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Labour Process Theory and Critical Management Studies¹

Paul Thompson

Labour Process Theory (LPT) is conventionally and rightly listed as one of the analytical resources for Critical Management Studies (CMS). Yet, the relationships between the two have been, in the words of a classic of the former, a contested terrain. This is hardly surprising. Even if we set aside the inevitable multiplicity of perspectives, there is a tension in potential objects of analysis. Before CMS burst on to the scene, LPT was being criticised at its peak of influence in the 1980s for paying too much attention to management and too little to capital(ism) and labour. This was sometimes attributed to the location of many of the protagonists (in the UK at least) in business schools, but was, more likely a reflection of wider theoretical and ideological divides.

Throughout the 1990s a battle took place – ‘the labour process debate’ – between what some would regard as the materialist and post-structuralist participants inside and outside the annual UK-based conference. The emergence of a separate CMS conference and related initiatives was shaped, in part, by the nature and outcomes of those debates. Where do we stand now – to what extent is LPT part of, separate from or hostile to CMS?

It is important to make one qualification about the debates discussed below. As social theory so clearly indicates, institutions matter. The existence and location of an annual and successful labour process conference and book series based in the UK has meant that a particular weight is given to theorising and research within its boundaries. Yet clearly the conference, critical theory and research and LPT are not the same things. For example, there are lively traditions of LP scholarship in North America that have proceeded on overlapping but often very distinctive paths (e.g. Shalla and Clement 2007). Whilst some effort will be made to refer to a wider set of debates, in a short review of this kind, the scope for doing so will inevitably be limited and our focus must be the LPT-CMS interface.

The Theory: Territory, Tensions and Tantrums

What is LPT and what does its ‘field’ consist of? It is convention to refer to a number of ‘waves’ of development (see Thompson and

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Newsome 2004). The first wave is seen as Braverman and supportive arguments, the second as the major studies from Richard Edwards, Friedman, Burawoy, Littler and others that followed in its wake from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. Perhaps more controversially, we could identify an overlapping third wave over the following decade characterised largely by a series of paradigm wars *between*, on the one hand, LPT and a number of 'new production and society' perspectives such as flexible specialisation and post-Fordism, and on the other *within* those attending the annual conference about territory and tasks. It is in the second category of the third wave that the UK-based 'labour process debate' took place. This debate was initially between consolidators and reconstructionists. The former saw the second wave as consisting of a number of common concepts vital for analysing the trajectories of capitalist economies and work systems, but in danger of being drowned in a welter of seemingly contradictory empiricist case studies about skill, control and related issues. The main proposed solution was the development of a core theory that synthesised and extended the insights of post-Braverman research with a view to producing more or less coherent statements of what the contemporary labour process looked like and the conceptual tools to understand it.

In the influential *Labour Process Theory* volume published at the end of the decade (Knights and Willmott 1990), this was the clear intent of a number of the contributors – notably myself, Paul Edwards and Craig Littler (all 1990). In my case, that involved the elaboration of a core theory based on a number of propositions about the structural characteristics of the capitalist labour process that shaped and constrained workplace relations. Part of the purpose was to distinguish between identification of strong tendencies deriving from those structures and mechanisms and particular outcomes, such as deskilling and Taylorism, with which LPT had become associated because of the influence of Braverman. So for example, the core referred to a control imperative given that market mechanisms alone cannot address the indeterminacy of labour (the conversion of labour power into profitable work), rather than specifying a particular control strategy. The core theory became a reference point for many later studies and we will return to its character and status later. However, in that same volume, the two editors, in separate but mutually supportive chapters, put forward a very different conception of territory and task: 'the systematic reconstruction of labour process theory...to develop a more adequate, materialist theory of subjectivity' (Willmott 1990: 337). Thus was born the 'the missing subject' debate,

There was some common ground between consolidators and reconstructionists. Both agreed that Braverman's preference for analysing only the objective characteristics of the capital-labour relationship had left a hole where agency and subjectivity should have been, but differed sharply on how it should be filled, Consolidators tended to believe that (re) inserting resistance, the capacity of creativity in labour power and the importance of consent (Burawoy 1979) as part of the range of worker responses to its commodity status was a substantial, if not wholly sufficient contribution to a revised LPT. For Knights, Willmott and their collaborators, such developments, particularly Burawoy's emphasis on consent, was an advance on objectivism, but nowhere near enough. At first this was framed in terms of 'complementing' a structural analysis through a focus on the subjective conditions that facilitate the reproduction of capitalism.

In itself, this is uncontroversial, but there are three problems. First, are the chosen means. It may have been 'materialist', but the raw *material* was a discussion of existential problems of identity and power located in the general human condition. Second, there was a substantive displacement effect through the rejection of all of the available resources of LPT and search for new ones, initially in critical theory and then, increasingly in Foucault and post-structuralism. Every critique more or less followed the same path – well known labour LPT texts would be picked over and critiqued with same ultimate punchline – the absence of an adequate theory of subjectivity. Third, though issues of subjective reproduction of capitalism and work relations are a sub-plot, they are not *the* plot. It is necessary to address and explain the changing political economy of capitalism, something that post-structuralists have generally shown little interest in.

Whilst Marx, Braverman and others were extensively and knowledgeably discussed in papers by Knights and Willmott, this was reconstruction without building on or from any prior empirical or theoretical foundations. As a result of these problems, the 1990s debate was not actually about the labour process. That it was presented as the 'labour process debate' was an accident of history – a convergence of two factors. The first, that the Labour Process Conference was the focal point for most critical scholarship on work, employment and organisation and, therefore, provided the textual resources for debate. Second, that Hugh Willmott and David Knights were, for a long time, its prime movers. They and their various colleagues have produced a large body of work. Some of the more empirically-based work is closer to mainstream labour process concerns (Knights and McCabe 2000; Ezzamel, Willmott and Worthington 2001). Nevertheless, my contention is that their main

interest was less the labour process itself than in critiquing labour process *theory* in order to take it somewhere else – as we have seen, towards a general theory of subjectivity.

Let's return to the proposition of a core theory. Space prevents a discussion of its content (Jaros 2005 gives a very fair account), so I want to focus on the *idea* of a core. Whilst extensively used, it always caused a certain amount of anguish. Critics of a core tend to deny that LPT has an 'essence' and describe any attempt to theorise one as a rhetorical move to marginalise or exclude dissenting voices. If you believe that all the world is a text and we are all mere players in language games, then theory can be anything you want it to be. But if, on the other hand you believe that the world consists of real structures and relations that require particular analytical resources to explain them, theory must be about *something*. In terms of a core, we can debate what features, what powers and what effects in what circumstances. But it is difficult to imagine a credible LPT that does not start from some attempt to elucidate the characteristic features of capitalist political economy and their potential causal powers, mediated by labour market and other institutions and the strategies of economic actors, with respect to work relations.

Though there are exceptions (Gibson-Graham 1996), post-structuralists do not generally produce work that tries to address 'structure problems', for example the changing nature of regimes of accumulation, state formations, the organisational forms of the contemporary firm. Such things are only glimpsed indirectly through the foggy lens of discourse. Nor do they recognise labour as an agency with distinctive (though discursively articulated) interests in the employment relationship. Rather they focus on the general indeterminacy of human agency, expressed primarily in concerns about identity. As they progressed, the 1990s conflicts became a variant on the more general paradigm wars between materialists and post-structuralists and for many reconstruction of LPT became a casualty of a more general rejection of the former framework. As Delbridge notes. 'While rarely carrying the LPT banner, these debates rumble on, particularly on the ontological status of social structures and over duality and dualisms..' (2006 1210).

Amongst the exceptions have been O'Docherty and Willmott particularly in the *Sociology* (2001) paper, their last significant attempt to intervene in the 'labour process debate'. They presented their arguments as a post but not anti-structural way out of the 'impasse' in LPT. However, the paper largely rehearsed the same critiques of 'structuralism' and arguments of a decade earlier:

subjectivity is the source of capitalism and its reproduction (461), the system's individualising tendencies accentuate existential insecurity and exploitative relations are immanent in the human condition. At the end they declare that they have 'stopped short of abandoning the central concerns and familiar linguistic terrains of labour process analysis (p. 472). But the paper had already revealed that capital and labour are viewed as only as 'signifiers', useful for their 'epistemological convenience' (466) rather than as conceptual building blocks of explanation. Nor, as Friedman (2004) demonstrates, has their methods changed. Having exhausted the classics, O'Doherty and Willmott turn to less well-known pieces by Sosteric and Ezzy to pick them apart and then chastised for the standard sins of not understanding subjectivity properly. Friedman goes on to observe that it would be better to develop approaches to subjectivity in the labour process that build on rather than dismissing previous work. This is the theme of the next section.

Theory building: successes and sins

Contrary to what O'Doherty and Willmott (2001 466), LPT is not primarily a 'discourse' – it is, or should be, a theory building project. The existence of an 'impasse' at a meta-theoretical level does not prevent theory building through research programmes associated with the 'consolidated' form of LPT. Such interventions have typically proceeded from the following questions:

- Has there been a shift in managerial strategies towards normative controls, what might such controls consist of, towards what are they directed (reshaping identities and/or interests) and how successful have they been?
- To what extent has labour retained a capacity for resistance or dissent, what forms is that resistance taking and how successful are they?

Whilst this way of addressing issues is clearly conceptually distinctive, it does offer opportunities for common empirical or conceptual meeting points between the rival perspectives.

The idea that there has been a shift in control regimes away from traditional Taylorism, Fordism and bureaucracy towards those in which management use value-based practices to shape employee identities has been associated with wider claims about a 'cultural turn'. However, as Thompson and Harley (2007) have demonstrated, from the mid-1980s onwards LPT had anticipated the idea of a shift to soft(er) and sometimes more indirect controls. Though associated with the service sector and, for instance, control through customers (Fuller and Smith 1991); LP researchers

highlighted the way that under lean production regimes, management focuses more on the normative sphere in order to bypass trade union representation and encourage worker identification with the company (e.g. Danford 1998). A further generation of researchers have been in the forefront of studies of call centre work, noting the trend towards integrated systems of technical, bureaucratic and normative controls (Callaghan and Thompson 2002), intended to create an 'assembly line in the head' (Taylor and Bain 1999), within a characteristic high-commitment, low-discretion model (Houlihan 2002). A similar story of expanded categories to take LPT beyond conventional wage-effort transactions and into analysis of new sources of labour power and emotional effort bargains can also be told (Bolton 2008).

Despite this degree of common argument, mainstream LP research has consistently criticised claims made by HRM and many post-structuralist writers concerning the extent and effectiveness of normative controls. With reference to extent, emphasis has been put on the continued presence and often centrality of traditional controls. More pertinent to the debates in this chapter, doubts have been cast on assumptions that management can shape identities in a way that overcomes divergent interests and the associated actual and potential worker resistance (and see Ezzamel, Willmott and Worthington 2004). Such arguments can be found in well-known studies such as Casey (1995), whose Foucauldian-influenced perspective produces the view that that new organisational discourses and practices produce designer employees and 'corporatised selves'. As Leidner (2006) notes, such perspectives take for granted that the identities held out by employers are attractive to workers and would uphold their sense of themselves as autonomous individuals.

Issues of culture and identity are certainly important in some contexts, but are seen as new sources of contestation. Whilst such observations are consistent with wider survey and case study evidence on the limited nature of attitudinal transformation in the context of organisational restructuring and change programs, it is one of the distinctive strengths of LPT that it can draw on the central concept of the indeterminacy of labour to show that control can never be complete and is always contestable. Whilst post-structuralists draw on a notion of indeterminacy, it refers largely to the existential insecurity of individuals (and the self-defeating character of resistance) rather than the specific characteristics of labour power under capitalism. Within LPT, this theoretical orientation has been strengthened by new inputs, notably Ackroyd and Thompson's (1999) mapping of organisation misbehaviour in which identity is key territory in which management and employees

compete to appropriate material and symbolic resources. The new categories have been successfully applied in studies such as Taylor and Bain's (2003) account of how call centre workers use humour and other informal action as a tool of resistance.

It would be unfair not to acknowledge that there has been a drawing back from deterministic readings of Foucault and the (self) disciplining effects of discourse and surveillance. In a widely-cited paper, Thomas and Davies (2005) argue that individuals are not passive recipients of discourses, but resist (in this case the discourses of new public management), utilising the tensions between different subject positions. However, they explicitly critique and reject conceptions inspired by 'negative' labour process theory, as such studies rely on an oppositional (and 'dualistic') conceptualization of resistance as the outcome of structural relations of antagonism between capital and labour. Whilst the re-discovery of resistance is welcome, as Fleming and Spicer note, in moving from a situation where resistance was nowhere to it being everywhere, CMS runs the 'risk of reducing resistance to the most banal and innocuous everyday actions' (2007, 3). LPT would argue that this trivialisation of resistance arises, in part, from its removal from the context of the employment relationship and the potentially divergent interests therein.

In contrast, mainstream LPT demonstrates a research programme that maintains continuity with core theory, a capacity to respond to new empirical conditions and for incremental conceptual innovation. That is not to say that there are no sins of omission and commission, but these have been openly recognised and discussed (Smith and Thompson 1998). Even on the 'missing subject' territory, there are welcome signs that scholars sympathetic to labour process approaches have been developing more materialist readings of identity that connect macro structures of political economy with micro-level concerns of everyday life (Webb, 2006: 194) Leidner 2006), as well as seeking to link the formation of identity and interests together in a common conceptual schema (Jenkins and Delbridge 2007, Thompson and Marks 2007).

LPT and CMS: past, present, future

Looking back, it is possible to view LPT as a territory where those critical of mainstream approaches could gather and debate – a forerunner, in other words, of critical management studies. This war of words now takes place largely across the trenches of rival conferences, journals and networks. LPT and CMS now compete for the radical work and organisations franchise, particularly in Europe and the US.

But is or will this competition be a paradigm war or peaceful co-existence? The answer depends largely whether CMS is conceived in big or small tent terms. A recent comprehensive mapping of the territory by Adler, Forbes and Willmott (2007) makes a heroic attempt at the former. It outlines even-handedly the heterogeneous theoretical resources contributing to CMS and gives a prominent role to LPT. The paper also pushes forward a reasonably consensual perspective to address the question critical of what? And it answers in terms of the varied structures of domination and inequality, as well as seeking to change management practices.

However, if we interrogate the 'critical of what' issue more closely the fault lines shift from a simple critical versus mainstream. The summaries provided by Adler, Forbes and Willmott of post-modernism/post-structuralism reinforce what we already know – that such perspectives include many 'critical' theories – including Marxism - in their definition of the mainstream. This is because the 'other' is modernism (which is taken as incorporating capitalism, though not reduced to it) and positivism. Amongst the evils attributed to these 'isms' are belief in rational (social) scientific enquiry, a reality independent of our perceptions, and so-called meta narratives that seek to order and explain broad social and historical patterns.

It is unarguable that most of the leading figures in CMS adhere to the social constructionist approaches that generate such critique. Where this is dominant, it leads, intentionally or otherwise, to a small tent version of CMS in which its radicalism is epistemological rather than ontological. In other words, the focus of the critical is more on the way that the studies are done than the position and practices of management. Though doubts about the substantive claims made about the world by mainstream scholars may be the starting point of critique, the ultimate focus tends to be on the means of and motives for making them.

I have argued elsewhere (Thompson 2004) against a restrictive branding of CMS, particularly as articulated by Fournier and Grey (2000). Hyper-reflexivity about our own labour processes and radical relativism concerning knowledge claims are not adequate ways of challenging managerialism in theory or practice. Whilst some contributors maintain an interest in social change and emancipation, too much small tent CMS tends towards self-referential textual games and (often obscure) meta theorising, whose emphasis on deconstruction and denaturalisation problematises everything and resolves nothing. As a result epistemological radicalism makes it harder to conduct debates

through common categories and criteria. The 'impasse' in the 1990s labour process debate was a much to do with lacking any common means of addressing and resolving contending claims as the arguments themselves, some of which, as we saw earlier, had more in common than sometimes thought.

If we dig beneath this somewhat asymmetric warfare, a genuine difference of territory and theoretical orientation emerges. Whilst I entirely accept the distinction between studying management as category and practice and managerialism as discourse and perspective, the focus of criticality on *management* is inherently partial and restrictive. Even for those of us who work in business schools, the broader social sciences, rather than the Academy of Management, should set the context for critical engagement. This relates to the previously-noted tension concerning an over-emphasis on management strategy rather than capital-labour relations and wider circuits of capital. One dimension of the core theory emphasises that given the role of the labour process in generating the surplus and as a central part of human experience in acting on the world and reproducing the economy, the role and experiences of labour and the capital-labour relationship is privileged for analysis. This does not mean a universal privileging *over* (for example, gender relations and the family), but *for* an analysis of the dynamic interactions between political economy and workplace change. In this sense, LPT is more accurately described as a form of critical *labour* studies, but without the teleological emphasis on labour as a universal, liberating class destined by its location in the process of production to be the gravedigger of capitalism.

Finally, the test of a good theory is, ultimately, whether it explains a particular reality in a more complex and comprehensive way than its rivals, and gives us some tools for changing it. Fetishising being critical per se is ultimately a sectarian cul-de-sac and fails to address the issue that in some spheres of academic life, such as organisation theory (at least in Europe) CMS is now the mainstream.

Conclusion

In a review in 1990 Gibson Burrell remarked that as a classic narrative, LPT 'no longer put bums on seats' (p. 294). It is certainly true that LPT has long ceased to be fashionable and a lot of bands and wagons have passed us by on the other side of the road. Whilst the continuing success of the conference might be considered by some as institutional inertia, there is plenty of evidence that the perspectives influence and inspire a body of relevant and radical

work about the many facets of the politics of production. Reviewing a number of recent books, Delbridge notes, 'There is nothing particularly novel in this agenda. These remain the core features of labour process analysis and so they should... critical and theoretically informed research into the labour process, its contexts and outcomes, retains a central place...' (2006 1219).

This is not just a question of core features, but of theory. As Jaros (2005 23) has noted, the core theory discussed earlier has survived postmodernist and orthodox Marxian critiques as a 'robust perspective from which to study the dynamics of capitalist production'. However, I also agree with Jaros and with other sympathetic commentators (Elger 2001, Smith 2006) that it is underspecified and requires some reworking and expansion, for example to incorporate better understandings of the dynamics of corporate competition, labour markets and mobility.

Though there will inevitably be some requirement for metatheoretical debates and critique of new economy perspectives of various kinds, mainstream LPT has to learn and move on from paradigm wars. Previous waves have been marked by foundation, consolidation and innovation. LPT needs to go through a serious, integrative theory building phase, elucidating patterns and propositions discovered through relevant research programmes (see Thompson and Harley 2007). Though, as Willmott, Knights and others have never tired of reminding us, the reproduction of capitalist political economy is accomplished through agency, the 'greatest task' is not a theory of the missing subject. It is (to quote Talking Heads) the same as it ever was: to develop a credible account of the relationships between capitalist political economy, work systems and the strategies and practices of actors in the employment relationship.