



# Marxian Critiques of Thompson's (1990) 'core' Labour Process Theory: An Evaluation and Extension

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## abstract

During the 1990s and into the 2000s, a substantial body of Labour Process Theory (LPT) research emerged around a 'core' concept of LPT initially outlined by Thompson (1990) and reiterated by Thompson and Smith (2001). While this research programme has yielded detailed case studies that shed light on labour process dynamics in a variety of workplaces, industries and governmental sectors, it has been a target of criticism by analysts of both postmodernist and traditional-Marxian persuasions, who argue that core LPT is theoretically flawed and politically inert (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001; Tinker, 2002). This paper evaluates the Marxian critiques that challenge elements of LPT's conceptual core, and then leverages the evaluations to outline some future directions for LPT research. These include proposals for addressing the 'value' problem, the political problem, and the global political-economy problem in LPT research. In conclusion, a revised core for LPT is recommended so as to enhance the framework's ability to address work-related issues in contemporary global capitalism.

## Introduction: Core LPT and its Critics

In an effort to bring together disparate strands of research influenced by Braverman's (1974) analysis of the labour process under monopoly capitalism, Thompson (1990) outlined four elements that he believed constituted a proper, and coherent, 'core' for Labour Process Theory (LPT). During the 1990s and into the early 2000s, researchers influenced by this core LPT concept developed an emphasis on describing how capital-labour dynamics unfold in a variety of specific workplaces and disparate labour processes (e.g., Smith, Knights, and Willmott, 1991; Jermier, Knights, and Nord, 1994; Warhurst and Thompson, 1998). This emphasis represented somewhat of a break from LPT's past, when initially and into the 1980s researchers incorporated the use of historical, cultural, and economic data to attempt to tie capital-labour dynamics at the point of production to the larger political economy and to formulate a class-wide politics for the working class (e.g., Braverman, 1974; Friedman, 1977; Edwards, 1979; Burawoy, 1985; Thompson, 1983). The more recent body of work has been lauded for having yielded detailed descriptions of multiple facets of work in many organizational settings (Jaros, 2001), but has been criticized by a number of analysts (Thompson and

Newsome, 2004; Tinker, 2002; Knights, 2001; Spencer, 2000) as having not resulted in much progress towards understanding phenomena such as the global nature of contemporary capitalism, nor of yielding a practical politics that improves the lives of working people.

LPT's alleged failure in these areas is hardly unique. One could argue that they are failures characteristic of all contemporary 'left' social theories of work. But with some exceptions (cf. Thompson and Newsome, 2004) most critics have maintained that in its present form, LPT, as exemplified by Thompson's 'core theory', is *fundamentally* inadequate to address them. That is, LPT's failure isn't explained by a failure on the part of researchers to properly apply what are sound analytical tools, it is that LPT's conceptual toolbox doesn't provide the necessary equipment (Tinker, 2002).

The critics cited above come at the problem of fundamental LPT inadequacy from different perspectives, often agreeing on little but its flaws. 'Core' LPT has been criticized from both postmodernist (cf. O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001) and traditional-Marxian (Tinker, 2002) perspectives. In this paper, we assess the relevance of 'core' LPT in light of the Marxian critique.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the strictly intellectual challenge this criticism poses for core LPT, it has arguably had practical force within the critical social science community. For example, perhaps in response to them, LPT has experienced an exodus of some researchers out of the LPT community and to Critical Management Studies (cf. Hassard, Hogan, and Rowlinson, 2001). Thus, there is a perception within some elements of the left community that LPT is a spent force. One of the purposes of this paper is to evaluate that perception by critically investigating the relevance and validity of the Marxian critique of 'core' LPT.

### *Thompson's (1990) 'core' Theory*

To do so, we must first define what we mean by 'core' Labour Process Theory, since its proper theoretical content has of course been the site of much contestation over the previous decade (Grugulis and Knights, 2001a). To reiterate, in this paper, we define LPT in terms of the four 'core elements' described by Thompson (1990) and restated by Thompson and Smith:

1. The function of labour in generating surplus in capitalism, and hence the centrality of production to the system, and the privileged insight this affords labour for a theoretical and political challenge to the system. (2001: 56-57)

Thompson elaborates: "As the labour process generates the surplus and is a central part of man's experience in acting on the world and reproducing the economy, the (labour process) is privileged as a focus for analysis. This necessarily incorporates relations of exploitation, though it should not...involve a labour theory of value" (1990: 100).

*Note:* Core component one implies that, as per Edwards (1986), the labour process is characterized by a 'relative autonomy' from the broader political economy, meaning that changes in the latter do not necessarily have deterministic effects on the former. It

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1 An evaluation of postmodernist critiques of 'core' LPT can be found in Jaros (2003). Including that critique in this paper would be redundant and would exceed space limitations.

also means that the labour process can and should be 'isolated' from the broader political economy for analytical purposes. As Elger puts it: "On the one hand, workplace relations (cannot) simply be read off from wider class relations, and on the other hand those wider relations cannot simply be subsumed within an analysis of the labour process" (2001: 4).

Also, since Thompson (1990) explicitly disavows the Labour Theory of Value, Marxian theorists would probably view his use of the term 'surplus' problematic, given its traditional linkage to *labour* productivity. This is a point I will return to in the next section of the paper, which addresses Marxian criticisms of Thompson's core theory.

2. The necessity for constant renewal and change in the forces of production and the skills of labour due to the discipline of the profit rate and competitive accumulation of capital.
3. The necessity for a control imperative in the labour process in order for capital to secure profitable production and translate its legal purchase of labour power into actual labour and a surplus.

*Note:* point 3 is due to the 'indeterminacy' of labour, i.e., that while the capitalist purchases labour power; he/she must still transform it into actual productive work.

4. Given the dynamics of exploitation and control, the social relations between capital and labour in the workplace are of 'structured antagonism'. At the same time, capital, in order to constantly revolutionize the production process, must seek some level of creativity and cooperation from labour...resulting in a continuum of overlapping worker responses...from resistance, to accommodation, compliance, or consent.

This definition is utilized because it is the definition around which most self-avowedly 'LPT' research is done these days (Spencer, 2000; Jaros, 2001), and because it is this core theory which has been the target of criticism by Marxian analysts. Its utilization does *not* imply that all researchers who claim to 'do Labour Process Theory' acknowledge this core as correct, in whole or even in part. But given its centrality in contemporary LPT research – the research programme and criticism of that research that has emerged around it – it is the conception of LPT which will be utilized for comparison with traditional Marxian theories of work. In the next two sections, Marxian criticisms that aim at this 'core' are briefly summarized, and an evaluation of them is provided. In the final section, these evaluations are drawn upon to make recommendations for future research from within and around a revised core LPT framework.

## **The Marxian Critique of core LPT**

The general form of the Marxian critique is that core LPT is today alienated from its Marxian roots (cf. Braverman, 1974). From this, the following specific criticisms have

been characteristic of the Marxian literature: That it is (1) managerialist, and (2) methodologically deficient.

### *Managerialism*

According to Marxian theorists, Core LPT is 'managerialist', meaning that it treats managers as having too much discretion, independent of any systemic profit or surplus-value extraction imperatives, to determine the nature of work (cf. Cohen, 1987; Rowlinson and Hassard, 2001; Hassard *et al.*, 2001).

This criticism is rooted in a belief that core LPT is fundamentally flawed because it derives from Braverman's (1974) analytical concepts which were applicable to understanding a specific kind of capitalism, *monopoly* capitalism, which, while perhaps relevant during the time Braverman was writing, are not helpful in understanding contemporary global-competitive capitalism. In a monopoly or oligopoly market, dominant firms are characterized by (a) separation of ownership from control of the corporation, such that top managers are largely free from the constraints of ownership, and (b) the ability to reap profits by price manipulation in the product market. As a consequence of viewing capitalism through a monopolistic lens, early LPT saw no need to incorporate key Marxian concepts that underpin and explain exploitative work-relations, such as the 'labour theory of value' (LTV) or the 'law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (LTRPF)' – concepts that also link what happens at the point of production in specific organizations with the broader capitalist political economy.

For Marxians such as Hassard *et al.*, point (a) is problematic because it implies that management has the freedom to act in accordance with their own personal interests, which may not necessarily coincide with the stockholder's interest in maximizing shareholder value. It is also problematic because it leads to the conclusion that there is a weak, non-deterministic link between system-wide profit pressures and the control mechanisms that organizations use against their employees. Managers are viewed as having lots of personal discretion in determining the forms that control may take. This has resulted in 'taxonomitis' – the tendency for LPT researchers to focus on manifestations of management control strategies or worker resistance behaviours in different industries and group them into various categories, typologies, taxonomies, etc. (cf. Friedman, 1977; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999).

Taxonomitis is viewed as analytically problematic, because it is seen by Marxians as fetishizing differences across organizations and industries while ignoring, and leaving under-theorized and unchallenged, the underlying systemic dynamics of capitalist production. As a result, core LPT cannot adequately explain how labour process dynamics interconnect with the broader political economy. Point (b) is problematic because it implies that the extraction of surplus value from labour is no longer an *imperative*, because profits can be achieved in the exchange process by leveraging product market power. This is anathema to Marxian theory, which derives from the Labour Theory of Value the notion that exploitation in the labour process is an inherent aspect of capitalist production.

### *Methodological deficiency*

Core LPT is 'methodologically deficient': Another Marxian-oriented critique of LPT has been offered by Tinker (2002). Tinker differs somewhat from Rowlinson and Hassard (2001), in that he calls for a return to Marx and Braverman. Much of Tinker's critique is aimed at postmodernist Labour Process Theory, and thus falls outside the purview of this paper. But he also takes aim at core LPT:

Thompson's (1990) analysis exhibits a number of shortcomings that renders his core inadequate as a basis for progressive research. First, the authority for the choice of parts is a social conclusion, not a logical or epistemic one. While Thompson's four traits are putatively important, the criterion for their selection remains implicit, resting on an asserted consensus among protagonists. Consensus alone is not a tenable standard of truth for epistemology; it opens the door to every whim of popular ideology (e.g., that the earth is flat, God exists). Second, Thompson's core underrates the historical specificity of Braverman and Marx's political projects. This is most evident in regard to the importance to Braverman of challenging the ideology of upgrading. (Tinker, 2002: footnote vi)

Thus, Tinker challenges the notion that LPT researchers have come to a consensus that the four components described by Thompson (1990) and Thompson and Smith (2001) do in fact comprise the 'core' of Labour Process Theory. Also, in other parts of his paper, he elaborates on the 'lack of historical specificity' argument to maintain that the core is incomplete, in that it doesn't express a preference for the method of inquiry used by Marx and Braverman – the dialectical method. According to Tinker, it is non-dialectical, a-historical readings of Braverman (1974) that give rise to the notion, common among LPT writers of all kinds over the past 30 years, that a consideration of worker subjectivity and researcher praxis are 'missing' in his analysis. According to Tinker, they aren't so much missing as de-emphasized, and this de-emphasis was appropriate, given the historical specificity of the time Braverman was writing, i.e., a time when an emphasis on de-skilling and the objective characteristics of production were necessary *political* tactics to 'debunk' the prevailing Western ideology of economic revival via training, upgrading, re-skilling, and job enrichment. According to Tinker, eschewing the dialectical method not only accounts for LPT's failure to grasp the political strategy behind Braverman's analysis, it also explains why LPT has been, unlike Braverman, unable to offer a compelling political agenda of its own.

To summarize, Marxians tend to see core LPT as theoretically trivial and politically irrelevant to contemporary conditions. Since the mid-1970s global development has been characterized by the dismantling of western welfare states, de-regulation, global market expansion, computer-based technological advancement, the collapse of state socialism, and intensified competition. But because core LPT overstates managerial agency, it is myopically focused on what happens in particular workplaces. And because it has strayed from its Marxian analytical roots, it is without a method that can reveal the 'laws of motion' characteristic of advanced capitalism, and therefore doesn't have the conceptual tools to contribute to the explanation of these momentous changes or how workers can act politically to challenge them.

## Evaluation of the Marxian critique

In this section, I provide an assessment of the degree to which the Marxian criticisms succeed in undermining core-LPT:

1. Considering the Charge of *Managerialism*: it is true that, as per Marxian criticism (a) above, core LPT research has emphasized that managers do have discretion to implement different kinds of control strategies and to take actions that benefit themselves, even at the expense of owners (cf. Thompson and Smith, 2001). This discretion is based on the core notion that the labour process is 'relatively autonomous', i.e., despite its linkages to the broader political economy, what happens at the point of production is not totally determined by those linkages, and is significantly influenced by contextual factors that are workplace or industry-specific (cf., Friedman, 1977; Thompson, 1990). The issue, therefore, is: is this core LPT view incorrect? The preponderance of the evidence suggests that it is correct: Empirical research rooted neither in a Marxian nor core-LPT tradition has shown that both across and within industries and countries, business firms do in fact display a wide *variety* of control strategies for managing labour (Clegg, 1990; Jermier et. al, 1994), which, contra the Marxian perspective, implies that the structural imperatives of capitalism are not so powerful that they override all or even most discretion, and that local market, institutional, and workplace conditions significantly mediate the relationship between system-wide profit imperatives and managerial responses. Furthermore, recent cases of corporate malfeasance such as Enron, Arthur-Andersen, Shaw Group, and WorldCom, in which top executives were able to line their pockets by de-frauding shareholders, provide at least anecdotal evidence that top managers are not so compelled by systemic pressures to enhance shareholder wealth that they lack the discretion to act in ways that benefit themselves at the expense of shareholders.

However, Marxian critics are correct in their delineation of the implications of managerialism for the concept of exploitation in the production process (point (b) above). By embracing the notion that profits can be earned in product markets (cf. Kelly, 1985) and that the Labour Theory of Value is not a relevant component of core-LPT, Thompson *et al.* do open the door to the Marxian conclusion that LPT does not posit worker exploitation as an 'imperative', an essential aspect of capitalist production. However, despite this, Thompson and Smith's (2001) description of core-LPT does clearly state that exploitation is an inherent aspect of capitalist production (see core points One and Four above). This means the core contradicts itself on this point. But, many Marxian critics (cf. Rowlinson and Hassard, 2001) do not tend to push this point, because they are themselves ambivalent about the validity of the Labour Theory of Value. This point will be developed further in the 'Future directions for core-LPT' section of the paper.

Also, to some extent, the disagreement over the issue of managerial agency and discretion is one of differing research emphases between LPT and traditional Marxians. Marxians are concerned with understanding capitalism as a total system, whereas LPT is concerned with understanding the labour process, the point of production where

products are made and services are delivered, which is one component of that total system. Thus, Marxians, studying and refining general concepts like the LTV and long-run profit tendencies, tend to emphasize commonalities in managerial strategies and worker behaviour across organizations and industries, while LPT researchers emphasize the explication of differences. At the risk of invoking a dualism, the former is interested in more of a 'macro' perspective on the study of work under capitalism, the latter more of a 'micro' one. Neither is mutually exclusive with the other and indeed they can and should be mutually supportive. Even an orthodox Marxian who pitches his/her analysis solely at a system-wide level should be interested in probing the *limits* of the compulsive power of systemic tendencies like the profit imperative and value-creation dynamics, as they manifest themselves in the decision-making discretion of capitalists in differing industrial sectors. It therefore makes little sense to dismiss the study of manifestations of discretion as trivial or unimportant.

However, on the whole, it is fair to say that LPT research has been characterized by an imbalance: too little effort has been invested in studying how workplace dynamics link with the broader political economy, and too much has been invested in studying differences across them, lending credence to the Marxian charge of *taxonomitis*. In practice, there has been a tendency to take the concept of 'relative autonomy' too far, treating it more as 'absolute autonomy' (Jaros, 2001). As was previously noted, this is how research that flows from 'core theory' differs the most from early LPT research, which, whatever its faults, was clearly focused on delineating linkages with the broader political economy (Friedman, 1977; Edwards, 1979; Burawoy, 1985). There are some signs that LPT researchers have begun to take this criticism to heart (Warhurst and Thompson, 1998; Thompson, 2003; Thompson and Newsome, 2004) but this work is in its infancy and to this point has been characterized by 'calls' to conduct more research in this area more so than actual empirical work.

But, looking forward to what needs to be accomplished, there's no evidence that doing so requires compromising the core 'relative autonomy' principle of LPT. What is required is an emphasis on the 'relative' aspect of this autonomy, and an investigation of mutual influences. A theoretical focus on studying variations in managerial control strategies and worker resistance to those strategies is not inherently incompatible with efforts to find system-wide commonalities among them, or to account for these differences by studying the influence of broader political-economic processes.

2. Methodological Deficiency: LPT, as per Tinker's (2002) methodological criticism, has indeed been *politically irrelevant*. Thompson (1990) argued in favour of the core approach in part on the grounds that if the LPT community rallied behind a common set of principles it could offer a clearer, amplified voice for its 'emancipatory tradition' of fighting for worker empowerment. Of course, not everyone doing LPT research chose to rally behind Thompson's core, but even those who did had little to offer in the way of a compelling political agenda (as admitted by Thompson and Smith, 2001). One reason for this could be that Thompson (1990) included only a passing mention (core element 1) to a political dimension in the core, and this only referenced *labour's* political position, it did not include a political role for the LPT researcher. Thus,

it is not surprising that research influenced by core LPT has been deficient in outlining a 'politics of production' over the past 15 years.

The notion that the 'laws of motion' that govern human history lead inevitably to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialism is fundamental to traditional Marxian theory and was characteristic of the Braverman era LPT as well. But, Thompson (1990) argued that LPT should abandon this position because this Marxian prediction had been refuted by actual history. He noted that the Labour Theory of Value that Marxian political theory is based upon was empirically wrong (if it had been correct, worker revolutions would have overthrown capitalism by now) and conceptually problematic (the notion that labour is the sole source of surplus value is empirically unprovable). But having abandoned its revolutionary message, core LPT replaced it with nothing but a vague notion that labour is in a structural position to 'challenge' the capitalist system. True, Marxian critics of core LPT would be on firmer ground to lecture LPT on improving its political shortcomings if their approach had performed any better than LPT has. Amongst leftist theories of work and organization, LPT is hardly alone in its lack-of-impact. Arguably, only radical organizational environmentalism has had a significant effect on the political debate within the contemporary global capitalist context. Still, this doesn't excuse LPT's failure in this area. The absence of an element that provides guidance about the political role that LPT researchers should play is a shortcoming of the core formulation. But in this regard, neither traditional Marxism nor core-LPT has an articulate perspective on what an emancipatory workplace politics should look like.

Also, Tinker's (2002) criticism about a lack of *consensus among researchers about the 'core' elements* seems irrelevant to the issue of core LPT's conceptual usefulness. While there is something politically provocative about Thompson *et al.*'s attempt to establish a core theory, since this can be interpreted as a 'power play' whereby researchers who do not abide are labelled as not doing 'true' LPT (Jaros, 2001), that is a separate issue from the value of core LPT as a set of conceptual tools for understanding work, and Tinker acknowledges that on that technical ground, the core elements are 'putatively' important.

Finally, Tinker's charge that core LPT *misreads* Braverman (1974) seems to amount to little more than a historical point regarding Braverman's intellectual legacy. Other than how 'correct' he was or wasn't in his analysis, whether Braverman mistakenly 'neglected' subjectivity and praxis or whether given the political context of the 1970s he properly downplayed them is meaningful... how? Either way, the topics aren't developed in Braverman's analysis and that meant later LPT researchers were justified in studying them. Furthermore, given the failure of Marxian dialectics to correctly predict the overthrow of capitalism, it's not apparent why the dialectical method is worthy of inclusion as an *essential* element in the study of capitalist production and therefore as a formal part of core LPT. This isn't to say the dialectical method can't be useful, just that there is little ground for granting it primacy as *the* method for doing so.



## Future Directions for LPT

In this section, I build on the evaluations of the Marxian critiques of core LPT to offer some ideas about where core LPT should go from here.

### *Theoretical issues – Value and labour process analysis*

One important unresolved theoretical issue confronting core LPT concerns the relevance (or lack thereof) of the Labour Theory of Value (LTV) to understanding capitalist production. As discussed above, Marxian critics including Tinker (2002) and Rowlinson and Hassard (2001) argue that core LPT's abandonment of the LTV has resulted in two negative consequences – a cessation of the 'search for the laws of motion' that underlie capitalism, and a contradiction in core-LPT's view that exploitation is in fact an inherent aspect of capitalist production.

Nevertheless, somewhat paradoxically, Rowlinson and colleagues also do not consider the rejection of the LTV to be *fundamentally* problematic for core LPT. The reason for this reticence is that the validity of the LTV is questioned by many Marxian theorists as well. After criticizing core LPT for abandoning the LTV, Rowlinson and Hassard, in discussing the concept of exploitation in the labour process, acknowledge that "it is not necessary to accept the fundamentalist-Marxist assertion that Marxian political economy stands or falls with the LTV" (2001: 90). This statement reflects their ambivalence about critiquing LPT for not abiding by a theory that is controversial even among Marxians.

However, to my view, it is unfortunate that their ambivalence causes Rowlinson and Hassard to not fully press this critique. While the quote from Thompson (1990: 100) describing the LPT core claims that 'exploitation' isn't dependent on the LTV, this isn't congruent with commonly accepted definitions of what the term 'exploitation' means. As traditionally defined, exploitation is the notion that in capitalism, "the value of labour extracted from the worker *in the labour process* must exceed the value of labour power purchased" (Grugulis and Knights, 2001b: 17, my emphasis). In other words, on average, workers are compensated at a level below the value of work they do, and this excess value is pocketed by the capitalist. However, if labour is not, as the LTV proposes, the *sole* source of 'surplus' value in production, then that undermines the ground for asserting that market wages and benefits do not compensate 'the worker' fully for the work they do, meaning that contra core LPT, capitalist production is *not inherently* exploitative. There are several implications for LPT's 'core theory' that flow from this single point (cf. Jaros, 2004):

1. Privileging the Labour Process for Analysis: The theoretical basis for the core LPT notion of 'privileging' the study of the labour process over other spheres of value-creation and value-realization activity, such as the labour, product and capital markets, cf. Kelly (1985) and his notion of a 'full circuit of capital', is undermined, since the justification for that privileging is that the labour process is the site where *exploitation* occurs.
2. Structured Antagonism: It implies that 'structured antagonism', the ever-present class-conflict of interest between labour and management – is likewise not an

*inherent* part of the capitalist labour process, at least to the extent that, as core LPT holds, structured antagonism is caused by exploitation at the point of production.

3. LPT's Moral Stance: Finally, there is a moral/political dimension to this issue. Though not formally included in the core, LPT has traditionally had a political orientation focused on developing ideas that empower workers to resist managerial control and eventually overthrow capitalism (Thompson, 1990). The moral justification for this is putting an end to exploitation; but if exploitation isn't an *inherent* feature of capitalist production, there is no *a priori* reason for being 'on the side' of workers in that struggle.

To my view, the solution to the 'value' dilemma isn't a return to the LTV. Ultimately, as many critics ('radical' and 'bourgeois') have noted the notion that labour and labour alone has the 'peculiar characteristic' of being able to produce value-added is an empirically unprovable one. In Marxian theory, it is today more an article of faith, or a meta-assumption about the nature of human development (Jaros, 2001). And Thompson's (1990) critique of the LTV remains sound – if the LTV were correct, Marx's predictions about the overthrow of capitalism would have been borne out, but they haven't been. Thus, a return to the LTV wouldn't improve LPT's conceptual armoury, because it would still be a vulnerable foundation for the core theory.

But, it is still possible to salvage the progressive orientation of LPT even absent a LTV. Capitalism can be conceptualized, in a manner of speaking, as being 'biased' against labour in a systemic sense, but the locus of that bias would lie in compelled labour market exchange: Marx's notion that, as a class, the labourer is compelled to agree to a working relationship that favours the capitalist, because the labourer has nothing to sell but labour power, and is thus goaded by, in Weber's (1908) words, the 'whip of hunger', whereas the capitalist can 'hold out' in negotiations longer due to greater wealth/resources (Marx, 1867/1976). The worker is thus compelled to agree to something that wouldn't have been agreed to absent that compulsion. This concept of unequal labour market exchange also allows us to salvage the core-LPT notion of a fundamental *antagonism* between management and labour, which could have its locus in the fact that because the effort-bargain it 'agreed' to was objectively made under duress, labour could subjectively perceive that bargain to be not fully legitimate, and act to battle management *at the point of production* for alterations to the bargain (wages, benefits, working conditions, etc.) that would make it more 'just'.

Recently, Elger (2001) argued that a weakness in core-LPT has been its failure to study how work experiences within a firm interact with the worker's experience of segmented (internal and external) labour markets. This is important because:

The promise of such approaches is that they provide a basis for understanding sources of similarity and difference in workers' experiences across different local labour markets and labour market segments and, crucially, the ways in which workers experience a range of instances of wage labour as they move between workplaces across their working lives. (Elger, 2001: 81)

Whilst Elger (2001) doesn't identify specific aspects of a worker's experiences at the point of production that are likely to be influenced by an understanding of their

experiences with external labour markets, I'm suggesting that capital's structural bargaining advantage over labour could be an experience that serves as a basis for the observed tendency for worker-management relations to be antagonistic. Of course, this structural advantage may not be a universal characteristic of all labour markets (local bargaining conditions as shaped by specific cultural and legal environments, and/or the vagaries of supply and demand may provide some workers with a temporary advantage that allows them to bargain on an equal or even superior structural footing with capital), but these instances are proposed to be exceptions to the general 'rule' (systemic tendency) which favours capital.

However, for this systemic tendency to be a source of workplace antagonism, labour would have to be cognizant of the fundamental power-inequality that shapes the effort-bargain. If labour is not subjectively cognizant, then it stands to reason that the objective existence of the unequal power relationship will not influence behaviour. Thus, though objectively-speaking we can talk of a tendency towards a 'structured imbalance' between capital and labour in the shaping of the effort-bargain, the notion that this manifests in a 'structured antagonism', i.e., actual antagonism in the workplace, would seem to be an empirical question, one that is reflected in labour subjectivity and identity in particular workplaces or industries (cf. Beil-Hildebrand, 2004), as opposed to something that can be *a priori* presumed to be always present under the surface, shaping any observed surface-level behaviour such as compliance, consent, or resistance.

### *Subjectivity*

This point about labour cognizance raises the issue of potentially conflicting Marxian and core-LPT approaches to the issue of worker *subjectivity*. Originally, there was no conflict between these approaches, because Braverman (1974) followed a traditional Marxian line, which conceptualizes workers as the *missing subject* in capitalism, i.e., once labour becomes a commodity, it loses its 'voice' and is spoken-for by capital, until at a certain point workers gain class-consciousness and overthrow the edifice. To traditional Marxians, the psychological or social-psychological experiences of individual workers are uninteresting, unless they can be shown to develop into class consciousness (Miller and Rose, 1995). But within a few years, LPT theorists rejected this Marxian view as too structural-deterministic. Burawoy (1979) attempted to rectify this problem by studying empirically the social-psychology of production; how the worker's desire to establish a stable, proud sense-of-self while living in fear of being downsized results in 'game playing' behaviours that have the effect of buttressing managerial ideology, and later (1985) tied this to the development of hegemonic political regimes in different eras of capitalist development, but his efforts were critiqued for over-emphasizing worker consent to and compliance with managerial control (Knights and Willmott, 1990).

Though he did not include an analysis of subjectivity as an element of core theory, Thompson (1990) did identify it as a pressing problem, and advocated bringing non-Marxian social theories to bear on it, but when other researchers heeded this – for example, the stream of Foucauldian-inspired work on identity maintenance (Knights and Willmott, 1990) and Collinson's (1992, 1994) work on the gendered nature of subjectivity) – their efforts were criticized as straying too far from the 'material' realities of work (cf. Warhurst and Thompson, 1998). Much of the last half of the 1990s

and into the early 2000s was consumed by advocates of the materialist and existentialist/postmodernist perspectives critiquing and de-constructing each other's work, with no resolution achieved.

Today, core-LPT approaches to employee subjectivity emphasize explicating employee resistance to modern managerial control efforts such as cultural indoctrination (Beil-Hildebrand, 2004), emotion management (Taylor and Bain, 2003), and technological surveillance (Warhurst and Thompson, 1998). In this regard, Ackroyd and Thompson's (1999) development of the concept of employee 'misbehaviour', which attempts to describe various forms that anti-managerial behaviour can take, is exemplary. The model conceptualizes worker-management struggle as occurring across four contested domains: worker identity, worker effort, working time, and the product of work. Notably, these contestations are over local, workplace conditions, not the broader capitalist system per se. Thus, core-LPT approaches to subjectivity aim at trying to map the *domain* of conflict, at the point of production, as it relates to subjectivity, while making no presumption that any particular form of struggle will necessarily or even likely lead to the development of class-consciousness and formal, collective political activity.

This core-LPT perspective on subjectivity would seemingly be diametrically opposed to Marxian points of view. However, during the same time that these core-LPT developments were taking place, Marxian researchers, perhaps chastened by the collapse of state socialism in the east and welfare-state capitalism in the west, struggled to find evidence of class-wide worker consciousness, much less its organic expression and development in particular industries and workplaces (Rowlinson and Hassard, 2001; Domingues, 2000). As a result, many Marxian theorists have moved away from the orthodox 'if it doesn't reflect class-consciousness it doesn't matter' perspective, and towards a position that is largely congruent with the core-LPT emphasis on resistance and misbehaviour at work. Barchiesi's (2003, 1996) work is emblematic of this movement. He argues that Marxians like himself should work to develop a concept of:

Subjectivity (that) requires a departure from the kind of orthodox Marxist-Lukacsian understanding of class consciousness based on a dialectic of "false" and "true", with the former associated with the everyday acceptance of workplace capitalist domination and the latter with the culminating moments of organization and struggle. (Barchiesi, 1996: 6)

Barchiesi argues that worker subjectivity cannot be assumed as 'transcendental to the field of events' and must be analyzed as the contingent product of interacting workplace and both local and global cultural, economic, and institutional processes. He acknowledges that because cultural and institutional factors mediate what happens at the global-systemic level and at the workplace level (a point acknowledged by Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999), worker subjectivity and resistance will likely take different forms in different places (Barchiesi, 2003).

This revised Marxian approach dovetails nicely with Ackroyd and Thompson's notion of 'misbehaviour' and consequent worker subjectivity manifesting in many resistant or anti-management forms, contingent on local political and material conditions. True, Barchiesi, like other Marxians (cf. Martinez-Lucio and Stewart, 1997), is still keen to study whether and how worker subjectivity will manifest in collective, large-scale

consciousness and political action, but since this manifestation is no longer posited, at least in the short run, to be inevitable, this analytical concern doesn't contradict the core-LPT approach.

Likewise, other Marxian-oriented LPT researchers, led by Paul Stewart (Martinez-Lucio and Stewart, 1997; Stephenson and Stewart, 2001; Stewart, 2002) have explored the issue of subjectivity by studying the existence of various forms of 'collectivism' amongst workers at the shop-floor level. In doing so, Stephenson and Stewart (2001) do critique Ackroyd and Thompson's (1999) concept of organizational misbehaviour. They argue that the 'misbehaviour' concept is limited because it (a) focuses on the behaviour of individual workers, missing collective manifestations of subjectivity, and (b) focuses on acts of misbehaviour, i.e., acts that management disapproves of, ignoring forms of collectivism that don't involve overt conflict with management. But as Thompson and Newsome (2004) note, the differences here aren't fundamental. They persuasively explain that the goal of the 'misbehaviour' model was to specifically explore just those aspects of employee subjectivity that are 'anti-management' in nature, and doesn't imply that subjectivity cannot take forms that are more overtly collectivist, or support or involve cooperating with management. Thus, the models can complement each other.

Also, a resolution of Marxian and 'core LPT' differences on subjectivity could be facilitated by insights from postmodernist-influenced investigators (e.g., Knights, Willmott, Wray-Bliss). Perhaps one way to overcome the postmodernist/materialist divide and move LPT forward on the subjectivity issue could be to posit that (a) yes, as per the postmodernist perspective (cf. O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001), employee subjectivity is often characterized by anxiety about the need to maintain a 'stable, autonomous' sense of self, and that this pre-occupation with individual identity-maintenance paralyzes his/her ability to act critically and self-reflexively analyze and resist capitalist employment relations, but (b) employee anxiety is animated not solely by an inherent existential 'need' to maintain a stable identity. As per the 'core LPT' perspective, it also reflects the material 'reality' of work under capitalism – fear of losing benefits, fear of pay cuts, fear of being 'right-sized' and outsourced, and so forth.

Both Jaros (2001) and Tinker (2002) note that the notion that workplace anxiety is animated *solely* by existential will-to-stability is itself the kind of 'essentialist' notion that is anathema to postmodernist thinking. A more defensible tack would be to posit identity-stabilization as one possible locus of employee subjectivity, and empirically assess it vs. competing explanations (cf. Charles and James, 2003; Parry, 2003). This would mean studying subjectivity in the workplace – to gather primary data on it – in addition to de-constructing other researcher's published texts by applying a will-to-stability framework (as per O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001).

But, this approach recognizes a key insight of the postmodernist critique – that Marxian and 'core LPT' perspectives on subjectivity have been hindered by a wedding to essentialist-humanist conceptualizations. It posits critical reflexivity (on the part of the researcher and researched) rooted in an ethical stance committed to undermining subjugating power dynamics, both at the point of production and in the broader society, as the starting point for developing a critical consciousness that can challenge the status quo. It also shares some commonalities with the notion of 'weak socialization'

(Bakhurst and Sypnowich, 1995), which posits that all specific social identities, including possibly those forged primarily at work, are influenced by, but not determined by, cultural and economic structures and discourses.

This discussion implies the need for ethnographic research to untangle the relative import of workplace and non-workplace influences on employee subjectivity. One goal that remains to be accomplished is an *explanation* of how workplace experiences interact with broader institutional, national, and international influences to shape worker agency (cf. Ailon-Souda and Kunda, 2003; Collinson, 2002; Bakhurst and Sypnowich, 1995). This implies the need for research that untangles the relative import of workplace and non-workplace influences on employee subjectivity. In this vein, Adler (2003) conducted a case study of software engineers in four companies and found that worker subjectivity was significantly shaped by US government-mandated changes in work documentation. The implementation of standardization procedures for software development mandated by the government changed the nature of work from being highly individualistic (software engineers developed code by themselves) to much more interactive (teams of software designers working together, and negotiating the standards to be applied and passed on to future developers). Management functioned as an intermediary between governmental pressure and the labour process, implementing control procedures to enforce those aspects of the government mandate that improved efficiency and managerial control over work assignments, but resisting those aspects that threatened to alienate software engineers and drive them from the firm.

All of this changed the prevailing self-construal among engineers from one of 'lone hacker' to a much more interdependent social identity. In this case, the source of changes in organizational control strategies and consequently employee identity wasn't managerial discretion alone, but also resulted from the influence of external stakeholders (the government and customers). Similar dynamics may be apparent in other labour processes, and this kind of research may constitute a fruitful path to learning how workplace identities are influenced by broader socio-political dynamics.

### *Methodology and linkages with political economy*

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of LPT to the study of work has been the rich and abundant body of qualitative research into the labour process. This is the area where LPT has the clearest practical advantage over its Marxian rivals, who often develop their ideas from 'armchair theorizing'. However, LPT still faces the problem of 'one-off' case studies identified by Thompson (1990). As acknowledged by Thompson and Newsome:

A great strength of LPT is its capacity to connect the workplace to a broader political economy. Without that, the research programme can disappear into micro-level case studies of control and skill strategies whose causal chain ends at the factory gate. (2004: 7)

The latter statement dovetails with the arguments of Marxian critics such as Rowlinson, Hassard, and colleagues, who of course have made the point that this 'capacity' to link what happens in specific workplaces to the broader political economy has not been realized.

Thompson and Newsome's comment is meant to encourage future research projects that aim specifically at tackling this issue, and such work is necessary. However, LPT might also be able to generate insight into these linkages by utilizing the findings of *previous* research – the substantial body of existing case research – since these linkages might appear, or at least hypotheses about them might be formulated, if *patterns* across these disparate case studies could be empirically identified. Characteristics of global capitalist political economy should be manifested in commonalities (in control mechanisms, patterns of workplace conflict, pressures on identity maintenance, etc.) that characterize seemingly disparate labour processes located in different economic sectors and/or regions of the world (Stiglitz, 2002).

This means that LPT could benefit from the application of methods that facilitate knowledge-accumulation across qualitative research studies. Researchers could use aggregation techniques such as meta-ethnography (Noblit and Hare, 1988) to summarize the findings of many case studies and tease out patterns and linkages amongst them. In recent years, the feasibility of this technique has been enhanced by the development of computer software that helps the researcher to identify common themes in concepts (such as 'subjectivity', 'control', etc.) that may have been formally defined differently in various case studies (Miles and Weitzman, 1994). LPT researchers have taken the lead in studying the impact that technological advances in control and production techniques have had on the nature of work (Milkman, 1998), but haven't been as effective in keeping abreast of how improved technology can help 'enhance productivity' in our field work. Meta-ethnographic methods could allow us to identify the 'universal in the specific' (Barchiesi, 2003).

Another, future research-oriented possibility that would enhance LPT's ability to generate insight into globalization processes would be to develop more quantitative instruments to measure important LPT concepts. Currently, the main data gathering technique in LPT research is case study research via interview and observation (cf. Beil-Hildebrand, 2004). A limitation of this method is that it is impractical to employ in cross-national or cross-industry research, the kind that can generate insights about global political economy. In contrast, survey questionnaires can be used to gather data from thousands of employees on a worldwide basis. Quantification would also allow for statistical analysis of relationships among the measured variables. The nearly sole reliance on qualitative methods that has characterized LPT research (for somewhat of an exception, see some of Harley's work – e.g., Hall and Harley, 2001; Jarley, Harley and Hall, 2002) has led to the formation of a research culture that produces 'deep' knowledge (nuanced, fine-grained understandings of particular workplaces) but not 'broad' knowledge (knowledge that is generalizable to other organizations, industries, countries etc.).

Of course, this means overcoming the aversion to quantitative methods that is part of LPT's culture. LPT is rooted in the work of Braverman (1974), and one of Braverman's goals was to revitalize the study of work by critiquing the prevailing Industrial Sociology and Industrial-Organizational Psychology approaches that were (and still are) the dominant paradigms of 'mainstream' bourgeois theories of work behaviour. Braverman had an aversion to the use of quantitative techniques, which he associated with "a pre-occupation with mapping job satisfaction, employee attitudes, and the

nature of social values extant in the employment relation" (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001: 113). Braverman considered quantitative measures to be inadequate for analysis of deep-structural systemic tendencies in modern capitalism, while later researchers have rejected them as having little value in 'penetrating below the surface' of superficial employee attitudes to tap more fundamental aspects of identity and subjectivity.

However, while the purposes that mainstream industrial sociology used quantitative methods for may have been 'bourgeois' in nature, there's nothing inherent in these methods that makes them useful only for that purpose. Nor are quantitative and qualitative methods mutually exclusive. They can be used together as a crosscheck on each other. Qualitative methods could be used to generate a general/richer understanding of themes and concepts, and then these could be translated into scale-form to permit statistical aggregation, thereby possibly producing deeper and broader insights into the global labour processes. For example, Littler and Innes' (2003) study that used quantitative methods to assess the relationship between corporate downsizing and firm-level de-skilling outcomes across 4000 organizations, and checked those results by comparing them to the findings of in-depth case studies of some of the same firms in the larger statistical sample, is in this regard exemplary. Though this study was confined to a single country (Australia), there's no reason the same kind of approach couldn't be used cross-nationally, to gain insight into how globalization processes and workplace dynamics interpenetrate each other.

### *Politics*

Finally, politically speaking, the implication of the notion that capitalist labour processes are only potentially, not inherently, exploitative but that labour markets are systemically skewed in favour of capital at the expense of labour is that the LPT researcher should work to educate labour and the general public about unequal labour market power dynamics, and the effect this has on the effort-bargain. This addresses the issue of labour-cognizance noted above. LPT researchers are educators, and are in a structural position to educate workers and the public about the systemically unequal context of effort-bargain negotiations.

Note that this proposal doesn't entail a top-down, elite-researcher-lectures-ignorant-worker-about-their-true-condition approach. Rather, it shares commonalities with Wray-Bliss (2002; 2003), who has argued that even many postmodernist-inspired LPT researchers, ostensibly committed to a reflexive/critical ethics aimed at subverting the subordination of employee 'voices' both in the workplace and in their wider lives, may be carrying out their research in a manner that gives the researcher an 'authoritative' voice, one that reproduces hierarchical relations between researcher and researched and buttresses the systemic subjugation processes that reproduce the worker's subordination within the capitalist labour process. Wray-Bliss's point is important because it has both methodological and political implications. Politically, it follows O'Doherty and Willmott's (2001) admonition that the critical researcher cannot work with research subjects to end their subordination to capitalism until the researcher has first achieved an ethical/political stance that doesn't subordinate the research 'subject' in the process of conducting research. It recognizes that hierarchical relations between researcher-researched are connected to broader systems of domination that underlie capitalist



employment relations, such that subverting the former is a prerequisite to undermining the latter.

Methodologically, it implies that a starting point for understanding wider systems of domination such as employee experiences in the labour process is the researcher's understanding of, and critical interrogation of, his/her own tendencies to engage in actions that reproduce research-subject subordination in academic forums. This proposal posits research into the labour process as a mutual learning process (though a problematic, not idealized one) between the researcher and researched. It also recognizes that the researcher is in a somewhat privileged position, a standpoint that provides him/her with a 'soapbox' from which to amplify the product of researcher/researched collaboration.

But, it also emphasizes that, as Thompson and Smith note, "the capitalist labour process consists of *real* structures and relations whose dynamics are open to empirical observation and demonstration, however partial and limited" (2001: 56). Workers are systemically subordinated to capital in the labour market, and this often translates into real, lived-experienced deprivation in their daily lives.

I make this point because there is a danger that the Wray-Bliss argument can be taken too far: in applying his method, one could conceivably get lost in a mental hall-of-mirrors, agonizing over every step of the research process, worrying endlessly about whether one is reproducing Foucauldian 'webs of power'. The researcher could slip into an obsessive introspection that might paralyze the researcher and prevent an analysis of real-world material subjugation (much as O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001, note that an obsession with establishing a stable sense-of-self can prevent the researcher and researched from looking outward and critically interrogating systemic forms of domination). But to my view, this is only a danger, a possibility: it is also possible to use the reflexive/ethical method without slipping into this kind of obsessive introspection, and the method is not incompatible with a concern for understanding and politically combating the material realities of the capitalist labour process, and an analysis of how they link with broader systemic tendencies. To the contrary, it facilitates their accomplishment.

Also, LPT researchers should participate in mainstream political processes and agitate for legislation that ameliorates the imbalance in the labour market itself (e.g., social welfare legislation that provides adequate support for the under- and unemployed so as to lessen the compulsion to accept an unjust effort-bargain) and that ameliorate its effects in the workplace (e.g., improved wages, benefits, and working conditions). And LPT researchers should join with researchers studying other forms of domination within the workplace (gender based, race based, etc.) to investigate how labour's subordination to capital via the labour market is interrelated with other forms of oppression at the point of production and to work jointly with them to overcome those forms of oppression.

Essentially, a 'reformist' agenda that, though it doesn't jibe with Marxian demands for revolutionary action, does speak to improving the lot of working people in the here-and-

now while not relying on empirically-unsustainable leaps-of-faith about the inevitability of working-class revolution and the overthrow of capitalism.

## Conclusion – A Revised core

The preceding discussion points to the need for a revised 'core' for LPT. The elements of the revised core should include:

1. The function of labour *as one input* generating surplus in capitalism, and an input that interacts with other inputs both inside and outside the labour process to create value, and hence the *important* role of production to the system, justifies the study of the labour process as a focal point for analysis.

This revision resolves the LTV contradiction in core-LPT by eliminating those aspects of Thompson's (1990) core element that rely on the LTV (i.e., labour as the sole source of surplus value and the labour process as the sole locus of value creation) and the notion that exploitation at the point of production is inherent to capitalist production. It also recognizes that even though the labour process is not the sole source of surplus, since it is a source of surplus it still merits distinct analytical attention.

2. The necessity for constant renewal and change in the forces of production and the skills of labour due to the discipline of the profit rate and competitive accumulation of capital.

This is identical to the Thompson *et al.* core element (2).

3. Due to the indeterminacy of labour, there is a control imperative in the labour process in order for capital to secure profitable production and translate its legal purchase of labour power into actual labour.

This revision is for the most part substantively identical to the Thompson *et al.* core element (3), except that the concept of labour indeterminacy is made explicit as the basis for the control imperative, and substantively, the reference to 'labour surplus' is dropped, since this relied on the LTV assumptions of core element (1).

4. Given the structural inequality of labour market transactions, the social relations between capital and labour in the workplace have a tendency to be characterized by antagonism. At the same time, capital, in order to constantly revolutionize the production process, must seek some level of creativity and cooperation from labour, resulting in a continuum of overlapping worker responses... from resistance, to accommodation, compliance, consent, or active cooperation.

This revision eliminates the concept of '*structured* antagonism', antagonism as an *inherent* aspect of capitalist production, based as it was on the concept of labour as the sole-source of value, and replaces it with the notion that unequal labour market conditions *tend* to create antagonism, contingent on labour's subjective recognition of this inequality. It also recognizes that labour may actively cooperate with management,

if it perceives a congruence of interests and/or an absence of exploitation. Additionally, our analysis of politics and methodology lead to two additional core elements:

5. Labour process theory is not analytically pre-disposed to any particular kind of method. Quantitative or qualitative methods utilizing dialectical or non-dialectical reasoning may all be capable of shedding light on the nature of work under capitalism, depending on the specific research question being investigated.
6. Given the objective, structurally unequal power relations between capital and labour that shapes the effort-bargain transaction, LPT is normatively pre-disposed to favour labour when labour and capital engage in struggle. The LPT researcher is committed to acting politically to ameliorate the effects of this unequal relationship in the short run, and eliminate it in the long run. This means that the LPT researcher should critically interrogate his/her ethical stance towards the 'subjects' of research, so as to ameliorate the possibility that the research process reproduces systems of domination that the researcher is committed to undermining.

A corollary to (6) is a recognition that other forms of domination are also manifest in the workplace, and that understanding labour's subordination to capital as a consequence of unequal labour market transactions may depend on understanding how this subordination interacts with racial and gender-based forms of oppression, among others, and acting politically with researchers who focus on those forms of domination.

From its inception, LPT has struggled against criticisms of its theoretical and practical relevance. Today, challenges to 'core' LPT come from leftist critics who argue that Marxian perspectives refute the underlying principles that characterize the core concepts. However, this revised core enables LPT to overcome some conceptual flaws while retaining those elements that have made it a robust perspective from which to study the dynamics of capitalist production, as evidenced by the rich body of empirical work it has generated on subjectivity, control and resistance, and power relations in work organizations. Still, attention to the theoretical and methodological issues highlighted above could prove fruitful in improving LPT's conceptual tools for understanding modern global capitalism and making a contribution to empowering employees in the process.

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