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Rediscovery of the Labour Process

Forthcoming in Stephen Edgell, Heidi Gottfried & Edward Granter (eds.) *Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Work and Employment*

“Despite the fact that the labor process is a conception of work devised by Marx in the nineteenth century (Marx 1970–1887: 177), it was not used very much for studies of work until taken up by left activists in twentieth century. It was subsequently developed for use by radicalised academics in Britain and the USA by the early nineteen seventies. Thus, LPT had actually reached a high level of intellectual development well before it was used in research and findings based on it were given any exposure to academic audiences.” (Stephen Ackroyd, 2009: 264)

“While Labour Process Analysis has Marxist origins (Braverman 1974/1998; Thompson 1983/1989), it has evolved, since its emergence in the latter half of the 1970s, into a tradition that now encompasses Marxist, post-Marxist, neo-Weberian, and other materialist–pluralist perspectives on the capitalist labour process (Jaros 2010; Thompson and Newsome 2004).” (Paul Brook, 2013: 334)

Introduction

This chapter will examine what a labour process is; what a labour process perspective is; and how labour process theory developed into what Ackroyd (2009) has called ‘normal science’, a community of scholars and researchers sharing an agreed set of ideas. It will show how this community is developing (growing and fragmenting), and how ideas as to what constitutes labour process theory are also evolving – drawing in new theories, tightening the definition of what labour process theory is (Thompson, 1990) and what a focus on the production process can and can’t do by way of explaining trends in capitalism at a global level (Thompson, 2003; 2013).

I should declare an interest. I engaged with the most influential text on labour process theory, Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, as a sociology undergraduate in the 1970s and critically examined what Braverman had to say about skills and white collar workers for my PhD thesis (Smith, 1987) with a supervisor closely linked to Marxist studies of work and the writings of Braverman, Theo Nichols - see Nichols and Armstrong (1976); Nichols and Beynon (1977); and Nichols (1979). I have used labour process theory (LPT) to explore the development of mass production in the UK confectionary industry (Smith et al 1990); the transfer of Japanese work organisation to the UK and elsewhere (Elger and Smith, 1994; 2005); the development of factories for global production in China (Smith, 2003; Ngai and Smith, 2007); the development of new categories of white collar (Smith et al 1991) and creative workers (McKinlay and Smith, 2007). Together with Paul Thompson, author of *The Nature of Work*, a book that has attracted almost 900 citations, I have produced several evaluations of labour process theory. From our long friendship and intellectual and practical commitment to the annual *International Labour Process Conference* (ILPC), we have been part of the

debate on the application of labour process ideas to contemporary developments in work within globalised capitalism (Smith & Thompson, 1992; 1998; Thompson & Smith, 2000; 2009; 2010). I have attended all but one of the 33 ILPCs and have been active in organising and publishing from the conference from its early days. I have produced overviews on the labour process (Smith, 1996a) and Braverman (Smith 1996b), which I will refer to in this chapter. Therefore I come to this chapter, with a certain standpoint.

The Labour Process

The concept of the labour process is taken from Marx's political economy and refers to purposeful activity in which a natural object or raw material is transformed into a useful product which satisfies a human need. The labour process is a transformation process – a conversion movement whereby the labour power of the worker enters a production process in which labour is realised to produce a concrete commodity or service which contains a use and exchange value (and surplus value that the employer or capitalist takes as reward). What Marx (1976: 284) called the 'simple elements of the labour process' consist of human labour, the object on which work is performed, instruments or tools and a purpose or goal.

All political economies or modes of production have labour processes – feudalism, slavery and capitalism for example. Different modes of production create different labour processes, involving distinct ways of combining human producers, instruments, raw materials and purposes. Tools and raw materials can be owned in common or privately; producers can be free to move from employer to employer or enslaved and coerced; they can be skilled or dedicated to one process in a complex production system. The purpose of production can be co-operative, to create useful goods for a whole group or society to share. It can equally be personal, producing for family subsistence. Or, as in the case of capitalism, it can be organised for private need, to satisfy the owner of the instruments of production, raw materials and finished product. Marx was primarily concerned with analysing the capitalist labour process, and currently the mode of production currently dominant in the world, the capitalist production system, remains central to labour process writing. However, there are many forms of capitalist labour processes – and with the expansion of commodity production to all kinds of human need, labour processes, such as sex work, human reproduction, body adornment and other personal services are becoming subject to market discipline and accumulation pressures and becoming more standardised as labour processes (Wolkowitz, 2006; Wolkowitz et al, 2013).

In capitalism the continual expansion of production – driven by the motive of making profit - takes the form of the accumulation of capital – challenging limits or boundaries, and political or economic controls – in a blind, restless and endless search for expansion on an ever extending scale. The labour process is the production process and is one, but the critical, moment, in cycle of capital accumulation. Without a transformation process which produces commodities the capitalist firm would have no goods or services to sell in the market place and no basis for further capital accumulation.

The capitalist seeks to get a financial return on investments and generate more value from workers than is returned in the form of wages. The main methods to increase the amount of labour going to capital is to extend worker's time at work or to increase or intensify their productivity within the same time, by using machinery, applying science to production, or using organisational strategies to

change the balance of returns on the labour process. A detailed division of labour appeared with the movement of workers into factories and out of the putting-out or cottage system, where the labour process was under the direct control of producers. In Marx's time the factory system brought workers and the labour process under the direct control of the industrial capitalist, and facilitated a more rapid accumulation of capital, by permitting a systematic, self-conscious or scientific analysis of the labour process and ways and means of enhancing labour productivity for capital. It allowed the reconstitution of handicrafts into detailed discrete tasks co-ordinated and controlled by the capitalist, not the craft worker. The worker became 'a mere living appendage' to the machine (Marx 1976: 548).

While the movement from cottage industry to factory production was a productivity and control transformation for industrial capitalism, it would be wrong to consider this a historical movement. Today having working at home (or anywhere with internet connection) has been part of a cost reduction strategy of today's capitalists, where contemporary technologies, especially ICTs, can put-out or disaggregate production and producers into new cottage systems, and draw in labour from across borders and temporal zones, thus ensuring continuous production, often in civil society and from workers on the move, and at a higher productive performance than in a fixed centres like an factory or office (Felstead, & Jewson, 2000; 2012). Scholz (2012) discuss the 'the shifting sites of labour markets' and the reinforcing of free (unwaged) labour with the growth of the internet and related work (see Gandini, 2014 for the case of Milan). In developing countries 'factories in the living room' are common (Hsiung, 1996). The cottage industry or putting-out system has also been revitalised with the internet, as distributive service work, can create virtual factories composed of workers who only meet on line, and employers that contract labour services without building a bureaucracy or firm as was common to many industries in the last century (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013; Huws, 2013; Fuchs, 2014).

Control is the major theme in the labour process literature. Whether through a catalogue of the various 'means' of management control or the historical evolution of employer's control strategies (Edwards, 1979; Storey, 1985) it is argued that management is synonymous with labour control. Taylorism had as its *raison d'être* managerial control over workers movement and skill. Fordism, through the assembly line, introduces a technology aimed at indirectly pacing and controlling the action of workers. Control in the labour process focuses attention towards working environments in which there is low trust, coercion, limited worker responsibility and a generally directed and regulated working environment. Braverman assumed this was the primary arena of social relations within all societies in the era of monopoly capitalism. However, post-Braverman labour process writing focused on both the themes of compliance and consent, suggesting that employers may more productively use labour power by engaging with it rather than controlling it. Groups of relatively autonomous workers, who are increasing as manual labour declines in certain parts of the world economy, either cannot, will not or do not need to be tightly controlled. Indeed rigid control is expensive and can be counter-productive. This does not mean the end of managerial control as some claim (Raelin, 2011). Rather, appeals to professional values, creativity, career, good will or trust are deemed more suitable methods of translating the capacity of skilled and professional workers into labour effort and value.

Main concepts in labour process analysis

1. **Labour Power** – a special commodity being part of the whole person of the worker and what is sold – a worker’s labour time.

2. **Control imperative** – due to the absence of consensus on how much labour is extracted from workers through the labour process, the purchaser of labour power must seek the means to control this process – which can only ever be partially accomplished, as control is not absolute. The means of control can be through institutional norms of joint interests, technological controls, bureaucratic rules or self-management. Whatever the means, there is always a control imperative in the labour process.

3. The **labour process is one moment** in the cycle of commodity production. Before entering production labour power must be reproduced and hired; a commodity is produced and circulated and exchanged, before the money earned can re-enter the cycle of commodity production. Kelly (1986) looked at the labour process in relationship to product and money cycles.

4. **Technology/tools** – instruments of labour can be hand-held, powered or automated; technology is ‘fixed capital’; it can be owned by the capitalist firm or society; and concentrated in special places – factories or offices for example – or distributed throughout society through ‘mobile technologies’ such as smart phones, tablets and computers.

5. **Purpose of production** – there is always a reason for bringing labour processes together, and these purposes are the drivers of production, whether for ends that are collective, public, or for private accumulation of wealth.

6. **Spatial divisions of labour:** largely absent from Marx and Braverman’s discussion of the labour process was the spatial distribution of production and elements of the labour process – including workers. Increased geographical movement of labour and capital, can create what Harvey (1982) called a ‘spatial fix’, that capital can utilise in bargaining with governments and employees, that is movement or threat of closing workplaces in one country or locality can be used to bargain with states and workers’ representatives, such threats often extracting concessions on working conditions and wages. Such threats are only possible because of the spread of the capitalist system geographically and the opening-up of new territories for expansion and re-location. At a macro level countries compete for Foreign Direct Investment and this can mobilise the distribution of ‘human resources’ by institutions like local authorities and schools to serve the demands of new entrants (see Smith and Chan, 2015). ‘Space’ is therefore an important element of management control and a factor of production – see also Harvey (1982), Massey (1995), Peck (1996) and McGrath-Champ et al (2010) who elaborate on the implications for the labour process of a more fluid understanding of space as resource for capital, and mobility as a resource for labour. All explore how labour markets develop alongside spatially embedded social and political institutions.

7. **Conflict** is at the centre of the relations between employers and workers as a structured interest antagonism, in other words something not contingent upon the subjective attitudes of either side. Marx forces us to consider the fundamental power imbalance between labour and capital – capital needs labour to expand; but labour needs capital to survive, and starvation and fear

can be the whip that keeps waged labour at work. The collective power of labour, both structural and associative (Wright, 2000) is different for capital, which can move through different forms and store itself (in money) in different places (in housing property which is never used but held as exchange value in cities like London for example). As noted below labour power is embodied and cannot be transformed in the same way as capital which is an object, as well as subject. Although Marx, following Adam Smith, saw labour power as ‘variable capital’ (see below) it is important to note the substantive structural differences between both labour and capital. As a recent discussion by Hodgson (2014) notes, capital is money or a deposit external to the individual and in this sense “‘human capital’ can only be collateral if the humans involved are slaves. ‘Social capital’ can never be used as collateral and it is not even owned.” This strict definition of capital does miss its’ symbolic, emotional and status elements, which are part of the way it is represented beyond material form. But labour power cannot be stored or transformed - at least only in the short-run – while in moving within and outside one’s country to work is always a possibility – controls on labour flows are greater than on capitals flows (Sassen, 1988) and migrant and illegal workers are always more vulnerable to super-exploitation (Anderson, 2010; 1013).

8. **Capitalism** – forms, trends, transitions and dynamics. Capitalism is historically the most dynamic production system, but it is difficult to plot a linear trend to the development of the labour process in capitalist societies. Edwards (1979) saw control cycles evolving through contradictions of conflicts between labour and capital, but more recently control has not been conceived in zero-sum or replacement terms, but as coexisting and multiple forms (Thompson & Hartley, 2007). As new countries are pulled into global capitalism, ‘old forms’ can be revised; or new technologies, allow renewal of old systems. Informalisation and the expansion of self-employment during the recession means decline in waged labour formally managed/controlled through the firm’s bureaucratic hierarchy, and the rise of contractors, self-policing and control: “... developing economies are marked by the existence of an overwhelmingly large volume of economic activities that fall within what is described as the informal sector. It is an economic space in which workers engage in economic activities in ways that are very different from the capitalist organisation of production. In particular, the prevalent form of labour in the informal sector is self-employment, which is different from the usual wage-based employment resting on the alienation of labour from capital” (Sanyal & Bhattacharyya, 2009: 35). Informal working is now being researched more thoroughly in developed economies (Williams & Nadin, 2012).

9. **Labour process and labour markets.** Radical labour economists saw the labour market possessing divided, dual or segmented forms (Peck, 1996), and explored how different social categories of labour relate to these differentiated positions in the labour process and labour market (Friedman, 1977; Gordon, Edwards and Reich, 1982). Writers continue to explore the connection between the labour market, social networks and labour process, examining the development of new informalities and old labour forms (Kalleberg, 2009), for example the return of gang labour in the UK (Strauss, 2013) or the growth of third parties, such as employment agencies, in employment relationship (Enright, 2013; Fudge and Strauss, 2013).

Labour power and labour mobility

Thomson and Smith (2009) in a review of the field of industry sociology stressed the centrality of the concept of ‘labour power’ to labour process theory. Workers in capitalist society sell labour power

for a wage. But the commodity 'labour power', which the individual owns and sells, has some unusual characteristics. Labour power is what Polanyi (1944) called a *fictive commodity*. It is not produced for the market or originated through a production process. Its expansion and quality, therefore, cannot be adjusted quickly in response to market pressures or even related to a market mechanism (Offe, 1985). Waged labour appeared when producers in other production systems – peasants and artisans – were dispossessed of their means of production, and compelled to sell their labour power as their only means of trade. Capitalism interacted with feudalism, slavery and colonialism – there was not a simple transformation, but a long coexistence (Rockman, 2010) - and it absorbed the labour from these systems, either as core or surplus reserve army, ready to move into production in times of expansion, or conflict. Capitalism continues to expand around the globe, and reserves of potential labour power have been created to join the global system in new and shocking forms of labour process control (such as the dormitory labour regime in China (Smith, 2003) or the labour compound system in Africa (Bezuidenhout, & Buhlungu, 2011). But not all are absorbed – millions of people exist in penury subsistence, starvation, desperate to enter formal exploitation that waged labour offers (Sanyal, 2007)

While other commodities typically have a single use value, labour power possesses flexibility and plasticity, which Marx called 'variable capital': the use value of labour power varies enormously through a division of labour across the class of workers, diversity within one workers' working lifetime and critically, variability within the working day when hired by the employer. The worker needs a use value in order to enter labour process; the capitalist hires a skill, talent or expertise from the worker in exchange for wages, and from which the capitalist aims to produce surplus value by which to accumulate more capital and ensure the expansion and reproduction of their business and capitalism as a system – although the relationship between the individual capitalist and the whole system is contradictory.

Although Marx sometimes noted that labour power is the 'property' of the worker – as noted above - it is different from capital (which has objective multiple identities independent of the capitalist) because labour power is part of 'the person of the worker'. In other words, labour power possesses what can be called *embodiment* and as such workers or sellers of labour power come in different bodies – by gender, age, nationality, ethnicity, skill, region etc. – and this differentiation makes uniting labour power into collectives harder, and the management of labour more particular and problematic.

Another significant feature of labour power is its capacity to generate more value than the costs of its reproduction. Labour power enters the labour process embodied, as a capacity of human beings, and must be extracted (alienated and objectified) through a work system with a variety of managerial control tropes, which are ever evolving as capitalism ages and expands globally (Thompson, 2010; 2013). The costs of reproduction can vary historically and cross-nationally – Marx noted these contingencies and how they affect the price of labour power.

Labour power is human and therefore has volition and a social history, gender, attitude, personality and other standpoint signifiers. The purchasing of labour power is also different from buying machines (fixed capital) or other goods bought through a simple sales contract. A employment contract by which labour power is introduced into the labour process is open-ended in the terms of exchange, although wages are normally agreed in advance, but the work to be performed is kept

variable, and subject to the discretion/authority of the capitalist or equivalent, within common norms of fairness. Marx understood the creation of free wage labour as a transformational capitalist process of labour commodification – whereby workers that are historically created through class struggle who are doubly free: free to sell their labour power to the capitalist of their choice (they are not slaves); but free from other forms of ownership (of the means of production or other systems or assets of production, such as land) such that to avoid destitution they are compelled as a class of workers to put their labour power onto the labour market and into a labour process in order for it to be realised and value to be generated to give a wage return.

Conflict is part of capitalism because of the problematic of labour power, whereby the employer cannot access the commodity purchased, labour power in the form of labour time, without going through the person of worker. This is the basis of conflict; especially because there is no stable agreement between worker and employer over the quantity and quality of labour power that can be expended in a given period – this is a constantly changing equation given: competition between capitals; competition between workers as owners of labour power; the representatives of employers, and workers; the conflict between dead and living labour (technology and people). In capitalism there is a dynamic and constant striving after new ways of extracting extra labour power through employers' strategies of different types (deskilling, upskilling, automation, movement of capital, substitution of labour, industrial engineering, ideological or hegemonic struggles over identity/culture/values and many other means). There is within this conflict, a requirement for consent, as formally capitalism requires free exchange between workers and capitalists, where formal freedom to quit, protest and resist, are often legally enshrined in rules of exchange. But this does not mean coercion, domination and oppressive relations do not continue to be part of capitalism, or that politics is not involved in this economic exchange.

Struggles between labour and capital can be around use values of workers – the skills required to producing surplus value – and higher skills can mean higher productivity, but also higher costs, and levels of skills of workers (the use values workers possess and sell) are important for both workers and employers. While Braverman judged capitalism to possess a 'degradation imperative', whereby high value skills are replaced by low value ones; in practice this is one tendency, among several, more contingent than absolute.

Struggles over working time have long been part of the narrative of employer-worker engagement, with societal and political struggles part of this story, from the 10 hours movement in the 19th century, to the introduction of the 35 hour week in France, to zero-hours contracts in the UK, and annualised hours increasingly part of the debate around time in work. In abstract, workers are selling their time – they are 'merchants of time' – and there will always be debates around how this time is used (the intensity of labour) and for how long (the extensiveness of labour). In annualised hours, there is abstraction of working hours, from the standard punctuation of everyday time – by days, weeks and months - into a more remote yearly cycle. This is part of the abstraction of working time from the regular intervals of social life (Heyes, 1997; Rubery, et al 2005; Arrowsmith, 2007).

Struggles around rewards - the terms of exchange – for what wages workers get for their 'effort bargain' with employers – is central to workers interests and interest group representation on both sides of the collective bargaining relationship. Struggle around the content of work – what is to be done, how workers are directed and the scope for autonomy and self-management.

Struggles around the body (Wolkowitz 1986; Wolkowitz and Warhurst, 2010) and the inclusion and exclusion of certain 'body types' (aesthetics of labour, see Warhurst et al 2000) or the strength or gender of bodies (see Cockburn, 1983 on the issue of masculinity and technical change in the printing industry); and race of bodies (see Roediger and Esch (2012) for a history of race and work in US management). All these examples mean that although the capitalist purchases a common asset 'labour power', this always comes in particular or *embodied* forms, and there is a valuation placed on certain bodies by the employer or customer or worker.

Control and consent run through the employment relationship or exchange relations, but with great historical, cyclical and societal variations (see Jacoby, 1998 for the US story). Economic interests of workers and employers are structured in terms of conflict and cooperation. Wider collective, non-economic interests attach themselves to the employment relation to regulate supply and demand of labour, as well as the terms and conditions of exchange. The evolution of capitalism as a system has witnessed the creation of powerful trade unions, employers' associations, political parties, welfare states and civil society agencies representing interests of the different parties. Education, in the form of vocational training, has expanded and grown independently from company-centred training, to deliver benefits of skilled labour as a public good, with an economic return to society, the trained worker, and the employer. Education, especially when vocationally orientated, straddles worker, employer and state interests. Both workers and employers seek to manage the labour power that is sold and hired.

Thus within capitalism, the market, or competition between capitals and between workers, acts to distribute labour to capital and capital to labour. In neo-classical economic theory, the market functions without the need for the state. In practice, both labour and capital appeal to the state to expand their 'realm of freedom' — controls over the mobility power of labour and controls over the mobility power of capital. Given that labour power is not a commodity, but does face external pressures of commodification, there is always a societal or social dimension to the reproduction and circulation of labour power.

Harry Braverman and *Labor and Monopoly Capital*

Harry Braverman (1920-76) is widely regarded as developing interest in the labour process through what became known as the 'deskilling thesis' in his classic work *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974). Its 40 years since the publication of *LMC* which has not been out of print, and has attracted 12000 citations (Google Scholar) and continues to gain 400 plus citations per year and remains *Monthly Review Press* biggest seller. *LMC* has sold over 200,000 copies in English, the bulk sales occurring in 1976-1980, but average sales in English remain high. It has been translated into Italian, Spanish, Japanese, Portuguese, French, Swedish, German, Dutch, Greek, Norwegian, Serbo-Croatian among others. Building on Marx's writing about the 'labour process' in Volume 1 of *Capital* Braverman set out to critically analyse the degrading effects of technology and scientific management on the nature of work in the twentieth century. Principally, he suggested that the drive for efficient production is also a drive for the control of workers by management. Managerial control is achieved through monopolising judgement, knowledge and the conceptual side of work, and concomitantly excluding workers from control and ownership of knowledge and skill acquisition. For Braverman, the expansion of capitalist work in the twentieth century was one of work *degradation* - as knowledge is systematically removed from direct producers and concentrated in the hands of management and

their agents. This leads to the impoverishment and debasement of the quality and experience of labour, both for manual and mental workers, who are condemned to execute only the routine and conceptually depleted tasks in the service of capital. Expressed simply, Braverman said:

‘The ideal organization toward which the capitalist strives is one in which the worker possess no basic skill upon which the enterprise is dependent and no historical knowledge of the past of the enterprise to serve as a fund from which to draw on in daily work, but rather where everything is codified in rules of performance or laid down in lists that may be consulted (by machines or computers, for instance), so that the worker really becomes an interchangeable part and may be exchanged for another worker with little disruption’ (Braverman 1994: 24-25).

It can be argued that “Braverman ... single-handedly caused a major upset by insisting on viewing work as a labor process, so placing the fact that work contributes centrally to processes of accumulation that are specifically capitalist back at the center of attention” (Ackroyd, 2009: 265). Braverman is linked with revitalising and expanding Marxist analysis of work. He proposed a radically different interpretation of the history of management writing on work organisation from that offered in contemporary organisation behaviour or management textbooks. In both, management ideas evolve as a progressive revelation of more enlightened forms, from Taylorism to Human Relations to work enrichment, job re-design and knowledge management. Braverman considered management to be animated by a single logic – the desire to control work and the worker by reducing the autonomy that flows from worker’s possession of skills and knowledge. Management, for Braverman, is primarily considered negatively, as an agent for controlling the worker.

Scholarly impact of Labor and Monopoly Capital

Braverman’s death in 1976 two years after the appearance of *LMC* gave the debate around the labour process a slightly unreal inflection. Because Braverman was not around to either respond to critics or apply the ideas within *LMC* to new circumstances as work in capitalism changed, *LMC*, became artificially frozen as text, providing a target that couldn't answer back and an icon for the faithful to venerate. *LMC* was rapidly codified into a few catch phrases, such as the 'deskilling thesis', for an army of PhD students to examine. In the UK for example, there have been around 120 PhDs on the topic of the labour process since the publication of *LMC*.

<http://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do?jsessionid=9B7F1D3F55CC7235D5C7EFFFFF8C1087>

Across North America, Europe, Japan and Australia many hundreds of students studied Braverman and the labour process debate that developed, especially from the 1980s.

Initially writers responded to Braverman's agenda. This agenda was broad – including the expansion of capitalism and growth of waged labour in the US; the expansion of white collar workers; the role of the state in capitalist society and the reserve army of labour. Many of these themes were lost as the debate on the labour process developed post-*LMC*. The main themes that were taken forward were management control, deskilling and Taylorism – in other words a narrow set of concerns, isolated from monopoly capitalism, the giant firm, the labour market and the state.

We can also classify reactions to *LMC* in terms of those stressing how Braverman neglected certain themes - subjectivity (see chapters in Knights and Willmott 1990; and Thompson and Smith, 2010 for

a review); consciousness and agency (Burawoy, 1979); resistance (Edwards, 1986; 2010); gender (see chapters in Wood 1982, 1989; Thompson 1989; Thompson and Smith, 2010); managerial strategy and national diversity within capitalism (Littler 1982; Burawoy 1985; Smith and Meiksins, 1995) and later the ideas of national institutions, the employment relationship and the geography of capitalism as the global economic system expanded.

LMC, Institutions and Capitalism

Comparatively Braverman's message of 'work degradation' fitted some capitalist societies better than others – the UK and US especially had greater 'deskilling tendencies'. But even in countries with intrinsic craft apprenticeship systems and an abundance of skilled labour, such as German speaking countries, writers have confirmed parts of Braverman's thesis of 'skill polarisation' or bifurcation, and uncovered within the firm, managers committed to rationalising work through skill substitution as well as skill upgrading (Altmann et al 1992). In a recent review Gallie highlights strong survey evidence of upskilling, but notes '... that the assumption that rising skills would necessarily lead to greater employee influence at work is incorrect' (Gallie, 2013: 339). In other words skills do not equate with job control. It appears national institutional arrangements mediate any such effect – such that one cannot read off common outcomes from generic tendencies in the labour process without factoring in institutional elements. Therefore the lack of a general fit between the degradation of work thesis and particular societies reveals one important limitation of Braverman's thesis, namely coupling to capitalism a universal division of labour which is more properly anchored to particular institutions - occupational and training systems. There was one reference to Japan in *LMC*. Yet in the 1980s and 1990s, the Japanese workplace was seen to typify a major contrast with the US, where greater employment security for workers (especially male ones) working in large companies is exchanged for higher utilisation and managerial control over the deployment of labour power (Elger and Smith, 1994; 2005). The place of national institutions was underdeveloped by Braverman, but as Elger and Smith (2005) show it is possible to combine together a labour process and institutional perspective for analysing workplace relations and the function 'nationality' of capital plays in shaping labour process practices.

Braverman was challenged by feminist writers who argued the gendered identity (of craft workers) was missing in his work. Craft and skilled labour is highly gendered as Pollert (1981) made clear in her book on tobacco workers; and Cavendish (1984) made clear in her book on assembly workers and Cynthia Cockburn (1983) demonstrated in her book on highly skilled print workers. Rubery (1978) was part of the early feminist writers examining the short-coming of *LMC*, and coming from a radical economist background she used Braverman to extend dual labour market theory and institutional economics to develop a theory of labour market segmentation. Like Burawoy, who emphasised the agency of labour, Rubery argued that labour markets are structured not just by the actions of capitalists, but by the ability of workers "to maintain, develop, extend and reshape their organisation and bargaining power" (1978: 34). In this, gender was an important way male workers could maintain controls over work and structure labour markets into non-competing segments, an idea close to the Weber's ideas of "occupational closure" – rather than Marxist notion of the reserve army of labour found in Braverman. Feminist writers have produced more dynamic explanations of the lived experience of discrimination on the shop or office floor, see for example Gottfried (1994), as well as theorisation of the interactions between gender 'structures', such as patriarchy and economic structures, such as capitalism and class (Gottfried, 1998).

Craig Littler (1982) made an important contribution to the labour process arguments on control by blending Marxist analysis of control and capitalism with the Weberian concepts of bureaucracy and legitimation. He developed a framework for analysing the labour process using independent levels – proposing a three level framework consisting of employment relationships, the structure of control and job design. The labour process sits within this nest of levels, and his 1982 book provided a historical analysis of the spread of Taylorist job design into the UK and a useful comparative portrait of work in Japan – drawing from Japan scholars such as Cole (1971) and Dore (1973) who, while not using labour process ideas explicitly, did thorough work on the sociology of work and industry in Japan.

The most significant Marxist sociologist of the labour process - an influential theorist and ethnographic researcher – has been Michael Burawoy. His *Manufacturing Consent* appeared in 1979 based on his PhD of ethnography of life inside a Chicago machine shop – the same company which the famous industrial sociologist Donald Roy had researched 30 years earlier. Roy had produced an analysis of the rationality of workers shop floor behaviour that buried the patronising view of workers in the Human Relations approach which assumed workers restricted output for emotional or irrational reasons. *Manufacturing Consent* is partly a dialogue with Roy, but principally with Marx, Braverman, and other theorists of labour markets and labour processes. It is in the best traditions of single case studies - theoretically embedded and creative - seeking analytical interrogations of the shortcomings of both Marx's (and Braverman's) understanding of life inside the large modern unionised, corporation with strong internal labour markets and a labour process where winning workers consent not managing through coercion was required.

Michael Burawoy's other key text on the labour process was from the same era – *The Politics of Production*, published in 1985, but already flagged as forthcoming in his 1979 *Manufacturing Consent* book, and therefore needs to read as coming from the same period of thinking about and researching production relations. *The Politics of Production* looks at the conditions under which consent and coercion are produced. Consent was strong at firms like Geer/Allied (his case study company for *Manufacturing Consent*) because these were unionised factories with strong internal labour markets, collective bargaining and an 'internal state' of consent and compromise between labour and capital in a wider American economy of dominant monopoly capital. Such conditions created 'hegemonic production politics' or 'factory regimes' - evident at Geer, with workers activity producing through shop floor 'games' the conditions for their continued economic oppression. This was contrasted to despotic regimes – where welfare, unions, and internal labour markets were absent, thus increasing workers dependence of a wages, which were difficult to stabilise due to competitive labour markets.

In broad terms Michael Burawoy opened access to the micro level of shop floor practices where workers are active agents in the resistance and reproduction of capitalist social relations as well as more macro comparative labour process research, and the linkages between factory regimes and societal and market conditions. In *The Politics of Production* he could draw from his earlier empirical work in Zambian mining, and in later work he worked on the Shop Floor in Hungary to gain insight into labour processes in a then command economy.

Paul Edwards (1986) moved labour process theory away from Marxism, towards materialism which has no transformation agency: "Marxism must propose some logic of social development such that

exploitation will be transcended, whereas materialism makes no such claim" (1986: 89). Edwards is sympathetic towards workers, but there is no expectation that class conflict will necessarily lead to social transformation or even that the common class situation of labour will result in shared subjective interests. As noted above labour as a commodity in capitalism possesses exchange and use values, but Edwards has put emphasis on use value, especially the utility and pride of work for workers. He has also contributed to the comparative approach (not only cross-nationally but cross-sectors) and the diversity and 'relative autonomy' of the labour process within capitalism, which does not inevitably produce one dominant control regime, but neither are there an infinite variety of control regimes as suggested by contingency theory. Like both Littler and Thompson (see below) Edwards stresses the importance of examining the workplace in capitalism at a series of levels of analysis (Bélanger & Edwards 2007).

Paul Thompson has been strongly identified with labour process theory building in the UK, being closely associated with the International Labour Process Conference. Through publications such as *The Nature of Work* (1983), *Work Organisations* (1990, 2009), *Workplaces of the Future* (1998) and *Organizational Misbehaviour* (1999) as well as many articles on such themes critiques of post-modernism, Foucault, surveillance, the knowledge economy, discourse analysis and HRM and ethics; he has consolidated and developed labour process analysis. Paul Thompson produced a series of papers and edited books that have offered a critique of post-modernist abandonment of employment relations and core elements of capitalism as real political economy. Smith and Thompson (1992) produced an early political economy book on the transition of labour and the labour process with the end of state socialism in Russia, Eastern Europe and China. More recently, he has effectively challenged ideas of Italian autonomists (Thompson, 2005), which present strange bedfellows with post-structuralism and new-managerialism, developing influential ideas such as 'immaterial labour' which Thompson rightly sees as confusing the content for form of labour power in capitalism.

Thompson (2009) has been especially critical of post-structuralist writing on the labour process best represented by Damian O'Doherty (2001; 2008) – see debate between Thompson and O'Doherty in the *Handbook of Critical Management Studies (HCMS)*. O'Doherty, a student of Hugh Willmott, wrote a PhD against labour process theory and in his 2009 chapter of HCMS, he sought to construct a 'Manchester School' of work that had as intellectual resources existentialism and post-structuralism, and developed the analysis of work relations in workplaces and organisations as constituted as power hierarchies. Like Willmott the concern is with 'human subjectivity' and being, not labour power in a Marxist sense, and the approach is constructionist rather than 'realist'. Fellow travellers have engaged in empirical work (Collinson; Knights and McCabe; Willmott and Worthington; Ezzamel and Worthington) but on the whole there is a strong tendency to examine or deconstruct 'texts', Burawoy (1977) for example, without any sense of the development of the academics behind such writing, in other words texts are frozen. Their work is more about organisation studies than labour-process studies – attention is focused on individuals within organisational settings. Labour processes are about the transformation process of moving labour capacity into labour; how individuals realise labour power through labour processes that can be very diverse; but capitalism imposes structural limits to variety.

In summaries of the history labour process debates Thompson has created 'periodizations', with the first wave containing writing following the immediate reactions to Braverman's *LMC*, and earlier

labour process theory from French and Italian Marxists. The second wave included writers such as Edwards, Burawoy, Freidman – who have all developed ‘typologies’ of ‘workplace regimes’ around a ‘control –resistance-consent’ dialectic, whereby managerial controls produce resistances from workers that then produces new control regimes in a cyclical manner. The third wave contained new developments of ‘alternative paradigms’ to Taylorism and Fordism, such as ‘flexible specialization’ (Piore and Sabel, 1984); ‘lean production’ (Womack et al 1990); and ‘innovation-mediated production’ (Kenney and Florida, 1993). Many of these new paradigms derived from new players, such as Japan, who entered the debate on how to organise work as Japanese firms moved abroad and Japanese products and production processes appeared superior to Western ones. These Thompson called ‘paradigm wars’ but in many ways they fit within the cycles of controls found in the second wave – for a review see Smith (1989; 1994).

Thompson (1990) developed the idea of a ‘core’ set of labour process ideas in the face of attempts to expand labour process writing beyond labour-capital relations in workplaces, with post-structuralist writers (such as Willmott and Knights) focusing on subjectivity and the human condition, thus stretching boundaries of what constituted labour process analysis. Thompson took labour process theory back a ‘core’ set of elements in which labour process analysis was about ‘transformation’ of labour power by different management workplace regimes, some of which gave workers greater autonomy, but none of which suppressed structural conflict and interests and the ‘imperative of control’ that remains a core characteristic of capitalism given the need to extract labour-power from the body of the worker. Reinforcing the work of Edwards, Thompson emphasised the relative autonomy of labour process and centrality of the employment relationship and importance of political economy as a wider conditioner to labour process practice.

Thompson’s (1990) approach was a critical framing device that usefully helped block a drift away from the core elements of labour process theory. His recent work has tried to expand a more analytical framework. In Thompson (2003) the idea of a ‘disconnected capitalism’ was developed, which aimed to explain the fragmentation of employment and control within capitalist system under more financial hegemony. Here, security offered to core workers in old welfare capitalism is gone; the value of labour to employers has been undermined with increased supply, and bargained forms of hegemony described by Burawoy in *Manufacturing Consent*, are no-longer possible under financial capitalism. Indeed, his thesis is used to explain such developments as the growth of suicides at work, a pathology born of the marginalisation of workers in conditions of easy replacement and unchecked management power. “Whereas within a model of industrial capitalism, the worker was an agent of production and therefore viewed as a source of profit and capital accumulation, within finance capitalism, profit is increasingly linked to extraneous financial variables and the worker is perceived as a potential obstacle to profit” (Waters, 2014: 122).

The disconnected capitalism thesis has received wide citations, as it moved beyond a defence of core labour process towards more explanation of the growth of fragmentation and marketization under the dominance of finance capitalism. Thompson (2003: 474)“...argued that political economy, firm governance, employment relations and the labour process should be treated as ‘distinctive spheres’ and patterns of connection and disconnection within their different trajectories be sought out”. In an updated expansion to this paper, Thompson (2013) makes a major move away from the *systemic* feature of Marxist political economy towards greater capitalist contingency (he would dispute contingency theory), with 4 distinctive institutional domains: 1. accumulation – with no

overall logic, but structure of separation, competition and coordination between capitals and 'elites'; 2. Corporate level which is the domain of firm action by managers and workers; 3. work level or traditional labour process domain featuring a technical and social division of labour and labour process; and finally, 4. employment level consisting of employment relations and industrial relations. This model was applied to what Thompson sees as the dominant feature of capitalism today, namely financialisation or new shareholder capitalism, in which there is greater work intensity and increased employment insecurity. But not all societies are under this model. As Vidal and Hauptmeier (2014: 15) note "...Thompson (2003; 2013) argued that employment regimes (employment security, wage setting and voice systems) are more diverse across countries than labour processes (systems of skill, control and coordination) because the former are more influenced by national institutions". In criticism of this multi-level analysis one could say that Thompson misses problems with Varieties of Capitalism approach he alludes to, such as the myth of nationally integrated models business models; and the focus on financialized capitalism may be more about Anglo-Saxon capitalism and not other parts of the world economy, especially Asia. Moreover, financial capitalism cannot generate new value, it circulates capital, and in these exchanges there are always winners and losers, but however displaced and spatially stretched, production will always be central to capitalism and labour process theory. But he rightly highlights a systemic shift towards neo-liberalism across all forms of capitalism.

My own work has made conceptual contributions to comparative theory and the labour process with the development of the system, society and dominance (SSD) framework and applications to occupations and the transfer of work practices between countries (Smith and Meiksins 1995; Elger and Smith, 2005). The SSD framework emphasises the importance of national institutional boundaries and rules, but additionally the centrality of systemic and dominant models – that create common and best practices, such as HRM, lean production, total quality management, that are imposed or copied across societies.

Other contributions have been understanding of the organisation of the labour process in China, with its concept of the 'dormitory labour regime' (Smith 2003; Ngai and Smith, 2007). This builds upon the work of Burawoy, but explores the interaction between the reproduction of labour power and the production process. It has been picked up as a way of characterising workplace regimes in export-factories in China.

In a more explicit attempt to develop labour process theory, I wanted to incorporate the importance of 'mobility power' into labour power in what I called a 'double indeterminacy' framework (Smith, 2006). This suggested that labour power possessed two components or indeterminacies: mobility power and effort power. The first indeterminacy emerges from the distinction between labour and labour power made by Marx, reflecting the decentralization of the authority over the disposal of labour power to the individual worker who has the burden and freedom (constraint and choice) as to where and to which employer the individual sells his or her labour services. This can be called mobility power, which is indeterminate in the sense that the decision on which employer the worker sells his or her labour power is given to the individual and therefore remains an uncertainty for the employing firm in calculating whether or not workers will remain with them. It is also an uncertainty for the worker as to whether or not the employing firm will continue to buy their labour services. Around the issue of mobility power both capital and labour strategize, plan and mobilize resources of a collective and individual kind as rational-strategic actors (see Alberti 2014 for an application).

The second indeterminacy is around labour effort and the wage-work bargain in production (Baldamus, 1961). How much effort is required for a particular wage for supporting the basic level of reproduction of labour has been the primary subject of labour process theory that has focused on management strategies to control labour and realize the returns from labour once hired (Smith, 2010). Similarly, how workers develop formal and informal work rules to limit effort and contain managerial claims on their time and body have also been widely discussed (Burawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1990). We therefore have mobility and effort power as indeterminacies for capital and labour, and forming the basis for labour and management strategies, tactics and policies to direct the exchange process within the capitalist employment relationship.

Mobility power has a strong political dimension – with employers seeking to limit the freedom of workers and to move employment at will, through contracts that stipulate length of service, notice periods for mutual separation, and limitations on labour supply and mobility (Jacoby, 1995). Within the firm the uncertainties over mobility create what Mann (1973) calls a ‘mutual dependency’ obligation, in which workers reduce job searching for internal promotion opportunities, and employers give up seeking external labour, through focusing on the utilization of existing labour. In some economies (Japan and Korea, for example), and in some companies a paternalist practice is widely espoused that reinforces mutual obligations beyond the naked cash nexus (Smith, 2003; 2006).

More recently I expanded this framework into what I called a ‘flow approach’ towards labour power which combines the importance of mobility and movement in new capitalism (Smith 2010). A flow perspective on the labour process is against human capital and resource-based theories of the firm, and versions of HRM which advocate a ‘high commitment workplace’ perspectives, as well as ‘organisation-centric models of capitalism’. All these approaches represent labour power as fixed, centred and located, rather than moving and dynamic – with mobility-capability as a core characteristic. They represent the employer’s perspective on containing labour mobility as something positive for both workers (guaranteeing access to work) and employers (securing access to labour).

A ‘flow approach’ brings in the nature of labour power, mobility, turnover, migration, employment contracts and challenges the orthodoxy of labour as fixed commodity. Labour power can be ‘stored’ socially through, *occupations* (professions with exclusionary rules); *organisations* (large firms with strong internal labour markets); *social networks* (family, kin and place networks for migrant labour for example); *industrial districts/communities* (mining, company towns, industrial towns etc.); *social institutions* – workers store of collective identity and organisations – e.g. trade unions (craft/work rules of job boundaries, even transfers of jobs through father-to-son dynasties – London printers before computerisation, Cockburn 1983). Stores are however partially ‘fictive’ and vulnerable because labour power is not property like capital and the need to animate labour power through the labour process in order to secure exchange/realisation (in the form of wages) forever requires labour power to seek out capital. Stores are vulnerable to change as a result of class struggle between labour and capital around the double indeterminacy of labour (both effort power and mobility power). They are vulnerable to technological and market change that can overturn established patterns.

Conclusion

New Trends

Smith (2010) summarizes developments in the labour process in terms of nine themes:

1. Decentring work from the workplace – new mobile technologies, home working and working ‘on-the-move’.
2. Mobility of capital – and extended value and commodity chains.
3. Internationalisation & ‘Globalisation’ - more labour (emergence of a world labour market for the first time) and more mobility of labour; challenges to national institutional settlements.
4. New forms of labour – creative, aesthetic, personal service etc. Labour process of old and new forms of labour.
5. Separation of work relations & employment relations - de-bureaucratisation, different contracts within the workplace.
6. Separation of ownership from management – disappearing bosses and principle employer - problem with legal work contracts– and the disappearance of owners (“who is and where is my boss?”).
7. Difficulties entering waged work – internships, employability, transfer of risk to the worker.
8. Taking the state out – value/commodity chains; international employment agencies; hedge fund capital.
9. New labour movement forms – community, internet, direct action, NGOs etc.

Braverman drew on his own experience and the work of others, but did not engage in empirical fieldwork in the conventional sense. Many reactions to his work have applied standard methodological ‘tests’ through surveys, but most especially case studies, to examine whether or not skills are declining and work is degraded by new technology and managerial control. Reactions have also challenged the theoretical basis of Braverman's work - his determinism in judging Scientific Management the ‘one best way’ of capitalist practice and his historical chronology - in the transition from contracting relations to employment relations and Taylorism (see Zimbalist 1979; Clawson 1980; Littler 1982; Burawoy 1985; Knights and Willmott 1990). In terms of the empirical shortcomings of his work, especially the so-called ‘de-skilling’ thesis, writers have challenged his claims by examining skill historically, sectorally, occupationally and nationally to test whether deskilling has occurred as a universal tendency (see Brown 1992 for a review of the evidence on deskilling; Grugulis and Lloyd, 2010; Fitzgerald, Rainnie, & Burgess, 2013).

In Braverman, there is a more definite chronological system shift from private, small scale capital under craft worker control to large-scale, monopoly capital, under Scientific Management as the pinnacle of labour process control. Post-Braverman writers have stressed post-Taylorist stages or phases of the labour process, and highlighted two things. Firstly, the continued evolution of labour process organisation within capitalism beyond the possibilities for accumulation afforded by classical Scientific Management. Control through culture, values and various neo-human relations policies seek to engage, not simply coerce the worker. And secondly, the role of new national and regional

centres of accumulation which offer a synthesis of classical Scientific Management within different cultural contexts and class accords, which allow for post-Taylorist practices to be embedded in unique ways. The organisation of the labour process in Japan and the transfer of the Japanese system to the West is central here (see Elger and Smith 1994; 2005 for an overview) and the emergence of China and India as new international players (Ngai, 2005; Lüthje, et al.2013; De Neve, 2014). However, the European, especially the German experience of post and neo-Taylorism also remains important (see Altmann, Kohler and Meil 1992; Eichhorst & Tobsch, 2013; Eichhorst, 2014).

Marx's analysis of the nature of the capitalist labour process uses England as its historical laboratory. England, the most economically advanced and dominant capitalist economy represented the future all other societies would mirror. Braverman wrote through the experience of the US as dominant capitalist economy of the twentieth century, originator of Scientific Management and therefore the common model for all other societies. In fact both were wrong to associate the most advanced with a single future. If we interject country differences into this picture, as cross-national studies of labour process organisation have done, then we see that the norm is for there to be both national pluralism to work organisation as well as pressures to find a 'one best way'. National differences are not infinite, and dominant economies remain important sources of 'best practice' which are used in many societies.

Another shift has been the systemic growth of different categories of worker on different contracts and the growth of employment agencies which source labour globally. There has been a massive transfer of employment risk from the employer to the worker. Old certainties – and very basic feature of being a worker – such as knowing the hours of work, continuity of work and regularity of wages – have now become uncertainties, in employment contracts such as 'zero-hours'. There has been a shortening of the length of employment stay within one organisation, although rates of tenure vary between say Europe and US, and within different branches of capital. While flexible or precarious work has been much debated in the US and Europe, contract changes have been more dramatic in East Asian societies (Nichols et al, 2004; Friedman & Lee, 2010). Organisation dependency which characterised the large firms that Braverman (and Burawoy, 1977) had used to define good jobs (high wage and high security) in what was a hegemonic, welfarist employment pattern of monopoly capitalism, which was constructed throughout the twentieth century (Gospel, 1992; Montgomery, 1979, 1995; Jacoby, 1997) now looks increasingly untenable.

There has been a continual *renewal* of labour process writing, development of new concepts, such as *emotional labour* (Hochschild, 1983; Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Bolton, 2009; 2010; Brook et al 2013) or *aesthetic labour* (Warhurst, et al, 2000; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009; Wolkowitz and Warhurst, 2010). There has also been application of labour process ideas to new sectors, such as the creative industries (Smith and McKinlay, 2008) and new organisational forms, such as the extensive literature on call centres. We have also seen labour process theory being linked to new areas, such as institutional theory (Elger and Smith, 2005) or critical realism (Thompson and Vincent, 2010). The prospects for labour process writing to continue to develop are good, and the annual International Labour Process Conference and associated book publishing (<http://www.palgrave.com/series/critical-perspectives-on-work-and-employment/CPWE/>) is likely to maintain the domain, as the evolution of forms of control and the continued globalisation of capitalism creates a demand for critical writing which engages micro and macro levels of analysis in a

coherent fashion. This is something that labour process analysis in the 40 years since the publication of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* has consistently aimed to do .

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