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Braverman and the Contribution of Labour Process Analysis to the Critique of Capitalist Production – Twenty- Five Years On

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ABSTRACT This paper seeks to reassess the contributions made by Braverman and subsequent labour process writers to the critique of capitalist production. Braverman's main motivation lay with the subversion of pro-capitalist ideologies. He identified deskilling tendencies with the capitalist imperative of accumulation in order to promote the case for revolutionary change. The labour process debate that Braverman helped to initiate, while successful in broadening understanding of concrete work relations, has difficulties in excavating the necessary interconnections of capitalist alienation and exploitation. In particular, there is a problem in separating out the different levels of analysis that link essence and appearance in the work context. Narrow focus on the labour process creates unnecessary conceptual confusion about the specificity of capitalist production, and also condones an unduly pessimistic political agenda on the prospects for transcending capitalist domination. In eschewing the important interconnections between workplace organisation and capitalist social relations, labour process analysis risks inverting the critical intent of Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* by promoting the continuation of the extant social order.

Introduction

It is well known that Braverman launched the labour process debate, rejuvenating critical scholarship on work organisation within the social sciences. Yet, twenty-five years after its original publication, Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* is almost universally rejected as a basis for understanding the labour process. Braverman, it seems, set a negative example, highlighting the dangers in drawing on Marx to conceptualise work relations. In particular, the argument is repeatedly made that Braverman offered a one-sided (objectivist) conception of the labour process, ignoring the subjective dimension of work. In order to advance labour process analysis, therefore, conceptual investigation must transcend the limits of Braverman. The story of the brief history of labour process theory is one of the progressive exclusion of Braverman and Marxist concepts from debate. Alternative inspiration

has been sought in direct empirical analysis (see, for example, Littler 1990), and more recently, Foucault (see Knights 1990; Willmott 1990). Braverman's contribution is apparently now outmoded, being surpassed by superior empiricist and Foucauldian approaches.

This paper seeks to appraise the conceptual significance of the drift away from Braverman and Marxism in labour process theory. It is divided into three sections. The first reassesses the original analysis of Braverman. He emulated Marx in positioning the critique of capital at the centre of his *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. His analysis represented a challenge to both sociology and capitalism. The second section focuses on the contribution that Michael Burawoy and Paul Thompson have made to the analysis of the labour process. Both identify linkages between the labour process and more abstract relations, yet neither offers a precise insight into how different levels of analysis interconnect. In eschewing value theory, Burawoy and Thompson fail to hold attention on the totality of capitalist alienation and exploitation, creating unnecessary pessimism about the possibility for emancipatory change. The third section examines nascent Foucauldian research on the labour process. Foucauldian writers focus on the 'local' constitution of subjectivity, neglecting the deeper specific differentiae of the capital-labour relation. That close attention is paid to concrete issues of self-identity frustrates efforts to overturn pro-capitalist ideologies that make the extant social order appear both necessary and inevitable.

Braverman and Radical Politics

Marx has been variously represented as a philosopher, economist, and sociologist. These distinctions have granted Marx academic 'respectability', providing opportunities to discuss his work in relevant disciplinary debates. However, this carries the risk of domesticating Marx, presenting his work as a simple academic exercise, entirely without political intent or aspiration. That Marx intended to increase political awareness, creating ideological pressure against the rule of capital, may be eclipsed in the dash to subsume Marxism into academia. Similar problems have been encountered in the academic reception to Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Invariably Braverman is categorised as a sociologist. To be sure, he engaged with the sociology of work, developing rivals insights into the organisation and control of production. Yet his task was not to create a 'new' sociology of work, as many contemporary labour process theorists seem to think. He intended to subvert sociology, locating its role in the promotion of pro-capitalist ideology. Braverman had a clear political agenda underscoring his work. He only sought to engage with sociology as a means to transcend it. His analysis of the transformation of the labour process aimed to provoke political debate, energising the campaign against the perpetuation of capitalist property relations. Braverman,

in short, restored Marx's critique of capitalism. As he stressed, 'Marxism is not merely an exercise in satisfying intellectual curiosity, nor an academic pursuit, but a theory of revolution and thus a tool of combat' (1976: 122).¹

Braverman's key contribution was to position the issues of class and history at the centre of the analysis of work. He located workplace transformation in a broader understanding of the specificities of capitalist production, demonstrating the important determining role played by class conflict in shaping organisational outcomes. Before Braverman, there had been a strong tendency to define the work process in universal terms. Researchers had neglected the specifically capitalist character of work. Thus, within industrial sociology, attention was focused on the factors leading to lower work effort. A particularly influential approach, associated with Elton Mayo and the notorious Hawthorn studies at Western Electric, ascribed poor performance within organisations to worker irrationality. Workers, it was argued, had to be persuaded of the collective rationality of organisational success. Plant ethnographies shifted the blame towards managers; poor organisation of work and the imposition of inappropriate bonus schemes were ultimately their responsibility (Burawoy 1996: 297). Workers were said to be acting rationally when they lowered their effort, given the irrationality of extant management practices. More recently, this perspective has resurfaced in transaction cost variants of neo-classical economics, which attribute low levels of organisational efficiency to the inappropriateness of extant 'governance structures' (see Williamson 1985).

Braverman shifted attention towards the production of surplus value. Expanded surplus value production, he argued, depends on the progressive erosion of worker control over the labour process. In his view, workers would 'thwart efforts to realize to the full the potential inherent in their labour power', unless control of the labour process passed 'into the hands of management, not only in a formal sense, but by the control and direction of each step of the process, including its mode of performance' (1974: 100). If capitalists are to fulfil their management function in the workplace, they must seek to minimise the cognitive and technical input of their workforce into the production process. During the twentieth century, capitalists embraced scientific management, and the associated 'scientific-technical revolution' in their efforts to separate out mental from manual labour. Conceptual control over production shifted to capitalists, undermining traditional sources of worker resistance based on work skills and knowledge. Labour had to be impoverished, argued Braverman, before the aims of capitalist production could be met.

Braverman looked to identify the 'objectivity' of working-class opposition to capital that is constituted in the all-pervasive denial of conscious and purposeful labour under capitalism. The inhumanity of capital, claimed Braverman, has definite objective roots. Alienation emanates from dispossession based on the forced separation of labour from the means of production. The real abstraction of alienated labour finds its concrete expression in the specific tendencies of degraded and

deskilled work. These tendencies represent the working through of the class domination of capital over labour, and in turn, reflect the conflict of interest at the heart of the capital–labour relation. Braverman stressed that his neglect of subjectivity was a ‘self-imposed limitation’ (1974: 27). He claimed that previous approaches had sought ‘to derive the “science before the science”’ (27) by eschewing the ‘objective’ content of capitalist class conflict. This created conceptual problems in terms of locating the essence of capitalist alienation. ‘Academic sociology’, in particular, by seeking ‘solutions’ to worker alienation in job enrichment schemes, focuses on the adjustment of workers to productive activity rather than to the nature of work itself. On this view, alienation ‘does not appear with the degradation of work, but only with the overt signs of dissatisfaction on the part of the worker (29). Thus, if workers signal their satisfaction at work, it may be inferred that there is no problem of alienation. Braverman dismissed this kind of approach as apologetic. He stressed the specificity of capitalist alienation; the objective dislocation of labour from both the product and process of capitalist production. In this sense, capitalist work confronts labour as an alienated activity, *regardless of the subjective state of mind of workers*. For Braverman, in short, there was no antidote to alienation beyond the abolition of capital itself.

In subverting ideologies supportive of capitalist rule, Braverman sought to locate the revolutionary position of the working class under capitalism. Just as alienation impacted on the proletariat as a whole, so it could be transcended by collective working-class opposition. This is why ‘*class as a whole* must be studied, rather than an arbitrarily chosen part of it’ (1974: 26). Labour, as a class *in itself*, represents the completeness of capitalist alienation, on the one hand, and the potential for the demise of capitalism, on the other. By restoring a specific objective content to debate on the connection between work and alienation, Braverman was concerned to reconstitute pressures leading to the formation of a revolutionary working class. His emphasis on labour as a *class in itself* did not then entail a complete neglect of labour as a class *for itself*. On the contrary, Braverman laid stress on the former as a means to bring forward the realisation of the latter. As Yates argues, ‘[f]ar from ignoring the class struggle, Harry Braverman in *Labor and Monopoly Capital* has provided us with an invaluable weapon in that struggle; for how can we struggle effectively unless we know exactly what it is we are struggling against?’ (1999: 10–11).

In fixing attention on the (objective) interconnection of capitalist domination and labour alienation, Braverman contributed both to the subversion of received academic debate on work, and the galvanisation of class struggle against capital. He identified capitalism as the antithesis to human production, and called for its revolutionary overthrow. Reforms to work organisation remained mere palliatives in the broader struggle to create a new post-capitalist society. Braverman’s vision incorporated the reconnection of mental and manual labour and thus embraced a specific commitment to the restoration of humanity in work. In this sense, he regarded his

theoretical and empirical analysis of the capitalist labour process as a means to an end; both only mattered to the extent that they contributed towards the emancipation of labour.

Though Braverman aimed to foster emancipatory change, he never lost sight of the difficulties posed in transcending capitalism. He eschewed, in particular, 'law-like' representations of capitalism that impart a determinate form to history. 'Social determinacy', argued Braverman, 'does not have the fixity of a chemical reaction, but is a *historic process*. The concrete and determinate forms of society are indeed "determined" rather than accidental, but this is the determinacy of the thread-by-thread weaving of the fabric of history, not the imposition of external formulas' (1974: 21). Braverman was clearly aware of the importance of historical mediation in the complex determination of capitalist alienation and domination. In particular, contra Littler, he recognised that 'the linkage between the logic of capital accumulation and the transformation of the labour process is an indirect and varying one' (1990: 56; see also Littler and Salaman 1982: 257). Through the effects of capital accumulation, '[t]he subjective factor of the labor process is removed to a place among its inanimate objective factors', but this remains only 'the ideal towards which management tends', one which can only be 'realized by capital within definite limits, and unevenly across industries' (Braverman 1974: 171, 171–2, 172). The separation of conception from execution 'is itself restrained in its application by the nature of the various specific and determinate processes of production. Moreover, its very application brings into being new crafts and skills and technical specialities which at first are the province of labour rather than management' (172). Thus, not only were contingencies in the workplace seen to produce counter-pressures against deskilling forces, but also scientific management itself was suggested to require, if only for a temporary period, the creation of new skills and competencies (Armstrong 1988: 146). In Braverman's analysis, workers were not relinquished of skills in a straightforward and inexorable fashion. The process was presented as altogether more complex, involving frequent shifts, setbacks, and transformations.

Braverman's deskilling thesis, so maligned by labour process theorists for its determinism, represents no more than a tendency inherent within capitalism that cannot ever be realised in some complete and all-conquering form. The contradictions and counter-pressures created by the separation of mental and manual labour do not refute the 'law [read tendency] of deskilling' as such, but rather indicate its actual causal movement and dynamic. Braverman's approach to deskilling ought to be interpreted in the same way as Marx's (in)famous laws. The law-like regularities propounded by Marx – the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and the law of value – appear only as 'approximations' (Pilling 1980: 90); tendential processes that cannot be understood outside of the complex reality in which they operate. The same is true for Braverman. Although he identified deskilling as an important necessary tendency under capitalism, he neither posited

nor sought an invariant law of deskilling. He emphasised that deskilling would only be actualised where conditions allowed it to develop. At a minimum, this demonstrated the opportunity for collective opposition to the degradation of work.

Braverman's work has suffered under a welter of empiricist challenges. His analysis has been customarily judged on the basis of simple empirical criteria, with contributions seeking to 'test' the adequacy of his implied 'predictions'. A key criticism is that Braverman over-simplified the direct control relationship. Critics claim that control at work is multifaceted, incorporating dual relations of conflict and co-operation (see Storey 1985). In some cases, this leads to an outright rejection of theoretical analysis. The argument is made that capitalist reality is so complex that 'there can be no theory of the capitalist labour process' (Littler 1982: 33–4; see also Brown 1992: 222–24). This approach offers a more or less chaotic conception of work relations, allowing different categories to be invoked without clear explanation of their causal significance or relative order of determination. Thus, for example, Littler makes the point that 'the statement that there is a material basis of conflict in capital-labour relations is to remain at the level of abstract class relations, which is misleading in an analysis of actual work practices' (1990: 70). He focuses specific attention on the control relationship, and claims that its nature 'is not given by the concept of wage-labour', and so 'cannot be derived readily from broad economic assumptions'. The control relationship is 'more complex', and encompasses important 'sociological and political components' (68 and 71). Here Littler makes the mistake of seeing moves from the abstract to the concrete as a process in which concepts are displaced, and substituted for one another. There is no appreciation of the need to successively transform abstract concepts in the pursuit of knowledge about concrete relations at work. It is vital to interconnect categories, illustrating the development of necessary tendencies constituted by more abstract relations (see Fine and Harris 1979: 6–15; also Nolan and Edwards 1984: 199–200; and Smith 1993). That these tendencies realise themselves in specific (mediated) social formations indicates the importance of history in understanding the categorial progression from the abstract to the concrete.

Littler's approach seeks to separate out essence from appearance, privileging empirical contingency over historical specificity. In short, he tends to favour a narrow 'celebration of empirical complexity' (Nolan and Edwards 1984: 213n), treating important abstract phenomena residually, or else without proper explanation of how they are linked to more complex relations. In particular, the profit imperative is not understood 'as the fundamental dynamic structuring the capitalist labour process', but instead 'as simply an "end product" which issues from but is somehow external to that process' (Cohen 1987: 42; see also Nichols 1999). Analysis is thus reduced to compiling crude, and ultimately, incomplete, taxonomies of the organisation and control of work (Rowlinson and Hassard 1994). An inevitable corollary is the descriptive or classificatory treatment of extant work relations that

forecloses understanding of the important interconnections of capitalist production.

Braverman was no crude empiricist. His main concern lay with the disclosure of the necessary tendencies leading to the degradation of work under capitalism. That he emphasised these tendencies did not mean that he believed they constituted *all* complex phenomena. This point is often misleadingly made in commentaries on Braverman's work (see, in particular, Littler and Salaman 1982). Instead, Braverman was eager to subvert the fetishism of appearances; he aimed to refocus debate on the unfolding of the inner essence of capital (understood as alienated and subordinated labour). If this sacrificed empirical content, then it was a small price to pay for rejuvenating efforts to critique capital. Braverman's revolutionary goal was to reconstitute production as a process under the control of labour. As will be argued in the next section, labour process writers have eschewed this task by blurring the internal connections between workplace transformation and capitalist exploitation.

A Value-Less Debate?

Two key protagonists in the labour process debate are Michael Burawoy and Paul Thompson. Both writers have defined the core of labour process theory. Their work has sought to fill perceived conceptual lacunae left by Marx and Braverman. A shared view is that the labour process involves important contingent phenomena. The capital–labour relation is said to assume different forms depending on the nature of concrete interactions between workers and employers. That the interests of capital and labour are generated endogenously makes it impossible to predetermine the organisation and control of work. Burawoy claims that Marx and Braverman made the mistake of taking class conflict for granted. In holding to this position, both authors supposedly overplayed the salience of coercion in assuring capitalist domination at work. Burawoy's key argument 'is that the interests that organise the daily life of workers are not given irrecoverably; they cannot be imputed; they are produced and reproduced in particular ways' (1985: 28–9). Hence, '[r]ather than postulate interests either metaphysically or empirically, we must develop a theory of interests, a theory of how they are constituted out of ideology' (1979: 19). This necessitates 'investigation of the conditions under which the interests of labour and capital actually become antagonistic' (1985: 29). Burawoy sees in workplace contingency the basis of capitalist success in surplus value production. The simultaneous obscuring and securing of surplus value – the essence of the capitalist labour process in Burawoy's analysis (see 1979: 30; and 1985: 35) – cannot be achieved without the concrete co-ordination of the interests of capital and labour at the workplace level.

Thompson takes a similar approach. He places emphasis on the relative

autonomy of the labour process in the context of specific structural pressures to accumulate capital. Though these pressures urge the continuous transformation of the labour process, they do not constitute 'inviolable laws' in the form of the division between intellectual and manual labour, hierarchical control, and deskilling/fragmentation (Thompson 1990: 100). The actual organisation of work is much more complex, incorporating a plethora of different management initiatives and worker responses. Edwards (1990) echoes these points. While he departs from Burawoy and Thompson in identifying a 'structured antagonism' at the base of the capital-labour relation, he follows both authors in stressing the important determining role played by contingent factors in establishing the limits to capitalist control over labour. Thus, the 'structured antagonism' between capital and labour 'does not determine what happens at the level of day-to-day behaviour, but it exerts definite pressures. Workers and employers respond to these pressures and in so doing develop traditions and understandings that are used to interpret their relations with each other' (Edwards 1990: 126). On this view, there exists no simple one-to-one correspondence between the abstract forces of class conflict, and concrete issues of control and resistance at work.

Thompson raises the broader issue of the position of the labour process in capitalism as a whole, stating that 'there is a problem of both the boundaries and limits to labour process analysis' (1990: 110). This problem can be solved, it seems, by establishing 'a hierarchy of concepts in the analysis of the labour process - a hierarchy in which the place of the capital-labour relation is given central attention' (99). Thompson is ambiguous, however, on the identification of different levels of analysis. He admits the need for different *forms* of analysis, but declines to consider their relative order of determination. It remains unclear where either the capital-labour relation or labour process feature in the recommended 'hierarchy of concepts'. Thompson fails to offer a clear articulation of the movement from essence to appearance, and indeed, tends ultimately to focus on the capitalist labour process alone. To be sure, other levels are admitted (e.g. the state and competition). But these levels are invoked on a more or less arbitrary basis. Thus, for instance, Thompson (113) sees class as important in understanding the labour process, yet he offers no accompanying explanation of either alienation or exploitation. Instead there is the individualistic notion of 'misbehaviour' (Thompson and Ackroyd 1995) that misses the problematic position of the 'collective worker' under capitalism (see Carter 1995; Martinez Lucio and Stewart 1997). Thompson's failure to hold attention on the class dimension of work resistance reflects on his inability to locate either category in a suitably integrated account of the capital-labour relation.

Burawoy encounters similar problems. He is prone to privilege certain categories in a way that neglects the casual effects of others. In particular, his analysis tends to overplay the determining role of competition in workplace transformation, ignoring important mediating forces emanating from, *inter alia*, class struggle. Thus, the

monopolisation of product and consumer markets in the early decades of the twentieth century supposedly brought a relaxation in the despotism that had characterised preceding competitive stages of capitalism. The rise of monopoly capitalism meant that capital could grant labour limited autonomy in the shape of internal labour markets and formalised collective bargaining and grievance machinery. In Burawoy's account, this autonomy has been used by labour to constitute work as a 'game', establishing 'the ideological preconditions for the obscuring and securing of surplus value' (1985: 38). Though created to ease the drudgery of capitalist work, game-playing behaviour has had the important unintended outcome of generating worker consent to expanded surplus value production. This has supposedly given rise to a new hegemony in the workplace based on reciprocity and shared interests.

Ironically, Burawoy's analysis of the labour process shifts attention away from production towards the spheres of distribution and exchange. On his account, relations in production are entirely contingent on the degree of competition faced by capitalists; the nature of the competitive process dictates whether work is transformed in one way rather than another. Labour control, in particular, is defined in relation to the particular stage of capitalist competition reached. Competitive pressures urge capital to exercise power using a particular set of control strategies; that these strategies assure capitalist domination means that labour resistance at work can be vanquished on a continuous basis. In Burawoy's analysis, the labour process merely consolidates processes set in motion at the more concrete level of inter-capitalist competition (see Gartman 1982). Arguably, the labour process is a residual aspect of Burawoy's work, assuming importance only when changes in the character of capitalist competition require a reorganisation of work. The valorisation and labour process seemingly have no reciprocal influence over competitive relations in the spheres of exchange and distribution. This misses important contradictions within production, notably the tendency for the rate of profit to fall, that create important barriers to the realisation of surplus value.

Burawoy makes no systematic effort to rank categories in advance. In itself, his stress on the separation between surplus value production and the more concrete labour process is insufficient. Such discussion must be allied with consideration of the specific tensions rooted in value production. Otherwise, the valorisation process appears as a simple constraint on concrete management practice, a problem 'resolvable' through appropriate reorganisations in production. This superficial treatment of surplus value production misses the necessary tensions arising from the basal opposition between value and use-value; the subversion of human production and its reconstitution under capitalism as a process against labour. Class struggle, in this sense, is essential to capitalist development, being reproduced as a necessary requirement for the self-expansion of capital. Though Burawoy claims that '[s]truggle is not merely derivative but is also determinative of capitalism's

development' (1985: 48), he sees labour as entirely subservient in production (see Peck 1982; Gartman 1982). Burawoy's eschewal of class struggle reflects his wider neglect of the necessary interconnectedness of capitalist production.

Thompson also restricts attention to control at work. While he sees appeal in the Marxist notion of the 'full circuit of capital' (a term he borrows from Kelly 1985), he claims that '[i]t is unproductive to search for totalising explanations, and more useful to see theories reflecting the complex and interrelated layering of social experience' (Thompson 1990: 113). This leads him to propose a simple bifurcation between 'general directive control and immediate work processes' (101; see also 1983: 241).² In a similar way, Edwards distinguishes between 'general' and 'detailed' control. On the surface, each writer appears concerned to separate out the labour process from the valorisation process. Thus, the contingency of the labour process, captured in 'immediate work processes' and the 'detailed control' centred on the negotiation of order at work, is to be contrasted with the 'general (directive) control' involved in the extraction of surplus value. The formulation, however, is much cruder. Thompson, in particular, grants the category of general directive control the entire burden of responsibility for explanation of the determinants of capitalist control that lie outside the immediate work context. He argues for a hierarchy of concepts, on the one hand, and reduces to a single concept a plethora of causally related phenomena, on the other. In short, the concept of general directive control conceals more than it illuminates; at best, it privileges classification over explanation, at worse, it provides an open invitation to ignore all but workplace contingency.

Edwards' analysis is equally problematic. At one level, he uses his concept of general control as a broad measure of the 'extent to which workers are successfully subordinated to the production of surplus value' (1990: 145). However, at a deeper level, the term is also employed as a proxy for 'the overall effectiveness of the productive system' (145). Initially, it is not clear whether Edwards means just the production process itself, or the capitalist system as a whole. Thus, general control is linked to Friedman's (1977) idea of 'responsible autonomy'; that labour uses its discretionary power to further the aims of capitalist production. The concept also has an important bearing on capitalist reproduction. Hence, for example, 'British capitalism' allegedly suffered a breakdown in general control during the 1960s. This breakdown supposedly reflected weaknesses elsewhere in the economy which the labour unrest of the period helped to reproduce and exacerbate (Edwards 1990: 147).

Edwards is keen not to overstate the role played by workplace struggle in the constitution of general control. As he argues, '[w]orkplace struggle need not be aimed at undermining capitalist authority as a whole. In some circumstances it can contribute to a crisis of general control. In others – for example the Great Depression – an accumulation crisis surely reflected different influences' (1990: 146–7). Here general control takes on yet another form, as a measure of the strength

and pervasiveness of 'capitalist authority as a whole.' Furthermore, crises of general control and accumulation appear to assume the same analytical status. Edwards argues that '[h]ow detailed and general control are articulated will depend on the internal dynamics of particular struggles around detailed control and on the context of the accumulation process' (147). On this view, general control serves as a catch-all term for the entire process of capital accumulation. With Thompson, Edwards reconciles within a single concept phenomena from quite different levels of analysis. His conception of general control offers an escape route from explanation of the necessary interconnections of the capital accumulation process, and shifts the focus of analysis towards the particularities of the immediate work situation.

That the three aforementioned authors fail to connect the labour process with other abstract and concrete categories reflects, in part, their collective eschewal of value theory. This remains an enduring problem in labour process analysis. As Cohen suggests, '[l]abour process writers have never *considered* the labour process from the point of view of value; the issue simply has not been on the theoretical agenda' (1987: 48). Yet value theory can make a significant positive contribution to the analysis of the labour process, advancing debate at both a conceptual and political level. In particular, it offers a clearly structured articulation of the move from the abstract to the concrete. The categorial progression from value as socially necessary labour time through valorisation and surplus value production to realisation marks the unifying moment of capitalist production. Each subsequent stage represents the progressive self-actualisation of value as capital, and constitute, in aggregate, 'value-in-motion' (see Pilling 1980). There is thus a specific order to value theory that can be used to grasp the necessary interconnections between essence and appearance in the work context. A value-theoretic approach to labour process enquiry is then useful in providing an insight into the different levels of analysis that inform developments in and around the work process.

On a political front, value theory fixes attention on the contradictions and necessary tendencies of capital. It identifies the essence of capitalist production with alienated labour, stressing the centrality of capitalist domination based on the primacy of value production over human production. Thus, it is no coincidence that Braverman (1974: 181–2) identified deskilling tendencies with the 'abstraction of labour'. His approach had a definite political intent. As the essence of value, abstract labour constitutes the self-denial of work; the imposition of labour as a forced activity in the service of capital accumulation. Braverman drew on the concept of abstract labour to show the necessary interconnections between workplace transformation and the more basic opposition of value and use-value. This promoted a view of labour emancipation based on the transcendence of abstract labour and value. Braverman's key message was that this could not be achieved without the abolition of capitalist property relations.

The move away from value theory in labour process analysis has created both conceptual confusion and political pessimism. Theoretically, the opportunity has been missed to define the specific internal connections of the capitalist production process. Thus, for example, Thompson recognises, on the one hand, that '[t]he social relations into which workers enter to produce useful things becomes a capitalist labour process when the capacity to work is utilised as a means of producing value', but claims, on the other, that '[e]xploitation does not depend on the notion of labour alone creating value, let alone socially necessary labour time determining the value of a commodity in exchange' (1990: 99, and 99–100). He locates exploitation with 'the appropriation of the surplus labour by capital based on its ownership and control of the means of production, and the separation of direct producers from those means' (100). Thompson's privileging of surplus labour, however, creates unnecessary conceptual ambiguity by shifting the focus away from the specifically capitalist process of valorisation. In eschewing surplus value production, he tends to misrepresent capitalist production as a simple labour process. This ignores the fact that '[i]n capitalist production the *labour process* is only the *means*; the end is supplied by the *valorisation process* or the *production of surplus value*' (emphasis in original; Marx 1976: 1001–2).

The failure to take account of the contradictions of value production has also served to emasculate the radicalism of the labour process debate. Discussion on the possibilities for progressive change remains narrowly centred on the immediate work process, which, in the case of Burawoy's analysis, is assumed to feature enduring sources of worker consent to capitalism. The narrow fascination with workplace contingency dislocates production from capitalism, granting capital a universal and inevitable status. This necessarily subverts the critique of capital and offers as an alternative a regressive form of 'apathetic cynicism' (Peck 1982: 89). Thompson is more direct in his disavowal of radical politics. He takes a deliberately reformist approach and claims that 'a hostility to transformational reforms makes sense only if revolutionary change is round the corner' (1990: 128). Surely, however, the whole point of critical research (Marxist or otherwise) is to promote the case for emancipatory change, even if such change may appear a distant prospect at the concrete level. Articulating the need for emancipatory change offers a vital step forward in the subversion of prevailing ideologies that support the status quo. This is perhaps one of the most important lessons to draw from the work of Braverman. Value theory facilitates political agitation by focusing on the all-encompassing domination of alienated labour under capitalism. Thompson's alternative approach, encompassing a dual appeal to empirical complexity and reformism, reproduces an essentially conservative politics. Rather than 'restore the emancipatory intent of labour process theory' (1990: 97), Thompson arguably pushes it towards an acceptance of capitalism that rules out any real possibility of change in the life-situation of the working class.

There is a clear role for value theory in the simultaneous conception and critique of capitalist production. That labour process analysis neglects this role hastens its retreat towards narrowly empiricist and managerialist research on work organisation. Unfortunately, as discussed in the next section, recent trends in the labour process debate have shifted the focus even further away from issues of value and alienation. Indeed, with the rise of Foucauldian analysis, there have been determined efforts to separate out the labour process from capitalism as a whole.

Submerged by Subjectivity?

A nascent body of research looks to reconstruct labour process analysis on new Foucauldian foundations. David Knights and Hugh Willmott have spearheaded this shift of focus. Both writers claim that subjective phenomena have been consistently neglected in the labour process debate. This deficiency is linked to the (implicit or explicit) commitment to Marx and Marxism among labour process authors. A key problem resides with the abstractness of Marx's original analysis of subjectivity. His materialist conception of subjectivity, in which conscious work is identified with the essence of human existence, allegedly delimits conception of the actual constitution of individual practices and experiences. In the context of Marx's treatise on capital, labour is conceptualised in narrow terms, as a 'forced' activity incorporating alienation and the consequent self-denial of workers as creative and purposeful human beings.

Foucauldian critics expose what they see as the false dichotomy established by Marx between the 'creative subject' and 'constraining object' (Knights 1990: 303). Thus, subjectivity is defined as the 'productive and autonomous aspects of human experience', and is claimed to be constrained by the 'objective structures of capitalist production'. This makes individual subjects appear as simple functionaries of processes inscribed in determinate structures. That there is a relative autonomy from structural forces allows for 'class struggle' against alienation. In this sense, there is no agency in social praxis. Marx's reliance on 'a highly abstracted and formalised conception of "class relations" and "interests", ... fails to penetrate the sensuous, material reality of the interpersonal process of production and circulation through which the complex dynamics of the capitalist system are practically articulated and developed' (Willmott 1990: 352).

A key theme is the constitution of self-identity in the context of individualised work institutions. Capitalist production is said to compound the sense of insecurity that attends the existential separation of object and subject. As Willmott argues, subjects seek to promote their self-identity in consequence of 'anxieties aroused by the experience of separation from nature and massively amplified by the individualising of subjectivity within the capitalist mode of production' (1990: 371). Thus, in the case of wage-labour, while the commodification of labour power affords

workers the opportunity to exercise discretion in their choice of employer, it simultaneously renders them individually responsible for the reproduction of their own labour power. Denied ownership of productive assets, individual workers face the ever-present uncertainty of securing an income that is at least sufficient to assure them a means of subsistence. The vulnerability attached to dispossession carries over to the labour process, in particular, through covert supervision and individualised career structures. These management initiatives increase the pressure on subjects to achieve self-validation in their actions. That individual workers locate opportunities for self-confirmation under existing capitalist institutions has 'the unintended consequence of concealing from labour the extent to which its pursuit of such opportunities has the contradictory effect of reinforcing its dependence on capital' (363).

This proposition is elaborated by Willmott in terms of the concept of 'identity fetishism'. The latter, he argues, is of equal importance to the more conventional Marxist notion of commodity fetishism. Preoccupation with self-identity is claimed to so dominate human existence, that its origins in specific social institutions become hidden from view. Individual subjects, Willmott suggests, seek reassurance in the familiar without being aware that they are contributing towards the perpetuation of forces that exacerbate individualisation, and which thus open the way for future disconfirmation of self-identity. Thus, '[i]nstead of penetrating this contradictory fetishism of identity, and thereby releasing ourselves from the unequal and unwinnable struggle of securing subjectivity in social identity, we direct our efforts to maintaining the social conditions required for its confirmation' (1990: 369). In the work context, it is claimed that individual workers discipline themselves through private activities to secure self-identity. The Foucauldian notion of 'subjugation' is invoked to describe the processes through which individual workers voluntarily produce, and reproduce extant relations of power and domination. The self-defeating search for stable identity is implied to reduce individual workers to obedient and passive subjects. This process of self-subordination supposedly accounts for the endurance of capitalism.

Foucauldian analysis, however, confronts a fundamental contradiction. Specifically, it must retain the objective (Marxist/Braverman) foundations of labour process theory, or else lose sight of the historical specificity (objectivity) of capitalist production. This explains the frequent references to surplus value production, and its necessary corollary, 'systemic exploitation'. Ironically, given Willmott's (1995) claims of 'schizophrenia' in labour process theory, he and other Foucauldian authors display their own schizophrenic attitude towards Marx and Marxism. Marx is excessively 'objectivist', on the one hand, but possessive of useful 'objective' insights, on the other. Of course, Foucault himself rejected broad (objective) categorisations of capital and labour in preference to a 'decentred' conception of subjectivity (see Newton 1999: 415–16). Inconsistencies develop as Foucauldian writers seek to square

this conceptual circle by embracing certain Marxist concepts and categories. Thus, in the case of value relations, for example, there is outright hostility to the 'functionalism' of value theory. Conceptualising labour as the servant of valorisation supposedly leaves it bereft of subjective content. Yet, on the other hand, value categories are used to define the 'imperatives' of the capitalist labour process, and also the source of labour exploitation. Foucauldian research, it seems, must take leave of Foucault to progress.

Though value theory is invoked in Foucauldian analysis, there is no clear explanation offered on the conceptual status of either exploitation or valorisation. More seriously, both categories are presented as if they were reconcilable within (sometimes even original to) the Foucauldian framework. Marxist insights tend to enter the analysis in a more or less ad hoc fashion. Their invocation invariably appears ceremonial, providing the appropriate conceptual bridge to previous research on the labour process. A key problem is the narrow focus on the subjective processes involved in self-identification. That these processes concentrate attention on the individual in specific work sites moves the focus away from the broader social context of value production specific to capitalism. To be sure, connections are made between the constitution of self-identity, and the reproduction of the institutions and power structure of capitalist production. But these appear as simple add-on arguments, assuming an entirely separate existence from the core analysis of workplace subjectivity.

Crucially, there is a failure to come to terms with the existence of different levels of analysis linking object and subject. At no point in the analysis do Foucauldian writers specify a precise order of determination between categories. It is not clear, for example, what theoretical importance should be attached to surplus value production and exploitation relative to the more concrete phenomena of self-identity. Definitional ambiguity over the analytical differences between categories allows phenomena from quite different levels of analysis to be brought together in a haphazard manner. Foucauldian authors are forced to be selective in their analysis of the labour process, leaving aside certain categories by way of emphasising others. A corollary is the one-sided emphasis on subjectivity that offers no ordered insight into the move from the abstract to the concrete.

Politically, there is analytical vagueness surrounding the Foucauldian case for change. Though arguments are advanced against capitalism, with no theory of capital or labour, it is difficult to see how a radical politics should be articulated. The narrow focus on subjectivity risks shifting attention towards the *effects* of capitalist domination and away from capital itself. Thus, the key problem to address is the negative subjectivity born of individualistic management control strategies (e.g. Total Quality Management, etc.). Even when Foucauldian writers are fundamentally concerned with the interconnection between subjectivity and capital, there is a failure to define the sources of capitalist (class) domination. Power, in Foucauldian

analysis, resides as an amorphous concept. Power is seemingly exercised by all, for no one. The postmodern bent of Foucauldian research decries the identification of power with either capital or labour. The dislocation of power from capitalism, however, succeeds only in burying the essential class dimension of the domination of capital over labour. Thus, loose references are made to 'modern forms of power' and 'liberal power regimes' (Knights 1990: 326) such that capitalist domination, and its corollary, labour subordination, are obscured. That Foucauldian authors make the case for labour emancipation they do so without a clear conception of the power-less position of collective labour under capitalism.

Foucauldian analysis promotes a conservative political agenda. Through the search for stable identity, argues Willmott, 'the modern subject willingly reproduces prevalent relations of domination and exploitation' (1993: 20, quoted in Thompson and Ackroyd 1995: 627). In the work context, employee consent is established through a 'plurality of disciplinary mechanisms, techniques of surveillance and power-knowledge strategies' (Knights and McCabe 1999: 203). Again, there is nothing distinctive about the exercise of power. As argued by Thompson and Ackroyd, '[c]ontrol is treated merely as another version of discipline, and functionally orientated towards the creation of obedient bodies rather than sustaining exploitation' (1995: 624). The status of resistance is unclear given that there is no specified source or cause of power for subjects to oppose. However, in stressing that '[i]dentity is neither fixed nor constituted through any single discourse, and power is not simply a property of the powerful', Knights and McCabe claim that 'the fragility of apparently concrete power structures becomes clearer: the whole edifice begins to look less secure, displaying the potential for unplanned intervention, change and resistance' (1999: 221). Yet, ironically, Foucauldian analysis tends to support, and indeed, strengthen, capitalist hegemony by deflecting attention away from the power relation between capital and labour, and towards specific 'localities' of power (see Knights and Vurdubakis 1994). Capitalism looks all the more secure in view of the (diversionary) emphasis on concrete praxis surrounding the (self-defeating) search for stable identity. Though Foucauldian writers claim to promote an 'open subjectivity' (see Knights 1990: 322; Willmott 1990: 375), their analysis imparts to individual subjects a narrow preoccupation with the confirmation of self-identity that has as its inevitable corollary the perpetuation of extant power relations. Power, in short, cannot be transcended; it can merely be exercised differently within existing (permanent?) power-knowledge discourses. The irony is that Foucauldian authors succumb to the very 'fetishism of identity' that they allege hinders radical change within contemporary society. Their agency-centred approach focuses on contingency to the wider neglect of deeper structural forces such that capitalist production is taken for granted, or worse still, ignored. Foucauldian research on the labour process offers no future beyond capitalism, and ultimately, could be said to condone the status quo.

Conclusions

The labour process debate promised to transform academic thinking on work organisation. Its genesis in Braverman propelled history to the forefront of discussion in the area. Work was no longer to be considered a natural or inevitable process, as had been the prior convention in industrial sociology and organisation theory. Instead work had to be understood in its specific connection with capitalism. The focus was now on capital as it simultaneously exploits and dominates direct producers. The publication of Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* raised expectations of a renaissance in critical scholarship on work issues. Twenty-five years on, however, this promise remains largely unrealised. Braverman, and in turn, Marx, have failed to retain a foothold in the labour process debate. Indeed it has become an almost unwritten rule that acceptance into the labour process school depends on prior criticism (even outright rejection) of Braverman's contribution.

Yet the retreat from Braverman and Marxism has created problems rather than resolved them. In particular, it has posed conceptual difficulties in connecting the labour process with capitalist production. Empiricist challenges to Braverman fail to excavate the necessary interconnections between workplace transformation and the distinct processes of valorisation and accumulation. Even when efforts are made to distinguish between different levels of analysis, there is no ordered insight into the movement from the abstract to the concrete. The failure to specify an adequate hierarchy of concepts means that the labour process is emphasised to the wider neglect of other causally related phenomena (in particular, class struggle). Though value theory enriches understanding of the internal connections of capital, fixing attention on the categorial progression from alienated labour through surplus value to the realisation of profit, its inclusion in labour process analysis has been resisted. This resistance has been intensified in recent times with the rise of Foucauldian research. This research takes a deliberately subjective focus, rejecting materialist and otherwise objectivist conceptions of conflict and power. While Foucauldian writers claim to transcend the bifurcation between object and subject, they ultimately end up condoning a one-sided emphasis on subjectivity that is equally as limiting as the objectivism which they allege debilitates the analysis of Braverman.³ The Foucauldian preoccupation with the processes involved in the constitution of self-identity not only individualises capitalist social relations, but also conceals the position of capital in the subordination and exploitation of collective labour.

It is a deep irony that after twenty-five years of Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* received commentaries on work organisation should once again be criticised for missing the specificities of capitalist production. For Braverman, conception of the capitalist labour process provided a necessary first step in the critique of capital. That capital no longer assumes the focal point of labour process analysis reflects on its broader journey towards political conservatism. Whereas previous empirical

enquiry on the labour process lacked the analytical depth to articulate the case against capital, latter-day Foucauldian analysis offers a specific ideology supportive of the extant social order. There is nothing in Foucauldian research to hint at the totality of capitalist domination, nor any analysis of the possibility for a genuinely alternative (post-capitalist) mode of production. The neglect of objective relations betrays an acceptance of capitalism, and in turn, an acknowledgement of defeat in the struggle to free labour from the despotic rule of capital.⁴

The route taken by labour process analysis is reminiscent of research trends in other areas of radical scholarship on work issues. Thus, just as radical economics has charted an inexorable course towards synthesis with bourgeois economics – moves that have exorcised its original subversive message (see Spencer forthcoming) – so labour process theory has embraced Foucauldian insights and relinquished the opportunity to emulate Braverman's critique of capital. That labour process writers tend to fetishise relations at the point of production threatens a return to the excessive subjectivism and ahistoricism that blighted the analysis of work organisation before Braverman (Meiksins 1994; Burawoy 1996). As Burawoy argues, movement away from Braverman and the associated 'eclipse of materialist critique opens the door to idealism – structure dissolved into a linguistic construction and history reduced to narrative' (1996: 299). The danger, as he continues, is that '[e]xperience becomes discourse, oppression becomes talk about talk'.⁵ The labour process debate risks aiding the development of capitalism by offering insights into the problems confronted by employers in motivating workers to internalise organisational goals. Labour process analysis, in short, will be turned against itself and used to formulate more effective control strategies to exploit labour. The recent incorporation of labour process theory into HRM points all too starkly to the problems of political dilution that accompany its movement away from Marxism. The challenge is to rejuvenate the radicalism of labour process analysis. If contemporary trends towards precarious employment and intensified labour are not to be accepted as 'necessary evils' but instead understood in their specific connection with capitalist production, then the position of 'critique' must once again take precedence in labour process analysis. A quarter of a century on, it is a time to restore the subversive intent of Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*.

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NOTES

1. There is also the issue of the relationship between Braverman and Baran and Sweezy. One criticism of Braverman is that he took Baran and Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital* for granted:

that he failed to draw out the differences between their approach and that of Marx (in particular, on issues of value and crisis). However, there is a real sense in which Braverman regarded his own work as separate from that of Baran and Sweezy (at least, that is, in terms of its contribution to the advancement of Marxist theory). As Braverman argues in the introduction to *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 'I cannot ... attribute to any Marxist other than Marx himself a strong intellectual influence upon this study: there simply is no continuing body of work in the Marxist tradition dealing with the capitalist mode of production in the manner in which Marx treated it in the first volume of *Capital*' (1976: 9). Braverman's approach arguably inverted that of Baran and Sweezy by seeking a return to an undiluted version of Marx(ism).

2. The term 'general directive control' originates in the work of Hyman and Elger (1981).
3. Nichols (1999) highlights the problem with reference to the edited volume of Knights and Willmott (1990). 'Consult the index', Nichols counsels, 'and 'valorisation' rates only one single page reference. 'Profit' gets no entry at all. Nor does 'wages'. 'By contrast, "subjectivity" rates 13 lines' (1999: 114). For Nichols, 'it would be a welcome step forward were it to be accepted that "labour process" is not a sexy phrase for "work organisation", and that the study of the labour process should be related to that of a valorisation process (or what we might simply term a surplus producing process)' (115).
4. Identifying limits in Foucauldian analysis, Newton claims that labour process theory should embrace the work of Nibert Elias, in particular, 'because of its ability to present a critical developmental account of power and subjectivity' (1999: 434). But Eliasian theory succumbs to the same fetishism of subjectivity that obviates Foucauldian enquiry. There are 'interdependencies and interweavings between actors', yet no articulated linkages between the labour process and capitalism. With related Foucauldian writers, Newton proposes to obviate the critique of capital under a welter of fetishised commentary on the outward complexity of empirical reality.
5. For Burawoy, however, Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* is a 'classic of its time', with limited relevance to the modern era of 'globalised' capital (see Bellamy Foster 1999). Yet this misses the important political moment of Braverman's work; his self-avowed aims to subvert pro-capitalist ideologies that universalise capitalist social relations. Braverman's sustained efforts to denude capitalist alienation and exploitation make his analysis apt to explain capitalism at all stages of its history.

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