

## The Labour Process: Still Stuck? Still a Perspective? Still Useful?

by: Jim Kitay

Many researchers who are interested in critical perspectives on work and organizations were influenced by the labour process debates. I first encountered Braverman's work in 1980, when a reading group of which I was a member spent several weeks studying *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. As my main interest at that time was in the state rather than the workplace, other labour process writings came to my attention only slowly, and it was not until the late 1980s that I became aware of the full nature and extent of the literature.

By that time the shortcomings of the early labour process approach had been identified. John Storey, an important contributor to the early debates (Storey 1983) had already announced that "It is perhaps not an exaggeration to claim that the labour process bandwagon has run into the sand" (Storey 1985, 194), and he questioned whether its problems could be resolved.

If the bandwagon was stuck in the sand, there have been a number of attempts to extricate it. The main vehicle for returning it to the road - I do not wish to belabour the metaphor - was the annual UMIST-Aston Labour Process Conference in the UK. With a mix of regular and occasional participants, these conferences yielded a steady output of published work from the mid 1980s onwards. However, is it still appropriate to speak of a labour process perspective? And what contribution has this work made to our understanding of work and organizations?

If there ever was a unified labour process perspective, it is questionable whether a cohesive theory can still be identified. A number of processes have been at work, which might be termed dissolution, fragmentation, assimilation and cooptation. After a brief introduction to some of the main early contributions to labour process theory, these four processes will be outlined.

Much of the early work on labour process theory was written within a broad Marxist framework. Braverman (1974) played a crucial role in resurrecting this neglected aspect of Marx's work, and three of the key texts in second wave labour process theory - Burawoy (1979), Richard Edwards (1979) and Friedman (1977) - were written from a Marxist perspective.

Braverman's was the seminal contribution to the contemporary labour process debates. His influence on the study of work coincided with an outpouring of radical scholarship across a range of fields, and Braverman's study is linked with this literature, particularly general political economy and the study of class. Indeed, although his analysis begins in the workplace, later chapters include discussions of class structure, the spread of market relations and the role of the state.

The focus of Braverman's book is the processes allegedly leading to the degradation of work, particularly scientific management as espoused by Frederick Taylor. Scientific management, according to Braverman, is the manifestation of the logic of capitalism in the monopoly era. It is "a theory which is nothing less than the explicit verbalization of the capitalist mode of production" (1974, 86), whose "fundamental teachings have become the bedrock of all work design". In Braverman's view, other schools of management thought such as human relations provide little more than a rhetoric for "the maintenance crew for the human machinery" (1974, 87).

Several themes can be found in Braverman's writing, which as Littler (1990) notes, underlie the main directions of the labour process debates. The first theme, which drew the most attention at the outset, was the argument that capitalism contains a logic of deskilling manifested in Taylorism. This involved a twofold process of job fragmentation and the progressive separation of conception from execution in the process of production. Braverman sketched a transition from production dominated by the scientific knowledge and craft skills of workers to a situation in which management exercises full control over the knowledge and design of the production process. Each step of the labour process

would be broken down into its simplest elements, management would determine the most efficient method of performing the task and provide detailed instructions which workers would follow unquestioningly. Taylor anticipated considerable increases in productivity through the simplification of production into specialized tasks, as well as allowing management to combat the "systematic soldiering" that he believed accompanied workers' control. The result, Braverman argued, would be a dynamic of deskilling, with workers performing increasingly routine, fragmented tasks without understanding the principles underlying the production process.

The second theme was control. Braverman (1974, 68) considered control to be "the central concept of all management systems". It is "essential for the capitalist that control over the labor process pass from the hands of the worker into his own" (1974, 58), and Braverman is usually understood to view control over labour as the fundamental problem of management. Thus Taylorism was not simply a system of job design, but of control over alienated labour (1974, 90). Braverman was particularly interested in the use of technology to transfer control over the labour process from workers to management (eg 1974, 194).

Finally, Braverman explored the implications of scientific management for class structure, leading to an exploration of labour markets. His analysis is based on traditional Marxist categories of a reserve army of labour, productive and unproductive labour, and class fractions. His general theme was a secular trend of proletarianization, with labour being released from industries which were subject to mechanization and clustering in industries less amenable to technological advances, particularly clerical, sales and service work. This would result in a polarization of wage levels in the working class, with higher paid men in the stagnant or declining industries subject to mechanization, and lower paid women in industrialized countries and workers in less developed countries concentrated in the rapidly growing labour intensive industries.

Several reformulations of labour process theory from a Marxist perspective soon followed in the "second wave" of analysis. The primary focus of such writers as Friedman, Richard Edwards and Burawoy was the question of control. Braverman's belief that scientific management was the form of control in capitalism was criticised as simplistic. Friedman (1977) agreed that employees could be subject to forms of "direct control" such as Taylorism, but argued that there were limitations to direct control that could be partially counteracted by introducing policies of "responsible autonomy" for sections of the workforce. This was not simply a facade to cover Taylorist practices, which was Braverman's view of job re-design approaches, but rather "attempts to harness the adaptability of labour power by giving workers leeway and encouraging them to adapt to changing situations in a manner beneficial to the firm" (1977, 78). Richard Edwards (1979) posited a secular trend in control strategies from the "simple control" characteristic of small workplaces to "technical control" in which management sought to use the control capabilities of machinery and technological innovations such as assembly lines, to the "bureaucratic control" found in the long career ladders and elaborate rule books of large corporations.

It was often asserted that Braverman had neglected the Marxist tenet that alienated labour inherently resists management. Friedman and Richard Edwards, however, argued that the changing forms of control they identified arose from conflict between management and labour. This "control-resistance" model remained popular amongst radical commentators for some time (see eg Probert 1989), but in another major "second wave" contribution Burawoy (1979) noted that basing labour process analysis on such conflictual foundations could not account for the prevalence of cooperation in most workplaces much of the time. Consent, Burawoy argued, arises from the organization of activities in workplaces in such a way that workers perceive themselves as having choices. "It is participation in choosing that generates consent." (1979, 27) From this, Burawoy developed his well known analysis of "games", activities which deflect workers' attention away from the expropriation of surplus value by employers, towards activities designed to "beat" the employer in matters such as incentive payments or otherwise organize workplace activities in a manner more favourable to employees. This argument suggests that the opportunity to gain small victories masks the fundamental disadvantage of workers in the capitalist mode of production.

With this brief introduction to some of the key early writings on the labour process, we can note, first, how a process of dissolution quickly commenced. The first stage of dissolution involved a critique of the initial Marxist framework of labour process theory, particularly Braverman's work, by sympathetic non-Marxist writers. More recently, a post-structuralist or Foucauldian influence has entered the debate, presenting itself as a significant departure from both Marxism and radical political economy or sociology.

Avowedly Marxist writers such as Friedman, Richard Edwards and Burawoy shared much in common with others who joined in the early debates. For example, in another major contribution to second wave labour process theory, Littler (1982) retained the radical orientation of Marxism but based his work equally on the more critical aspects of Weberian theory. In addition to a critique of arguments on scientific management, Littler also sought to link labour process arguments on control with the Weberian concepts of bureaucracy and legitimation. He concluded that a more complex approach was needed in which the labour process was conceptualized as operating on three levels - job design, the structure of control and the employment relationship. These levels have a degree of independence, and allow for mixed strategies to be employed. While Littler did not develop an extended theory of ideology, his use of Weberian constructs led to an analysis of subjectivity at work which potentially covered a wider range of workplace actions than Burawoy's discussion of consent and games.

Similarly, in an article which became a basic reference in the radical literature on labour markets, Rubery (1978) used Braverman as a starting point, but introduced material drawn from dual labour market theory and radical economics to develop a theory of labour market segmentation. In her view, 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). A consequence is the development of a range of non-competing labour markets, an idea which seems closer to the Weberian concept of closure - "the process by which social collectivities seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles" (Parkin 1979, 44) - than to the Marxist notion of the reserve army of labour found in Braverman.

Littler, Rubery and others like them can be seen as having entered into a dialogue with Marxist writers. Paul Edwards (1986), in another major synthesis of labour process theory, made substantial use of Marxist concepts, but went to considerable lengths to distance his work from Marxism. Noting a broad theoretical similarity between Marxists and radical non-Marxists in the use of such terms as exploitation, contradiction, and the centrality of workplace struggle, Edwards terms his approach "materialist" but not Marxist (1986, 88). A key difference, in his view, is that "Marxism must propose some logic of social development such that exploitation will be transcended, whereas materialism makes no such claim" (1986, 89). While a position such as Edwards's is sympathetic towards workers, 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. A similar view to that of Edwards is adopted by Thompson (1990, 102), one of the relatively few major radical writers who maintained an ongoing involvement in labour process analysis from the early 1980s to the present.

More recently, Rowlinson and Hassard (1994) have argued that Braverman, by adopting the economics of Baran and Sweezy (1966), departed considerably from orthodox Marxism. According to Rowlinson and Hassard, the labour process theorists abandon such central Marxist tenets as the labour theory of value and the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, concentrating instead on struggles over relations of dominance and subordination. Thus "the connection with Marxian political economy is largely severed, and it becomes difficult to distinguish labour process theory from radical organisation theory" (1994, 70).

Despite the similarities between Marxist and non-Marxist "second wave" labour process analysis, the rejection of Marxism by most writers by the mid 1980s constitutes the first stage of the dissolution of a cohesive labour process framework. Indeed, given differences among Braverman and the Marxist

second wave theorists, it is arguable that despite a number of shared ideas, a coherent labour process theory may never have existed at all.

The post-structuralist or "Foucauldian turn" subsequently introduced a much deeper theoretical rift. The work of Knights and Willmott in particular (Knights 1990; Willmott 1990; Knights and Vurdubakis 1994; Knights and Willmott 1989) has been very influential, especially their theorizing of subjectivity and resistance. They argue that both Marxist labour process theorists and their non-Marxist critics are guilty of dualism. One pole of this dualism revolves around the distinction between agency/structure or voluntarism/determinism in which subjectivity is tacitly conceptualized as "that creative autonomy or personal space not yet captured by political economy" (Knights and Willmott 1989, 549). The second dualistic element is said to be an essentialism in the form of an assumption that there is an "inner essence" which is violated in the capitalist labour process " (552). Instead, Knights and Willmott (1989, 554) argue that subjectivity and power are mutually constitutive, such that "subjectivity is understood as a product of disciplinary mechanisms, techniques of surveillance and power-knowledge strategies: human freedom is constituted through their mediation of subjectivity".

In the course of a critical discussion of post-structuralist theory, Thompson (1993, 202) suggests that when applied to the labour process, it entails a "retreat from engagement", which might be seen as a diversion of labour process theory away from its original radical direction. Knights and Vurdubakis (1994) deny this accusation, as does Townley (1994) in her Foucauldian critique of human resource management. More recently, Thompson and Ackroyd (1995) suggest that, although post-structuralist analysis is predicated on the view that power inherently gives rise to resistance, worker resistance has been theoretically neglected and empirically invisible in post-structuralist writing. Ironically, according to Thompson and Ackroyd, this replicates one of the central problems identified by early critics of Braverman.

The infusion of Foucauldian ideas has rekindled the labour process debate along new lines, with the opponents much further apart than during the earlier period. Indeed, there is less a debate than a gaping chasm across which dismissive polemics are occasionally hurled. It seems likely that the injection of post-structuralism into labour process analysis will result in further dissolution rather than a new synthesis.

A second trend in the labour process literature theory was fragmentation. As mentioned earlier, Littler (1990) identified three key themes in labour process analysis: deskilling, management strategy and labour markets. While early contributions such as Littler (1982) attempted to formulate a synthesis, research in each strand soon developed a dynamic of its own. The labour process literature quickly evolved into disconnected debates over the meaning of skill and whether or not deskilling was occurring, or whether multiple control strategies could be used.

Later, discussions of strategy receded in the labour process literature. Critics such as Storey (1985) noted that the strategy literature was too generalized. First, it was argued that most enterprises do not use one particular strategy, but a range of strategies simultaneously. Second, the early labour process literature portrayed management as more conscious and rational than they typically are in dealing with labour. Allied to this is a third point, that labour control is usually less important to employers than early labour process theory suggested. It is ironic that not long after early labour process theory was busily elevating labour control to the top of management's agenda, the new breed of HRM writers were lamenting the failure of management to take the personnel function sufficiently seriously! Some contributors to the labour process debates continued to be interested in management strategy, but only Friedman (1990) sought to incorporate the criticisms into a more sophisticated version of labour process theory. Paul Edwards (1987), for example, examined the prevalence of "macho management" in Britain, while Storey (1992) has made a major contribution to the analysis of human resource management. Both Edwards and Storey's recent work deals with strategy, but neither uses a labour process perspective.

In addition to a new epistemological approach, the entry of the Foucauldians to the field in the late 1980s shifted attention towards subjectivity, an issue raised earlier by Burawoy (1979). Their work had little overlap with the empirical concerns of most earlier labour process writers.

After Edwards (1986) there was no attempt to develop a synthesis. Thompson (1990) sought to redevelop a core theory, but by this stage the Foucauldian critique had emerged and Thompson has sought to criticise rather than incorporate their work. Thus the labour process literature proceeded by developing a number of discrete debates, each of which was worthwhile, but there was little attempt to maintain a theoretical integration between the broad issues.

Third, many of the insights of labour process theory have been assimilated by mainstream researchers, particular in industrial relations in the UK. It is instructive to note, for example, that Dunn (1990) refers in passing to Paul Edwards as an industrial relations "mainstreamer". This is the same Paul Edwards whose theoretical work is based on the idea of "a basic conflict of interest between capital and labour ... rendered in the notion of a structured antagonism" (1986, 77). Edwards himself (1995, 44), writing about industrial relations in the UK, later noted that

The [mainstream] pluralists accepted some of the key points of radical analysis, in particular as expressed through renewed attention to the labour process. The indeterminacy of the labour contract ... became a standard theme in teaching in the early 1980s, with works like those of Richard Edwards (1979) and Andrew Friedman (1977) being widely studied.

This understanding would no doubt be shared by many mainstream industrial relations writers in the UK - and indeed in Australia as well, although the influence of labour process analysis has been minimal in the United States.

The failure of labour process theory to make much headway in the US is interesting, and difficult to explain except in terms of the more conservative nature of American social science in comparison with the UK and Australia. The contours of these differences are well beyond the scope of this paper. Most British and Australian industrial relations academics, for example, would have some familiarity with labour process analysis or at least its subject matter, but Kaufman's (1993) history of academic industrial relations in the US fails to mention it at all. Similarly, standard American industrial sociology textbooks such as Hall (1994) and Hodson and Sullivan (1995) mention the key writers in the labour process literature only in passing, while British texts such as Grint (1991), Thompson and McHugh (1995) and Watson (1995) devote considerable attention to the approach.

If labour process analysis made little impact in the US, many of the insights of first and second wave labour process theory are now everyday fare amongst the academic mainstream in the UK and Australia. While many British and Australian researchers would feel uncomfortable with the Marxist sounding terminology, arguments over skill, control and labour markets that draw on labour process concepts would hardly be considered exotic. Shorn of its Marxist and radical Weberian assumptions, it was assimilated into the mainstream and lost much of its distinctiveness.

Similarly, some of the iterations of labour process theory have been assimilated by other schools of thought, such as feminism. Although Braverman addressed the situation of female workers, a fundamental problem with Marxist class categories is that they are gender blind. Work on gender issues has been a strong feature of the labour process literature from an early stage (see West (1990) for a review). In particular, feminists have done important work on both labour markets and the social construction of skill. However, introducing concepts developed in feminist discourse took labour process theory further from its Marxist origins. Indeed, as West (1990, 246) argues, many feminist issues fit poorly within Marxist categories. Furthermore, the centrality of domestic labour to feminist analysis stands in an uneasy relationship with the labour process focus on paid employment. In Australia, labour process theory has informed some important feminist historical research into the development of work, trade unionism and the domestic division of labour (Bennett 1984; Frances

1993; Reiger 1985), as well as writing on contemporary industrial relations and sociological issues (Probert 1989; Williams 1988).

Finally, it could be argued that a number of researchers in the labour process tradition have been coopted to less radical approaches. There clearly has been a general decline in the popularity of radical thought in universities in anglophone countries since the halcyon days of academic Marxism in the 1970s. For some writers, there doubtless would have been a genuine intellectual disenchantment with radical theory and an attraction to other schools of thought. The shift away from labour process theory would be all the easier because of its weak link with Marxist economics (Rowlinson and Hassard 1994) and its affinity with Weberian perspectives which easily merge with a reformist research agenda. Furthermore, a number of academics who began their careers as young, radical political economists or sociologists now occupy senior positions in schools of management or business. They deal readily with business, government and mainstream funding institutions. While these scholars have generally retained a critical edge to their published work, and can by no means be considered to have joined the ranks of some former radicals who became neo-conservatives, their criticisms now come from within the political mainstream, and at a considerable distance theoretically from early labour process perspectives. Without knowing the personal histories of those involved, it would be futile to speculate on the reasons for their intellectual shifts. Certainly, as Rowlinson and Hassard (1994, 66) argue, working in a business school has no inherent bearing on one's theoretical perspective, though in most cases business school radicals will find few intellectual fellow travellers in nearby offices. The point remains that the insight and energy of the early labour process theorists who abandoned the approach has not been replaced, and the redirection of their interests has clearly weakened the debates.

My argument is that labour process theory began to change at an early stage, such that it is inappropriate to speak of a unified "perspective" at least from the time that Rubery (1978) and Littler's (1982) work appeared. Thompson (1990) seeks to salvage a common core from the "wreckage. To some extent the appearance of common ground was encouraged in the early labour process debates by the radicalism of most of the participants, which glossed over their differences. But there are a range of radical perspectives, as indeed there are a variety of perspectives within Marxism itself, and the introduction of non-Marxist frameworks made it unlikely that common ground would be re-established. The growth of Foucauldian ideas confirmed what was already evident in hindsight.

Is labour process analysis still useful? I believe that it is, bearing in mind that no one theory wears the labour process mantle. Personally, I continue to find Littler's (1982) three level framework of the employment relationship, the structure of control and job design a fruitful model for analysing relations at work. Similarly Burawoy's (1985) discussion of the politics of production, both in terms of the micro-politics of the workplace and the role of the state in work relations have helped me make sense of work organizations. Rubery's (1978) early work on labour markets became an important foundation of subsequent labour market research. While few would now agree that capitalism contains an inherent dynamic of deskilling, labour process analysis keeps me wary of the enthusiasms of post-Fordist and postmodern writers concerning employee empowerment and skill upgrading. I remain sceptical of those for whom increasing productivity has taken theoretical priority over reducing inequality. And so on.

Judging from the articles in the past few volumes of a journal like *Work, Employment & Society*, and even the more mainstream *Work and Occupations*, many researchers seem to share the view that labour process concepts are still worthwhile, including those found in the early works of Braverman and the second wave writers. While labour process analysis has waned with the general waning of radicalism in universities and elsewhere, it has nevertheless contributed a leavening of concepts which question the understandings of managerial ideologies. It is surely not a coincidence that so many academics in Britain and Australia, where labour process theory has wide recognition, are interested in the ways in which human resource management practices constitute a new form of control, whereas in the United States, researchers seem far more concerned with whether HRM is positively associated with higher levels of productivity.

I do not believe, however, that there is now a coherent labour process perspective, and an argument can be made that if one ever existed, it was fleeting, for the reasons outlined above. Most significantly, labour process analysis suffered the proliferation and subsequent decline of radical scholarship more generally, though it retains a small but hardy following and a wider influence within mainstream research.

With the entry of post-structuralists to labour process analysis, the prospect of a cohesive approach is less likely than ever. In addition to the difficulties Foucauldians have agreeing amongst themselves, I am unaware of any suggestion that there might be a synthesis between post-structuralism and the more traditional radicalism of writers like Thompson. The early theoretical debates on the labour process were marked by both disagreement as well as a search for common ground, but more recent debates seem to consist mostly of drawing lines in the sand. Furthermore, while post-structuralist theory has enjoyed a degree of popularity in fields like organisational studies, it has remained marginal in other areas - notably industrial relations and industrial sociology - which have been heavily influenced by early labour process theory. Quite apart from any intellectual merits the post-structuralist approach might have, the difficulty - dare I say inability - that many of those working in this tradition have writing clear English makes it hard to see post-structuralism attracting the wider interest which might lead to a revitalisation of the labour process approach.

Until such time as there is a rekindling of radical perspectives more generally, the main contribution of labour process theory has probably already been made. The labour process debates played a crucial role in refocusing the interest of mainstream industrial relations and industrial sociology on a range of management issues using a critical perspective, and away from the previous limited focus on workers, unions and productivity. At least in Australian and Great Britain, it is hard to imagine non-managerial research in the broad areas of work and employment relations which is not influenced by labour process insights.

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