corporations whose sole concern is the maximisation of profits.'

The performance of the labour of pre-conceptualisation constitutes, in its consequences, a fetter and a threat to the working class. Yet, as Hales argues, how socialism can be won in industrialised countries without the working class *and* 'thinkworkers'

working at it together is hard to see. That this working together can be very hard to achieve as well, hardly needs spelling out here. Is it not, for example, a common criticism of alternative plans like the Lucas one that manual and clerical workers are relatively uninvolved? And what became of the ICI shop stewards' paper *ChemCo News*, the origins of which Hales describes and which he helped to develop as part of his own attempt to resolve theory and practice and bridge the thinkworker/working class divide? Perhaps rather than dwell on the negative aspects, though, we should remember that the 1970s did bring some new initiatives. And as for Hales' self-reported blindness and naivety as a creamed-off working class lad, with a first class degree and a PhD in operational research, who discovered socialism late, went back to ICI as an OR specialist to put his socialist theory into capitalist practice, and got the sack — well, as for Hales, there's not only a cruel lesson to be learnt from him, also a sign that the 'messenger boys' sometimes read between the lines of the messages they are paid to deliver, and sometimes want to re-write them.

Theo Nichols