

Neo-Liberal Workplace and Labour Process Analysis: resilience of Dialectics in Understanding Consent and Resistance in the Workplace.

Abstract

This paper contributes to understanding the debates on labour process analysis which continue to underpin conceptual framework for explaining the dynamics of neo-liberal workplace. The generic character of capitalist mode of production has distinct features that have been elaborated on, in labour process analysis. In the context of “structured relations” between capital and labour, labour process theory provides the foundational theoretical framework for examining and understanding the social relations of production within the workplace. However, while the debates over labour process continue to reflect a “broad church” of perspectives comprising “eclectic orientations” of diverse strands, dialectical analysis remains resilient in providing critical understanding to consent and resistance in contemporary workplace. The diverse contributions to the debates on labour process provide the critical perspectives to emerging dynamics of world of work, and endemic dimensions of control imperatives of management. The conceptual lineages of labour process debates; both of the earlier Marxist contributors and that of “second wave” analysts, remain strong and “elastic” in providing understanding of contemporary neo-liberal workplace.

Introduction and Conceptual Underpinning

Labour Process Theory (LPT) (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979. 1985; P.Edwards, 1979; Friedman1977; Paul Thompson and Stephen Ackroyd, 1995; Hugh Willmott, 1998; David Knights,1988; and David Collinson et al,1994) provides the foundational understanding for examining the workplace as a “contested terrain” between the owners of the means of production, and the workers, while locating the struggles within a wider political economy. “Labour Process debate” that followed Braverman’s publication continues to advance our

understanding of the complex character of the transformations of world of work under capitalism. Indeed, the tendencies to rehash orthodox labour process analysis, and the inclusion of emerging and diverse perspectives under the same umbrella continue to make the debates dynamic and resilient to understanding workplace relations. Dialectical analysis, within the genre of Labour Process Theory (LPT) makes the debate the best means to critically analyse world of work under neo-liberal managerial control and practices. However, as Thompson (1989, cited in Vaughan Ellis 2004:2) notes, it is necessary for “both orthodox analysts and “second wave” writers to consistently identify with the “core” elements of LPT for it to retain its vigour and usefulness in understanding work under Capitalism”.

Marx (1990, cited in Vaughan Ellis, 2004:3) had defined “labour process as comprising three elements; one as a purposeful activity, i.e work itself, second; the object on which that work is performed, and third; the instruments of the work”. It is therefore the interaction between the ‘human’ and ‘technical elements’ that shapes the particular labour process. It is this analysis that provides the framework for delineating the “core” elements of labour process, as argued by Paul Thompson (1990).

Within the context of neo-liberal workplace, Thompson (1990, cited in Stephen Jaros 2005:5-7) outlines four elements that constitute a proper and “coherent core” for labour process theory; one, the function of labour in generating surplus in social relation of production; second, the need for constant renewal and change in the forces of production and the skill of labour; third, the necessity for control imperatives in the labour process. And fourthly, “due to the dynamics of exploitation and control, the social relations of production in the workplace are of “structured antagonism.” These conceptual categories of labour process offer explanations not only to specific capitalist mode of production, but also to historical change that characterised it. The general character that constitutes the ‘core elements’ of labour process thus provides the backdrop for understanding neo-liberal forms of work activities. From the Marxian perspective, the interest in the labour process involves a concern with the impact of the capitalist mode of production on workers’ lived-experiences of the workplace, and for workers’ collectivities on the “shopfloor”. The concern has been to challenge the managerialist rhetoric of organisation of work; delivering prosperity to workers (Marx 1990; Braverman, 1990; Edwards 1979; Friedman 1977; cited in Ellis 2004:3).

While much of Braverman's contributions to the debates on labour process centered on class analysis of capitalist mode of social relations of production, other analysts; Friedman (1977) and Edwards (1998), had argued the need for "considerations of managerial control strategies in understanding labour process" (Vaughan Ellis 2004:5). Emerging trends in neo-liberal workplace, including the character and extent of workers' resistance continue to shape the trends in labour process analysis. Indeed, contemporary trend in labour process analysis is moving away from Braverman's own conception and analysis of labour process. The emerging tendency, which seems to cut across the evolving spectrum of neo-liberal workplace, has tended to incorporate into the political economy of labour process debate "culture"; to move class analysis of labour process into studies of "discourse and identity" (Peter Meiksins, 1994:1-2). More significantly study of labour process has refocused attention (beyond Braverman's conceptualisation) to the ability of workers to resist managerial controls, via by covert and overt means, and to a concern with the role of forces outside the workplace in shaping the labour process and conflict within it. Thus, in the context of contemporary managerial practices of workplace organisation, Meiksins argues that a "distinct critique on Braverman's work is found in his (Braverman's) analysis of techniques of scientific management" (Meiksins 1994: 5).

The techniques of work rationalisation and control, developed by Taylor, and located in Braverman's conceptualization and analysis of labour process are particularly being eroded in modern workplace organisation. Thus, as noted by Meiksins (1994:6), capitalists have "developed a variety of strategies for controlling labour, of which Taylorism is only one, and not necessarily the most effective one, as espoused in Braverman's". Commenting on the emerging and diverse techniques of management, Andrew Friedman (1977), has argued that there are two major types of capitalists control strategy in contemporary workplaces; "direct control" involving the techniques of scientific management and "responsible autonomy" in which workers are allowed "leeway" and discretion at work. Even as modern capitalism progresses, there is no feasible future for the "erasure" or 'closure' of these two concepts in modern workplace.

In a later work, Richard Edwards (1979) develops a historical review of the evolution of the labour process in which the capitalists have developed a sequence of modes of control in response to new forms of worker resistance in the production system. To Edwards, the small workshops characterised by 'simple control' had developed into 'technical control' of assembly

line type, and on which, as modern capitalism developed, gave rise to 'bureaucratic control' that characterised "the internal labour markets of contemporary workplaces" (cited in Meiksins 1994:4). Consequently as observed by Edwards (cited in Meiksins 1994:4), transitional forms of control continue to emerge "as employers grope for ways to solve the problem of workplace labour control." As a result, contemporary workplace transformations and new ways of managerial practice seem to have moved beyond scientific Tayloristic management type.

Also, a consistent theme in the long line of critiques of Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital* has been the absence of 'subjectivity' in shaping the labour process. On this, it has been pointed out that Braverman's "self-imposed emphasis on "class-in-itself" as opposed to "class-for-itself" excludes an understanding of the "role of subjectivity" in shaping labour process. To Zimbali, (cited in Meiksins 1994:5), this is interpreted as Braverman's neglect of working-class resistance to capitalist efforts to control the workforce. To Braverman's critics therefore, this represents an implicit claim in his work of "working class inability under monopoly capitalism to mount effective resistance to capital", and thus a neglect of what workers' resistance and roles could play in conditioning, or blocking the capitalist efforts to control workers (Meiksins 1994:5). However, as pointed out by Meiksins (1994:7), much of Braverman's analysis can still accommodate the "idea of subjectivity and resistance since the central achievement of his work was to restore the dynamics of exploitation, class and class conflict in the central analysis of work under capitalism." Thus, as noted by Sheila Cohen (cited in Meiksins, 1994:7), Braverman does not describe "a labour process to nowhere", but a labour process that exposes the fundamental logic of capitalist accumulation of surplus labour.

Burawoy's (1979) work, *Manufacturing Consent* is located in Braverman's (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital*. However, his discussions also fail in many ways to account for workplace resistance and opposition. In his "*Manufacturing Consent*", Burawoy had argued that a central element in shaping work relations is the "manufacture of consent" by workers, which consequently aids the management's in gaining workers' consent to the conditions of production, even on the volition of the workers. However, the "negotiated outcome" through which workers continue to "manufacture" their consent inexorably ties them to the structures of capitalist mode of production.

Burawoy's "Manufacturing Consent" has also been criticised as offering "a version of elite theory in which all events at the point of production end up in strengthening the control of capital" (Clawson 1983:671). In his critique of Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent*, Clawson (1983) argues that his approach is "fundamentally ahistorical and non-dialectical", as such does not account for the dynamics and the struggle between labour and capital. In Clawson's interpretation of Burawoy's analysis, it appears Burawoy is making a claim that; "all social processes on the shopfloor benefit the capitalist" (Clawson 1983:671).

As noted by Clawson (1983:672), the most important means through which shop floor workers produce consent in Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent* is by playing various "games", especially the game of "making out". Therefore as part of "ensuring the subordination to the labour process" (Clawson 1983:673), games arise from the initiatives of the workers. Interpreted from the perspective of class relations, these "games did not create an autonomous cultural and production system that oppose the management" (Clawson 1983:673). In other words, the shop-floor collectivities surrounding workers' games-play on output and quota restrictions are "neither independent of, nor in opposition to management" (Clawson 1983:673).

A careful reading of the shop-floor "games" on the manufacturing of consent seems to persist because they are indirectly supported, and being "regulated by the management in serving its own ends"(Clawson 1983:673). The Supervisors, on the shop-floor actively co-operate and participate in the game of making out by requesting the workers to reduce or increase the number of their pieces in line with the on-going piece rate. Indeed, for the game of making out to succeed, the active co-operation of the management was involved. In other words, in Burawoy's work "management accepted the rules of the game and co-operated in entering these rules, specifically those informal rules establishing an upper limit on output" (Clawson 1983:673). Paradoxically, the activities of the management helped to consolidate the process of securing consent and production output of workers on the shop floor. The implication of this for our understanding of the labour process in neo-liberal workplace is that workers themselves negotiated their own way into the process of "super-exploitation with no rebellion but consent, the very activity of playing a game generates consent with respect to its rules" (Clawson

1983:674). In this way, consent on the shop-floor is inexorably tied and rests upon the workers' activities. Ironically therefore, the game is responsible for, and generates the "harmony" of workers' interest with the management. From labour process analysis therefore, though the workers are tied to the logic of capitalist mode of production, they still "make choices", which also encourage the process that generates their consent. On the shop-floor, the informal rules establishing the norms of "making out", legitimates the relationship between the supervisors and the workers, and where each errs, the other points out the corrections.

Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony, Clawson (1983:675) argues that Burawoy's work illustrates how hegemony manifests at the workplace. In other words how the patterning of the lived work experiences "shape the game of making out, and how workers find rewards in self-acts that drive them harder, thus generating more profits for the capitalists" (Clawson 1983:675). As pointed out by Clawson, the problematic of consent and control in contemporary workplace is aptly demonstrated by Burawoy; how capitalism structures "on a day-to-day basis, the labour process control without the use of force" (Clawson 1983:675). The game dimension of the labour process reinforces the interests of the capitalists in expropriating more profits from the workers. Critiquing Burawoy's, Clawson noted the "essentialist logic" of "either/or" in his analysis, and this is "the fundamental weakness in his book" (Clawson 1983:676). The game of making out, in as much as it reinforces the system, can equally perform the opposite role of opposition and struggle – "a phenomenon can be both itself, and its opposite", (Clawson 1983:676). To Clawson therefore, "Burawoy's Marxist argument on labour process lacks a dialectical analysis" (Clawson 1983:676). The apparent "complementarity" of interests between the workers and the management, in the game of making out privileges output maximization for the capitalists.

Underscoring Burawoy's analysis of labour process are the "essential principles and requirements inscribed within the structure of the capitalist mode of production" (Gartman 1983:660), which ensure the "unmitigated fulfilment" of capitalist interests through consent at the point of production. As pointed out by Gartman, Burawoy's analysis of labour process is a "coupling of governing principles of production with the governing principles of economic surplus appropriation which together secure an adequate production of surplus values but in obscured, indirect and exploitative manner" (Gartman 1983:660). Accordingly, the dual

situations of “obscuring” and “securing” surplus value generates a logic of “internal transformation”, carried out through the game of making out, that consequently reproduces and realizes the essential interests of capitalism.

Further, Gartman’s critique of Burawoy’s work, is located in the latter’s characterisations of capitalist labour process as divided between a ‘despotic’ and a ‘hegemonic’ type, in which advanced capitalism represents the hegemonic type where there is “unmitigated fulfilment” of obscuring, by replacing coercion with ‘consent-producing measures’ at the point of production. With greater challenges facing “monopoly capitalism” in the realisation of its goals, and with “greater resources” at its disposal, “capitalists offer workers autonomy within the production system, by relaxing hitherto standards, and supervision, creating internal job ladder, and instituting collective-bargaining systems” (Gartman 1983:660) – all fulfilling the essential logics of the game of “making out”. These “measures generate workers’ consent” (Gartman 1983:660) into which they “voluntarily negotiate” themselves. However, in Gartman’s reconceptualization, Burawoy’s merger of “micro-rationalism of game theory with “structural determinism of Althusserian Marxism, provides the pivot through which hegemonic labour process fully realises the structural requirements of securing and obscuring surplus value, and thus assuring the capitalists a stable structure with no contradiction” (Gartman 1983:661).

For the purpose of our reconceptualization, the version of labour process analysis provided by Burawoy produces a ‘deterministic structure’ of capitalism production with an “inexorable logic” of surplus value production and appropriation, and in which the issue of social relations of production facilitate rather than “contradict the immanent development of the structure,”(Gartman 1983:661). The social relations of production identified by Burawoy merely deepen the process of obscuring and securing the structure of self-exploitation. However, in Paraphrasing Burawoy’s argument rather than agreeing with him, Gartman notes that “the economic struggle between workers and managers on the shopfloor over piece rate quotas, bonuses and rules as identified by Burawoy does not (in Marxist’s standard account), contradict but actually facilitates capital accumulation” (Gartman, 1983:661). To Gartman, “the motor driving the development of labour process in Burawoy’s conceptualization is not struggle but structural conditions of competition” (Gartman 1983:662).

Under the hegemonic labour process, characterised by consent-generating and game of making out, Burawoy sees “class struggle at the level of collective bargaining as facilitating the development of equally appropriate institutions i.e., internal labour market and internal state” (Gartman 1983:662), through which workers’ consent is obtained and consolidated. The motive here is not struggle but structural imperatives of competition and surplus-values. Put graphically, the enormous resources at the command of monopoly capitalism necessarily allow capitalists to usher in flexibility and re-organize neoliberal managerial practices along hegemonic lines, as against the despotism of earlier factory regime. Under the new hegemonic regimes, and for capitalists to continue with surplus accumulation without making it obvious, the “dimensions of job intensifications and cut in wages, ‘increased flexibility’ and ‘responsible autonomy’ must appear to be given to the workers through internal labour markets e.g. seniority and hierarchy demarcations, and institutional mediations of which unions play significant roles” (Gartman 1983:662). Within this context, and in Burawoy’s conceptual framework, workers may “react and struggle”, but such struggles are confined to, and only fulfil the structural logic of capitalism. They do not undermine it. Though the developments in labour process understanding through the successive stages of Taylorism, Fordism and Neo-Fordism of work organisations, in general, reflect the immanence and the inexorable character of the structural logic of capital accumulation (Gartman 1983:664), the concrete dimensions of workers’ own struggle and lived-work experience must also be located.

Therefore, labour process analysis should “creatively engage with the peculiarities of social process of production that subsequently define the terrain of labour process in the contexts” (Adesina 1991:13). By way of the reinterpretation of Adesina’s line of arguments, much of what existed in mainstream labour process analysis (e.g., Edwards 1979; Friedman 1977; and Burawoy 1979) fails to account for the duality of labour as comprising “both sides of the same coin of commodity production and as definitive creative processes at the point of production”(Adesina 1991:460). Even Burawoy’s work, as remarked by Adesina (1991:460) treats “consent as absolute” as if it is something different from what is “essentially an indeterminate and contradictory factor in the labour process”. In other words, their analysis treats the dynamics of consent and control in purely “structuralist-deterministic” ways without properly accounting for the contradictions in the duality, that is, conflict and consent as inherent in the

capitalist labour process. This deficit therefore calls for the re-insertion of dialectics in our reconceptualization of labour process even within the mainstream of the debate.

2. Beyond “Consent Manufacturing”: bringing in Dialectics

As clearly shown in this review, evaluations of foundational approaches to labour process and theoretical constructs, as demonstrated in the literature, seem to be limited with overt emphasis on the immanent logic of the structure of the capitalist mode of production in which “the interests of workers and those performing the global functions of capital are co-ordinated and sustained” (Adesina 1991:7). Concern for a dialectical analysis of forms of control and resistance is excluded from their analysis. For instance, as noted by Adesina, (1991:7) both the “internal moments” (game of making out) and the “internal state” (efforts bargaining) co-joined to “generate consent rather than challenge the relations of production and surplus appropriation”. Workers’ resistance, therefore remain relevant in the whole logic and process of consent manufacturing through which consent is constantly generated on the shop floor. In its quest for appropriation of surplus value through production, capitalists need to constantly launch hegemonic process to “modernise” the means of production. In doing this, and its attempt to defeat workers’ struggles, capitalists need incremental “changes in the labour process” (Gartman1983:664).

Embedded in historical development of capitalist labour formation is the “dialectical” and “contradictory process” in which capitalists not only need to contain, but indeed continue to design “counter-measures” against labour in the process of accumulation of surplus labour (Garman, 1983). Thus, located in the capitalist structure, and the struggle it generates, is the “dialectical interplay” between labour and the capitalists.

2.1.Neo-Liberal Workplace and Varieties of Capitalism

As insightful as Marxian perspective, in the analysis of relations of production remain foundational, emerging dictates of contemporary dynamics of such systems of production “demand a revitalization of alternatives, and greater openness” (BLPS 1976:15) in the discourse of labour process. As such, post-Braverman’s labour process analysis has therefore made efforts to introduce the idea of “national variations” into analysing organisations of work. As argued by

some of the second-wave labour process writers, for example Thompson and Smith (1998:563), “there are variations and diverse capitalist formations, and therefore the types of capitalist forms of labour process organisation.” In other words, there are competing forms of organising labour process reflecting the national distinctiveness of a particular form of capitalist formation. Cautioning against seeing the continental Europe and the USA variant of capitalist labour process analysis as universal reference points, Thompson and Smith (1998) drew attention to diverse and multi-variant forms of capitalist labour process shaped by the national “social effects”. According to Thompson, and Smith, “today, it is hard to speak of the capitalist labour process as a single experience, as though US-capitalist labour relations are equivalent” (Thompson and Smith 1998:563).

National socio-political systems of diverse capitalist formations have therefore become important and critical in the post-Braverman labour process analysis. Also, a pattern in which a particular capitalist formation is “written into the global forces of capitalism and neo-liberal market place have some “hollowing out” effect on national economy and the labour process” (Thompson and Smith 1998:568). In the context of neo-liberalism, “global features of capitalism in the form of transnational character of firms, the universal patterns of commodities production and value chain continue to succeed in drawing people into waged labour” (Thompson and Smith 1998:564) and therefore integrate labour more into world commodity production.

Nevertheless, researchers doing labour process analysis are to note that, regardless of “regionalisation of economic activity into distinct blocks, and the diverse patterns of employment relations, global economic dictates continue to erode the autonomy of national economic systems” (Thompson and Smith 1998:564). Thus, despite the distinctiveness of a national economy, from neo-liberal analysis, it remains vulnerable to capitalism, and therefore may not be able to maintain “a serious autonomous space” in terms of pursuing “a distinct form of labour process” (Thompson and Smith 1998:564).

For empirical grounding, contemporary labour process needs to be “decentred” from the US-European process”, and put into consideration; national institutions, the patterns of employment relations, local forces, and socio-political dynamics of the specific capitalist formation. As noted by Adesina (1991:14) “a conceptualisation of a labour process must commence from the

specificity, and peculiarities of commodity relations,” if we are to make sense of the particular labour process. Researchers on labour process are therefore encouraged to embrace an attitude of “selectivity” in their analysis, dictated not only by the context of study but also by emerging global dynamics. Within the “universalistic” labour process, analytical framework on which first wave analysts, largely influenced by Marxian perspective premised their arguments, the concern for national diversity and difference in organisation of work has generated new themes for labour process analysts.

Theoretically, attempts are being made to ensure analysis of the workplace labour process that takes into account “societal effects” of diverse nation states. Such comparative perspective takes into consideration, as noted by Sorge (1991; cited in Thompson and Smith 1998:565) “situated variety of forms of organisational systems and practice...bound into institutional forms of HRM; education, training, work careers, social stratifications, and industrial relations”. Buttressing this point, Thompson and Smith (1989:566) notes “social institutions mould capitalist social relations of production in distinctly “national ways”, so much so, that “there is no generalised tendency for labour process to express the same antagonistic relationship between labour and capital, as seen in the UK or the USA”.

The implications of this for our understanding therefore is that within a specific capitalist formation, workers and managers may manifest “mutual expectations” and perceptions distinctively rooted in the “cultural”, informed by historical experiences and enduring social processes. However, this is not to dismiss the primacy of the “core” elements of the capitalist labour formation, and in fact, the “peripheral” which are embedded in the ‘core’. And in the context of neoliberal workplaces such as in Nigeria, the “peripheral” cannot limit the “core.” As noted by Thompson and Smith (1998:566) “no sufficient and adequate national ingredients can produce totally different national cake, if our analysis takes into consideration such structural, essentially contradictory categories such as wage-labour, unemployment, flexibility, wage-effort bargaining that characterize contemporary organisational practices.” Also, taking into consideration the universalism of “technology of production” and peculiarities of production patterns in neo-liberal workplace (dictated by global operating environment) “peripheries” are embedded in the “core”. As Thompson and Smith (1998:566) caution, “societal or institutional approaches in its undiluted form are close to Weberian Sociology, when workers and manager’s

activities, orientations and perceptions are bracketed within institutional dynamics of organisation of work.” Clearly, therefore, while labour process analysis must incorporate societal or “institutional effects”, and in the attempt to retain the autonomy of social processes, such conceptualisation must be synthesized with wider social structures and production politics.

The significance of this for conceptualizing the labour process is that the post-Braverman genre is to be re-theorized, on the one hand, beyond the “binary classic” structural Marxism to embrace national thinking such as the family, community or clan as co-existing with “rational-legal” capitalism, and with its own distinct implications on specific labour process. Impliedly, the autonomy of the local workplace practices, and experiences of labour process at national or local levels “speak into”, and are “also fed” by the “international typicality” of labour process. As noted by Thompson and Smith (1998:566) “there are common technological imperatives impacting on the life history of factories as influenced by local labour markets, folklores and social processes that are context determined at the workplace.” Labour process understanding is made more “reflexive” and “nuanced” when the dynamic tensions between national specific varieties are “synthesized” with international capitalist dynamics.

Contemporary developments and patterns in labour process conceptualisation therefore indicate the importance of “broad theoretical” perspectives in thematizing and understanding the emerging dimensions in the capitalist labour process, and organisation of work. The implications of these dimensions have now compelled labour process researchers to work beyond Braverman’s Labour and Monopoly Capital, and contextualise the shifts in patterns of labour process, and the attendant managerial practices and control imperatives. Emerging patterns in the workplace show responses to trends that are both dynamic and contradictory, even as they are influenced by the dictate of global capitalism (Thompson and Smith 1998). New perspectives on labour process therefore “needs to combine sensitivity to the more emerging individualised and employer dominated forms of employment which seek to engage workers’ subjectivity in realising capitalist agenda” (Thompson and Smith 1998:571). In other words, particular workplace understanding needs to be contextualised with structural relations and production politics that go beyond local or national context. As noted by Thompson and Smith (1998:571) both “micro and macro contexts need to speak to each other.” Researchers within the labour process tradition, therefore, need to evolve analytical tools that are capable of integrating both.

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Understanding Control and Resistance in Neoliberal workplace: a Post-Structuralist Perspective

The understanding of labour process in the workplace, represented strongly by Braverman’s (1974), which was in turn, inspired by Marx’s, labour process debate in recent times has started to take the turn for consideration of resistance in the workplace . And from Marxian perspective, ‘real resistance is manifested in diverse forms but significantly takes its source from revolutionary class consciousness’ (cited in Knights et al 1994:2). Here, resistance is conceptualised as a fundamental defining feature of capitalist mode of production, where surplus value is appropriated.

Inherent in this collective form of labour is lack of tendency for real consciousness on the part of labour of the “real resistance”. As noted by Marx, “because of the mystifications surrounding capitalist mode of production, there is illusion of freedom which blurs and obscures the fundamental source of the alienation” (Knights et al.1994: 3). Here again, we note how the mechanisms and “legitimizing ideologies” of capitalist mode of production tend to obscure a

tendency on the part of collective labour to engage in class-based resistance. The legitimating ideologies constructed capitalism “as normal and rational progress of nature” (Knights et al 1994:4). As a result of this rationality and its inner logics, workers may therefore find it difficult to actively move beyond it as a ‘socially constructed’ reality, thereby obscuring and mystifying any consciousness for “real resistance”.

As demonstrated in the above review, it is precisely because of the “hidden” and obscure form of consent in the workplace that evokes the concern for understanding the relevance of “subjectivity” and “identity” as crucial imperatives for a critical understanding of labour process. As noted by Knights and Vurdubakis (1994, cited in Knights et al. 1994:168), post-structuralists’ interest in “subjectivity and resistance is to address the gap in early writers’ contributions to labour process understanding.” Thus, elaborate theorisations in its various forms continue to engage the attention of “second-wave” labour process analysts. We find this in the works of David Knights and Hugh Willmott(2000); Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson (1999); David Collinson(1994 and 2003); Mahmoud Ezzamel et al (2001); and Muhammad (2003). Their analyses within the labour process debate touch on the meaning of resistance from the subjective formation of workers’ identity even as this is influenced by the inner logics of the capitalist labour process.

While Braverman’s (1974) *LMC* remains inspirational and fundamental in the work of these analysts, attention is increasingly being paid to the issues of subjectivity and power/knowledge relations on identity formation and resistance in the workplaces. Their contributions paid close attention to what may appear as “cooperation or consensus at work”, which may conceal aspects of resistance that do not directly threaten capitalism, but form the “subjective orientation” of workers and subsequently “reproduce” itself in the workplace. According to Knights and Vurdubakis, labour process analysis should begin “to question the assumptions that render knowledge of resistance self-evident in the workplace” (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994, in Knights et al 1994:169). In other words, “theory and analysis of resistance should be located around three central questions; where is resistance to be located, who are its agents, and how can it be justified?”(Knights and Vurdubakis 1994). The answers to these questions as noted by Knights and Vudurbubakis are situated “in the analysis of resistance within the relations of power and knowledge” (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994, in Knights et al 1994:169) in the

workplace. In this understanding, the “subjects though separated, are also determined by the structures of power knowledge relations and discourses” they are embedded in (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994 in Knights et al 1994:170).

In this new turn, labour process debates have consequently been “far-reaching” in an attempt for a “re-dress” of the relative neglect of resistance in the workplace. There have been calls for consideration of detail theorisation of subjectivity and resistance in the analysis of labour process. In the contemporary workplace, Knights et al (1994) argue that “resistance is intertwined with subjectivity.” In other words, there is a “role” assigned to the subject in the manifestation of resistance in the workplace. Labour process understanding, therefore, needs to incorporate the new direction of resistance and the processes of subjectivity in the capitalist workplace. Amongst the critical labour process writers whose work depicts the growing concern for a theory of subjectivity are David Knights (1980), Paul Thompson (1990), Hugh Willmott (1990), David Collinson (1992), Study *et.al.* (1992).

It is, however to be noted, that there are differences in their theory of subjectivity and social identity formation at workplaces. While earlier writers such as Friedman (1977), Edwards (1979) situate their line of analysis within managerial control strategies and workers’ subjective resistance tendencies, other writers like Littler (1982), Edwards and Reich (1982), Burawoy (1985), and Knights et al (1994:6) draw a connection between managerial control and resistance in the workplace.

Though Burawoy’s (1979) writing on “game play” through which consent is generated among the shopfloor workers could also be interpreted as workers’ experience and identity formation on the shopfloor. Its limitations have been pointed out for not being able to draw out “the implication for understanding shopfloor resistance” (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994:6). Arguably, his analysis remains relevant to the extent that “playing game” becomes an arena for testing the self-esteem of shopfloor workers. Nevertheless, it is still locked up in the conditions of exploitation and subordination that reproduce their subordination. When workers get bounded up in the conditions that reproduce their subordinate positions, awareness regarding resistance is “blurred and obscured”. Critics of Burawoy’s “making out” thesis point to this, as one of its

limitations for understanding modern workplace 'misbehaviour' and subjectivity (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999).

Critical labour process analysis that draws on Foucault's works (1980, 1982) started with a refocus on the close relationship between "the subject and power/knowledge relations, as particularly influential in stimulating a deeper understanding of subjectivity, with a strong focus upon localized, context determined forms of resistance" (cited in Knights et al 1994:177). For the Foucauldian turn, the real implication of power is through the workers' subjectivity. Subjectivity is seen as "a complex composite of such category of persons (workers) upon who powers of others are exercised" (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994 in Knights et al 1994:177). According to Foucault, "it is the formation and reformation of self through the gaze of power/authority that is most important for understanding contemporary strategies of control and resistance" (cited in Knights et al 1994:184). "Self-identity formation" thus becomes a complex outcome of "subjugation" at workplace, and from which resistance to it also emanates. Through the "effects" of power, process of subjectivity and identity formation are in process. While power does not in itself "directly" form identity and subjectivity, it puts in motion process and conditions for its formation – which also generate tensions and resistance (Knights et al 1994). Modern workplace study has, therefore, renewed the attention on how to problematize workers' experiences through the concepts of control and resistance, understanding the relationship as dialectics between power/subjectivity, and consent/resistance in the analysis of labour process (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994 in Knights et al 1994).

Control and Resistance: a Dialectical Analysis

In its most conventional way, resistance in the workplace is seen as a "reactive process when agents (workers), in the context of workplace/power relations actively oppose initiatives from the management" (Knights et al 1994:9). Resistance is, therefore, seen to be shaped and determined by the particular context, and the context of the workplace. Workers' responses to specific processes of managerial practices are manifested in the dimensions and character of workplace resistance and consent. And the particular form in which the resistance is manifested is also located and conditioned by the local and historically specific formations of the workplace managerial and employment relations' practices. To Knights et al (1994:10), therefore, central to

“theoretical analysis of resistance and subjectivity in the workplace is the focus on power.” Thus, consistent with the underlying assumptions of post-structuralists’ labour process analysis, theory of subjectivity and resistance provides the conceptual framework “where self and agency are seen as constituted through the essence of power in the workplace ... and other practices” (Knights et al 1994:10). In the attempt to break away from the “dualistic-deterministic” orthodoxy of agency – structure within the Marxian tradition, in which resistance could be interpreted as manifestation of deep-rooted antagonism between capital and labour, the theoretical framework of subjectivity draws insight from both extremes of “structure-action”, and “determinist-voluntarism’s” range of thematic underlines, within the critical strand of labour process understanding. At one point on the continuum or level of our analysis, it is essential for the researcher doing workplace study to investigate the meaning the subjects themselves attribute to their action within the locale (Adesina 1989). In other words, the researcher should consider the words and interpretations of the participants in the analysis and confirm their meaning regarding the local resistance practices.

At another level, and arguing for contemporary literature on workplace resistance to move beyond the “dualism” of consent and resistance, Mumby (2005) urges researchers to incorporate a dialectical approach that account for consent-resistance as “mutually constitutive of social reproduction of everyday organisational life” (Mumby 2005:20). In this way, according to Mumby, a “thick description of the politics of everyday life and workplace would be provided” (Mumby 2005:20). A conceptual approach that adopts “a more dialectical analysis to consent/resistance seeks to understand how the two are “mutually implicated and co-productive” (Mumby 2005:21). Consent and resistance often intersect in the “complex mundane practices of everyday workplace situations where the “bow” and the “fart” i.e. both processes of workers’ obedience and covert act of resistance shape the process of workplace relations” (Mumby 2005:21).

Mumby’s (2005) work goes further to show, drawing on both neo-Marxist inspirations and Foucault’s perspective “the discursive conditions under which the dynamics of consent and resistance unfolds” (Mumby 2005:21) in the workplace. To Mumby, “all forms of workplace workers’ behaviour - “discursive or material” are best understood through the prism of discourse in which all forms of behaviours are shaped and fixed by competing efforts in the workplace”

(Mumby 2005:21) A dialectical understanding of the workplace relations of consent and resistance therefore explains how “the actors accommodate, resist, reproduce and transform the interpretive possibilities and meaning systems embedded in the organisational life” (Mumby 2005:22). If the workplace is conceptualised as frontiers for interplay of mutual tensions, and contradictions, a dialectical approach synthesises these tendencies in their “dramaturgical” context. As such, workplace resistance is best understood as a local “sociational” process and production, involving “how actors attempt to shape workplace practices” (Mumby 2005:23). While it seeks to eschew reification of behaviours in the workplace, it analyses the “how” in a dialectical context.

In arguing for the revitalization of dialectical approach in the study of contemporary workplace, Mumby’s emphasis is on how daily manifestation of struggles by workers is best conceptualised. According to him, there is “indeterminacy” in this struggle, and this indeterminacy is best understood through the prism of dialectical analysis. In other words, in the workplace, there are diverse ‘underbelly’ interplay of mutually embedded efforts unfolding in the daily workplace practices that shape workers’ struggle and resistance. In an Edwardian sense, the workplace struggle and resistance are at the centre of analysis, and which, therefore, makes it a “contested terrain”. With greater attention on this, dialectics give attention to “rhythms” of everyday managerial practices and labour process, without privileging “limitless” understanding on the managerial texts and discourses, for instance on TQM, teamwork, and flexibility as objects of analysis. As such, dialectical perspectives “rediscover the recalcitrant worker – the missing subject that has become an almost “extinct” species in critical” workplace analysis” (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999, cited in Mumby 2005:24).

For the researcher to be able to locate and identify the “recalcitrant worker”, he is to adopt a dialectical approach and move beyond descriptive “typologies” or “differentiation” of types of resistance in workplaces (Mumby 2005), to a model that gives distinctive attention to the “interpretive struggles” with managerial practices. In other words, the specific, locally produced character of the workplace, and its attendant “ambiguities” and “reconstitution”, should engage the attention of the critical analyst within the labour process tradition. In the context of this “discursive turn,” and within the general framework of dialectical model, resistance is

conceptualised “as a routine, yet complex embedded social process, the meaning of which is contingent on the contextual features of the workplace” (Mumby 2005:32).

According to Mumby (2005:32), this has been the approach and concern of post-structuralist labour process scholars such as Mumby (1998); Knights and McCabe (2000); Collinson (1992,1994); Ackroyd and Thompson(1999); Fleming and Spicer (2002), to thematize workers’ resistance in its “agentic formulation” and reconstitution in the workplace. Within this conceptual remit, workers in their recalcitrant tendencies are able to deploy inherent “discourse strategies” in their attempt to create “resistant spaces for themselves within the larger discourses of managerial practices” (Gabriel 1999, cited in Mumby 2005:32). Such discursive tactics are exemplified as including: “cynicism, dis-identification, humour, joking, gossiping, parody, mode of dress, hidden transcripts, office graffiti and discursive distancing” (Mumby 2005:32). Though, these are routine daily workplace practices, “they are also forms of resistance, which are covert and non-confrontational, operating in the interstices and underbelly of organisational life” (Mumby 2005:33). Mumby’s analysis has, therefore, shown how the workers in the workplace, through the process of discourse, “engage in the systems of meanings constituted in their daily fabric of organising” (Mumby 2005:33). In other words, labour process analysis should focus on the “ambiguity” and “multiplicity” enacted by the workers towards the managerial practices. The broad space provided by this “ambiguity and indeterminacy therefore allow workers to freely deploy resources that make possibilities for reconstructing alternative resistance and counter the hegemony of managerial practices”(Mumby 2005:33).

Drawing on illustrations from Collinson’s (1992) workplace ethnographic study, Mumby (2005:33) shows how humour, for instance could firstly be seen as a discursive practice “producing conformity” and simultaneously used to resist managerial practices, and, therefore, use it to control shopfloor production output. In this context, as demonstrated through Collinson’ (1992), “humour on the shopfloor” demonstrates a strong resistance culture, rooted in shopfloor conception of autonomy, “knowledgeability” and “critical narcissism”.

While classic Marxist labour process analysis situates mechanisms for resistance within the inherent contradiction of capitalist mode of production, “discourse-based” post-structuralist analysis conceptualises resistance as a form of “Identity-Work” (Mumby 2005) through which

“organizational members, that is, the workers discursively manage their identities in the face of management’s efforts at control and surveillance”(Mumby 2005:33). Self- identity formation, therefore, becomes the outcome of “daily experiences” of work life practices. The implication of this for our understanding of labour process analysis is that in this context of ambivalent work life experiences, a worker may pursue “conformist subjectivity” behaviour to secure identity in the face of constant pressure, and at another level he/she may articulate such “self-formation” and subjectivity in a manner that challenges the very managerial discourse.

The conceptual challenge, from a research point of view is, therefore, to critically analyse and examine how workers explore the “tropes of resistance” mechanism such as irony, cynicism, and parody, and how they use these resources at their disposal to reconstitute their identity, and in the appropriation of managerial discourse. And as noted by A. Prasad and Prasad (1998 cited in Mumby 2005:36), such strategic discursive of resistance is manifested in “subtle subversions,” “ambiguous accommodation”, and various forms of workplace disengagement that may be difficult to be noticed directly, or identified as overt recalcitrance. Ezzamel et al (2001) also identify how workers have been able to “use such discursive mechanisms to resist managerial attempts to encroach on what they perceive as their autonomy and collective identity in the production process” (cited in Mumby 2005:36).

Thus, in the context of “multiplicity of meaning”, that characterised everyday workplace practices, resistance is the “medium and outcome” of how workers reproduce and deploy available “spaces” and managerial discourse to reformulate their own self-identity. From a dialectical perspective of consent-resistance dynamics, and given the “shifting” and “precariousness” of meanings/discourses in the workplace, resistance and self-identity of workers are contingent upon the ability of workers to strategically engage with and adapt to available discourses. As noted by Mumby (2005:36), workplace resistance as a “discursive practice needs to be examined not as a specific, identifiable set of behaviours, but as a complex, contradictory and socially situated attempt to construct oppositional meanings and identities.”

The concern about forms and dimensions of workplace resistance and recalcitrant behaviours that are often covert, and that lie beneath the “observable surface” in the workplace continue to engage the attention of “second-wave” labour process commentators on how to conceptualize

and analyse such forms of “organisational misbehaviours” (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999). In a context, where management remains the active agent in managerial practices, Ackroyd and Thompson (1999:3) argue for the rediscovery of the “recalcitrant worker” that is becoming an “extinct species” in the labour process analysis.

Conclusion.

Within diverse strands, but within a single genre of labour process conceptualization, sociology of work continues to see the neoliberal workplace as an arena of “contested” and multiple changes. In other words, work processes are restructured with new management practices, with attendant implications on employment relations. From the critical LPT perspective, as against mainstream managerialists’ conception of workplace relations, this review has shown there is a growing and palpable “removal of labour as an active agency of resistance” - painting a picture of “quietness in the workplace’ (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999:615). Evidence has shown that, as work organisations change and evolve in the light of global dynamics and in line with normative expectations, with the attendant managerial implications, theoretical re-consideration and re-conceptualization of “recalcitrant worker” have challenged researchers to see beneath the surface of “formal consensual” formation in the capitalist employment relationship. At the workplace, and beneath the managerial gaze, there exists “a considerable variety of forms of resistance and misbehaviour’(Ackroyd and Thompson 1999:615) , thus making workplace practices an arena of “contestations” that often make the insidious process of “colonization” not easily observable, but inherent in the daily process of work organisation.

This review has offered an insightful analysis of contemporary workplace practices, where at ‘the underneath’, covert forms of resistance reside. While the concern of management and its control imperatives in contemporary organisation, continue to focus on how to “eliminate” or minimize recalcitrance in the workplace, its persistence in several forms remains a “distinct analytical” focus within labour process commentary.

In the daily routine of workplace behaviours are acts that indicate dimensions of ambiguities, ambivalence and paradoxes invented, and mobilized in the manifestation of consent and resistance. In other words, workers in their concern with how to secure their identities in the

workplace, mobilize “informal collectives” and “symbols” as resistance strategies, even in their confinement as “commodity status” in the labour process.

However, as pointed out by Collinson (1994:40), workers’ resistance through distance “paradoxically reinforces the legitimacy of managerial control, making workers submissive to the disciplinary practices.” This, therefore, implies that at the workplace, “workers have available to themselves variety of options, knowledge, cultural resources and strategic agencies through which they initiate oppositional practices” (Collinson 1994:49). Workplace resistance which seeks to challenge managerial control initiatives draws on multiple “material and symbolic” forms of the specific context of the workplace. Within the context, issues of consent and resistance are so “inextricably interwoven” that they “mutually” constitute each other. Also, while resistance could not be entirely interpreted as overtly subversive or intended for disruption, it might be naïve to conceive that it could invariably be “outflanked” by managerial control. The routine, daily manifestations of covert resistance underscore their shifting, indeterminate and overlapping dimension while still remain as strategic choices for the workers. In other words, they could be mobilized for resistance as they could be mobilized for consent.

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