What was so great about Harry Braverman? The question, obviously rhetorical, elicits a predictable response in academic circles, where the author of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) is deservedly praised for a text that christened the emerging field of labour process studies. Braverman’s book was rigorous in its conceptualisations, sufficiently abstract to present an argument that reached beyond particularities into generalised, universal experience and historical and empirical enough to sustain an analysis meant to be received across disciplinary boundaries. Moreover, it bridged the academic and activist worlds of left scholarship and practice, a breeze of fresh interpretive air that reinvigorated intellectual sensibilities and revived the study of the work process in fields such as history, sociology, economics, political science and human geography. One of the 50 or so most important studies produced in the third quarter of the 20th century, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* earned its author a remarkable reputation that, sadly, he never lived to enjoy.

Authors of great books, having scored the music which rings in the collective ear of generations of readers, inevitably face a cacophony of criticism, some very good, some quite indifferent and some irritatingly bad. Braverman soon faced an avalanche of revisionist study, much of which was written to displace his analysis by showing that somewhere, somehow, some group’s historical engagement with the work process stepped outside the general boundaries developed in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. In the end, such studies remain, for the most part, mere footnotes to the edifice of labour process studies, the foundation of which has been, for almost a quarter-century, Braverman’s book. Written by the director of a small, independent left press, Monthly Review, an author with next to no university training and no disciplinary, scholastic axe to grind, consciously scaffolded on an argument that generalised capitalist experience in order to better sustain the perspectives needed to build a socialist

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1 Braverman 1974.
2 Brief comment on Braverman can be found in Wald 1987, p. 298, and Breitman 1976, p. 12.
society, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* was, and remains, a deep irony. As a powerfully influential academic text that made its mark on tens of thousands of students and instructors, Braverman’s book made an intellectual splash and has remained an important study used in many classrooms and read widely outside the university. Yet it would almost certainly have been rejected by any university press to which it was submitted in the early 1970s.

My task is thus a modest one, rooted in humility and respect for who Harry Braverman was and what he accomplished. I cannot lecture anyone on any theme that even gestures towards the pretence of going ‘beyond Braverman’. I have no inclination of suggesting some deep structure of interpretive reciprocity, in which exercises in textuality will bring Braverman into line with the fashionable ‘critical theory’ icons of our time. My purpose is much more mundane – embarrassingly so, since it is not particularly theoretical at all, but is, rather, unashamedly political. I want to address what was great about Harry Braverman. And to do that I offer only a sketch of a life ‘before Braverman’, commenting on a man some will know as Harry Frankel.

Harry Braverman, like so many of his generation, came to radicalism in the Great Depression. ‘Socialism and Marxism were in the air’, he recalled 40 years later. ‘Capitalism was putting on a pretty bad performance’. Born in 1920, the son of a shoemaker, he aspired to a college education but the pinch of hard times and the pressures on the family economy forced his father to terminate his enrolment in Brooklyn College after one brief year. As Irving Howe and a host of others have suggested, the New York public-college scene was perhaps the nation’s most fertile seedbed of radical ideas in the 1930s, but Braverman ended up in a particular current of the oppositional stream. His choice was to be a minority within a minority, and he aligned himself not with the Popular-Frontist Communist Party but with the Young People’s Socialist League (*YPSL*). The ‘Yipsels’ were a rare phenomenon: associated with the Socialist Party, they were nevertheless an almost autonomous entity, much more than the youth wing of the older, established party apparatus. Having gone through a series of radicalisations and reorganisations, including voting to join the Communist movement in 1919, the Yipsels were in particular current of the oppositional stream. Led by the iconoclast agitational firebrand Albert Weisbord in the early 1920s, the *YPSL* lost its leader to the CP and its political moorings

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4 Howe 1982, pp. 61–89.