

Class Implications of the Changing Labour Process

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CLASS IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHANGING LABOUR PROCESS

The purpose of this paper is to examine changes in the labour process from a perspective which has, especially in the wake of an increasing avalanche of business and “human resource management” literature, become heterodox. The heterodox character of this approach is simply due to its commitment to synthesise class analysis and labour process analysis, that is to illuminate the underlying structural relations of power in the workplace, in the market and in society as a whole.

The labour process is functionally fundamental to every social system of production, including capitalism. Our discussion shall seek to demonstrate this relevance of the way in which work is organised for wider systemic patterns through the examination of three main factors connecting the labour process with the structure and operation of class relations.

The first of these is the level of exploitation, which is scrutinised in a perfunctory manner in the section on working time and work intensification, as well as, to a lesser extent, in the course of our subsequent discussion throughout the paper. The second major linking point between labour process analysis and class analysis is the enquiry into the differences in employee skills and work experience. Skill levels are important factors and indicators of two main things – (a) employee’s workplace, social and economic (bargaining) power and autonomy, as well as of (b) the methodology employed by economic and political elites in the construction of power relationships. Thirdly, we shall analyse certain patterns pertaining to job autonomy and task discretion.

The paper will thus explore some basic parameters of change and continuity with regard to employee effort, skill and autonomy. These factors (most directly the issue of employee autonomy) shall frame our discussion of the labour process around the question of the contemporary character of managerial control and hierarchical/power relations, the specific modes of class rule in the modern UK workplace.

WORKING TIME AND WORK INTENSIFICATION

Even though the length of the basic working week has significantly decreased in the last 150 years (Blyton, 1994), from more than 60 to a little less than 40 hours per week, paid and unpaid “overtime” working largely complicates this picture, and average UK working time has in many cases increased over the past two decades (Noon and Blyton, 2007). Indeed, usual working hours of UK males were the longest in the EU (Eurostat Labour Force Survey, 2003). An outstandingly high proportion of UK workers (almost one in five, men significantly more than women) are even working more than the 48 hours prescribed as the maximum length of the working week by the EU Directive on Working Time (ONS, 2006). Almost a third of workers reported that they worked more than 48 hours per week at least once monthly (Kersley et al., 2007). These long hours were particularly common for sections of construction, manufacture, the motor trade, hotels, transport and security in the case of

men and bar work for women (New Earnings Survey, 2003). Yet the Labour Force Survey (ONS, 2006) also found that 30 per cent of managers and 27 per cent of professional workers reported usually working more than 48 hours weekly in 2005, mostly with unpaid overtime work.

In fact, already by 1993, only about a third of UK workers had the “classical” 9 am to 5 pm, Monday to Friday work week, and over a fifth (23 per cent) had a 6 or 7-day week (Hewitt, 1993). There was also an increase in the proportion of workers whose job attendance time was monitored through electronic time recording or a time-clock during the 1990s (White et al., 2004).

An obvious limitation of these figures in assessing job intensity is that they do not record time that is actually spent working, nor the actual complexity and pace of work. In addition to long hours, and the widespread absence of work-life balance, UK workers have reported a sharp reduction in control over how much effort is put into their work, from 71 per cent who reported that they had a great deal of influence over how hard they worked in 1992 to 51 per cent in 2001 (Gallie, 2009b). Additionally, despite the commonly heralded advent of flexible, “liberated” work, just one in seven workplaces permits staff to work flexi-time hours, and this practice appeared not to be spreading (White et al., 2004).

At the same time, pension age has increased to 65 for both men and women and there were around 2.53 million unemployed people in the three months to the end of January 2011 (ONS, 2011), while in 2004 about a fifth (22 per cent) of workers reported an average working time of less than 30 hours a week, which meets the generally agreed definition of part-time work (Kersley et al., 2007). Partly as a result of this, the supply of labour significantly outstrips overall job demand.

In spite of the existence of large-scale unemployment and a massive part-time work sector, more than a hundred years after the American and European socialist and labour movement (including the Second International) put forward the demand for an 8-hour work day, this vision now appears quite distant for many UK workers. Already in 1935, at a time when long-distance commuting was still quite rare, the ILO (which was, of course, never a radical labour organisation) proposed that weekly work be reduced to 40 hours (Bosch et al., 1993).

In national and cross-national surveys on work effort since the 1980s, UK workers have consistently reported an increase in work effort and work under pressure (Green, 2001; Green and McIntosh, 2001; Green, 2004), which reached a general plateau between 1998 and 2004 (Green, 2004). In 2004, 76 per cent of employees concurred with the statement that their job “required them to work very hard”: this was most often true for employees in managerial (86 per cent) and professional (84 per cent) occupations, followed by employees in Caring, leisure and other personal service occupations at 78 per cent (Kersley et al., 2007).

Surveys are obviously quite a crude method of assessing job intensity, subject to numerous subjective, cultural and other factors, yet simply to discount them would be unwarranted. The apparent intensification of work effort, along with longer working hours, has been related to the introduction of greater employee flexibility. Extensive political and ideological changes, as well as globalised competitive pressures requiring “higher quality, better design *and* more frequent changes in products” (Ladipo and Wilkinson, 2002, 10), in both the private and the public sector, have introduced not just greater numerical and temporal flexibility, but also functional flexibility (such as employee multi-tasking and teamwork). These changes shift responsibility to implement flexible forms of delivering goods and services onto the workforce (Hudson, 2002). Some instruments set up to ensure these different forms of flexibility have included new targeting systems, computer acquired performance data and other forms of performance management (especially individual performance assessment, as well as a trend of increasing performance-related payments, mostly but far from exclusively for non-manual employees – White et al., 2004), work reorganisations and reductions in employment and workforce numbers, so that the remaining workers are forced to cover more tasks (Elger, 1991; Edwards and Whitston, 1991; Burchell et al., 1999).

The continuous promotion of organisational change, for instance in the NHS, has increased employee stress, insecurity and workload still further, echoing Parker and Slaughter’s (1988) notion of “management by stress”. Government departments and agencies typically conduct regular organisational changes at 12 to 18 month intervals, which includes significant methodological and procedural alterations induced by new and rapidly evolving ICT (information and communications technology) systems (White et al., 2004; Green, 2004). Computer technology has also increased the possibilities for surveillance and control, as we shall later document. In a UK survey on the impact of the introduction of IT 64.6 per cent of respondents reported an increase in stress and pressure, while only 0.8 per cent reported a decrease in these experiences (Baldry et al., 1998). Other developments in communication technology (such as mobile phones, pagers, fax and email) have aided in this process of extending working time, and have enabled employers to contact their employees away from work (Fuchs Epstein and Kalleberg, 2001).

In her book *Willing Slaves*, Bunting (2004) established that an overwork culture driven by consumption and status-seeking is persuading “white-collar” professionals to go beyond passive complicity and to self-initiate the extension of working time and intensification of work effort. This is in line with a peculiar blend of consumerism and neo-Puritan work ethics which views time poverty and a long hours’ culture as proof of employee commitment and a factor in career promotion, or just a more secure employee approach in a highly competitive labour market. The obfuscating ideology of much of the new human resource management - which seeks to present economic life as an open meritocracy and a realm of autonomous relationships, to deny a fundamental class conflict of interests and to promote the notion of homogenous interests shared by workers and employers (Legge, 2005) - contributes to this cultural perspective. Team working (to which I shall return later when I discuss office work) is another supposedly “liberatory”, innovative development which has in some cases been

associated with job intensification (Graham, 1995). More generally, peer pressure among workers has been identified as an increasingly important source of labour intensification (Green, 2001). Psychological internalisation of managerial demands by employees is also deepened through the inducement of workers' self-surveillance and time discipline (Hassard, 2000).

A Western, largely professional/"middle class" version of "Stakhanovism" is a common result of these phenomena. Studies of British managers and finance workers (Wajcman, 1998; McDowell, 1997), and of male workers in particular (Hewitt, 1993), indicate a "workaholic" culture characterised by an unwillingness to sacrifice career prospects in exchange for a better work-life balance, despite the proclaimed desire of professionally successful men and women to achieve this balance (Pahl, 1995). This disparity in declared goals and actual behaviour seems to demonstrate one important way in which the nature of the modern workplace remains coercive even to relatively privileged employees. Workers in higher-skilled occupations reported higher levels of work intensity, leading to lower levels of employee well-being (Kersley et al., 2007). Even many senior executives are expected to demonstrate "total time commitment" (Fagan and Lallement, 2000).

The contemporary vitality of the "long hours' culture" or "presenteeism" (Simpson, 1998) might not in all cases disprove claims that the sphere of consumption has become a more important source of identity than the world of work, but it is even more significant as an argument against claims that work has been losing its objective centrality in human life.

CHANGES IN EMPLOYEE SKILL AND AUTONOMY

CONCEPTUAL ASPECTS

Advocates of the humanistic organisation of work have long asserted that the contemporary worker has become an "appendage to the machine" (Supek, 1953, 54). Marx summarised the alienation of work inherent in the capitalist labour process by averring that "it is not the worker who employs the conditions of his work, but rather the reverse, the conditions of work employ the worker" (Marx, [1867] 1967, 548).

Recent debates on the organisation of the labour process have generally taken Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (1974) as a starting point for discussion, tending to revolve around arguments designed to defend or attack his main thesis. Braverman's argumentation in favour of the understanding that a "deskilling" of work was occurring specifically centred on the "scientific management approach" and its (alleged) focus on the tightly controlled, hierarchical, cost-lowering and productivity-oriented division of labour, with its separation of the conception of work from the execution of work and the attendant employee deskilling, compliance and disempowerment. Braverman recognised, as did many before him, that the degree of job

autonomy is often highly dependent on the level of skill involved in the job (and *vice versa*). It therefore logically followed from his argument on deskilling that a decrease in the worker's understanding and control over the labour process was also taking place.

According to Braverman, the "monopoly capitalist" system of production and distribution, with its emphasis on the welfare consensus, relatively high wages and the increasing promise of mass consumerism, rapidly replaced expectations of fulfilling, life-enhancing, democratically organised working life in exchange for the external rewards of the consumerist lifestyle.

However, Braverman's supposition that managerial strategy centres on controlling the labour process, deskilling and the restriction of employee autonomy is universally true only in the sense that management and owners of capital seek to ultimately preserve their proprietary privilege. Apart from this basic prerequisite, management's overt control over labour (including capital's interest in reducing labour costs) are subordinate to the basic economic imperative, which is to extract surplus labour and make profit; there is more than one way to successfully organise capitalist economic activity (Palmer, 1975, Armstrong, 1985; Friedman, 1977). Consequently, managerial approaches aren't necessarily keen to decrease employee autonomy and cooperation when they enhance productivity and profits (Blackburn and Mann, 1979; Batstone et al., 1987), and help companies to retain skilled workers (Nichols and Beynon, 1977), as evidenced, for instance, by managerial promotion of semi-autonomous work groups in some cases (Grint, 2006).

That said, productivity from the point of view of capital and actual productive efficiency are two distinct things. As Marx wrote, labour is productive only if it "produces surplus value for the capitalist, and thus works for the self-expansion of capital" (Marx, [1867] 1967, 509). "Only bourgeois narrow-mindedness, which regards the capitalist forms of production (...) as eternal (...) can confuse the problem of what is productive labour from the standpoint of capital with the question of what labour is productive in general" (Marx, [1863] 1969, 393). More recently, Gorz recognised that "from the point of view of capital the productivity of labour goes up whenever it can impose on the worker *an increased amount of work without a proportionate increase in his wages*" (Gorz, 1976, 169, his italics). Extensive empirical evidence shows that workers' participation in decision-making powerfully improved actual job productivity by removing obstacles to efficiency (created by managerial domination), which include strikes, various forms of sabotage and chronic waste, as well as general underperformance in comparison with the democratised work model which transforms the workforce into highly-motivated, innovative stakeholders (Gorz, 1976; Conyon and Freeman, 2001). However, serious participatory and cooperative economic models preclude the generally unhindered extraction of surplus labour and undermine the "technical irrationality and the politico-cultural bias of the capitalist division of labour" (Gorz, 1976, 172), which helps to explain the customary unpopularity of these approaches in managerialist circles.

An emphasis on (limited) employee creativity and problem-solving is nonetheless a significant strategy to match and overtake corporate competitors. Furthermore, as (for example) Friedman (1977), Burawoy (1979) and Edwards (1979) have pointed out, workers' resistance has often forced management to seek more sophisticated and veiled forms of control. Yet the fundamental limitation on these decentralising tendencies remains firmly embedded in the capitalist mode of production – i.e. the protection of long-term capitalist class interests transcends (in the last instance) the focus on immediate productivity and profit-making. Furthermore, as we shall empirically validate below, the exigencies of capital accumulation do tend to robustly support the class function of hierarchical control and domination over the labour process.

However, managerial control is never permanently acquired. The structural antagonism of the modern workplace therefore has to be kept under control through a degree of employer-employee compromise (Burawoy, 1985). The theorists of post-Fordism tend to share the view that recent decades have steadily led to a production system based on significantly altered strategic priorities. Some authors have located the main impetus for this transformation in the managerial response to workers' dissatisfaction and resistance (the so-called "regulation approach" proposed by Aglietta, 1976; Lipietz, 1983; Boyer, 1986 etc.). Other authors emphasise the role of consumer dissatisfaction with Fordist mass, inflexible product lines (Piore and Sabel, 1984), thus accounting for the perceived rise in flexible specialisation in which multi-skilled employees engage in team-working characterised by devolved responsibility and flexible production methods. Both lines of reasoning can be presented with strong counter-arguments. The lack of empirical evidence for the argument that mass markets have been discontinued (Williams et al., 1987), as well as the presence of "a degree of product differentiation since the mid-1920s" (Edgell, 2008, 82), render the latter approach quite deficient and questionable. The first perspective, on the other hand, reveals that a linear interpretation of post-Fordist change is inadequate. The post-Fordist implications of regulation theory were conceived in response to a different historical moment when even radical demands for workers' self-management were bursting into the mainstream in many Western countries (Sassoon, 1996). Such explanations are of much less use in these times of downcast labour movements in the West.

Other authors (Wood, 1989) prefer the notion of "neo-Fordism" to define predominant contemporary dynamics, arguing that recent changes in the labour process and the organisation of work tend to only partially modify existing Fordist patterns. In reality, these different ideal-types often even coexist in the same product market (Grint, 2006). Hence, for example, methods such as teamwork and multitasking are used alongside more traditional Fordist elements of work standardisation and numerical flexibility (Royle and Towers, 2002). Yet even the advocates of this proposition generally fail to note that, while Taylorist "scientific management" in the traditional sense has mostly been modified and transcended, it is certainly still present in numerous offshore operations of transnational, Western-based companies (Klein, 1999).

Friedman (1977) emphasised the use of various strategies in the pursuit of long-term profitability, depending on the strategic importance and hence bargaining power of a particular segment of the workforce, the likelihood they might resist managerial discipline and the oppositional resources these workers have at their disposal. Analysing developed Western economies, Piore and Doeringer (Doeringer and Piore, 1971) and Edwards (1979) were among the early researchers who pointed to this polarisation of the workforce according to their central or peripheral position in the labour process. On the basis of criteria expounded by Friedman (1977), the management of these two general workforce categories could be differentiated along two major lines – 1) the direct-control strategy and 2) the responsible autonomy strategy.

1.

According to this schema, peripheral workers are less skilled and less central to the labour process. They are consequently more expendable, more vulnerable and exposed to stricter, more direct managerial control and greater skill degradation. This basic picture is, however, complicated by the existence of a sizeable segment of highly skilled peripheral (freelance, part-time etc.) employees. Intelligent flexibility (including continuous training, multi-tasking and team organisation) is often compatible with the use of numerical, external flexibility (White et al., 2004). On the whole, however, it appears that higher-skilled occupations did indeed tend to entail more formal employment arrangements (Kersley et al., 2007).

2.

“Responsible autonomy” is presented as a more relaxed, indirect control regime based on a greater degree of employee discretion (Fox, 1974; Friedman, 1977). It is, at least on the level of theory, associated with a “high-performance” managerial strategy, which focuses on job skill development (“quality circles”, “continual improvement” etc.), team-working and employee motivation (Frohlich and Pekruhl, 1996; Murray et al., 2002), including through the bestowal of “status, authority and responsibility” (Friedman, 1977, 21) to the workers. When examined from a different angle, however, “responsible autonomy” might be interpreted as a shift from an emphasis on external control to “ideological consent through internal disciplinary systems (mind and cash)” (Grint, 2006, 319). Certain authors emphasize that this managerial strategy relies significantly on the obscuring of the extraction of surplus value itself (Burawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1979). In reality, beyond a mythical, empowering neo-capitalism, “responsible autonomy” is often simply a form of functional flexibility and ideological manipulation (armoured with methods of close supervision), rather than a result of committed democratism and anti-authoritarianism in the organisation of work. Certain authors, such as Thornley (1996), invoke the typically Marxian argument that employers induce and sustain divisions between “skilled” and “unskilled” workers in order to undermine workers’ solidarity and cooperative resistance to the capital’s agenda. This seems quite a plausible contention to us, but it is difficult to either conclusively prove or disprove. Somewhat less controversially (considering the politically charged nature of this debate), occupational skill differentiation is in some cases also associated with the attempt by certain types of workers to elaborate, organise and present their skill categories in ways which

restrict entry into their trade and promote their sectional interests (Cockburn, 1983; Thornley, 1996).

The impersonal complexity of modern social organisation also serves to conceal the eminently political decisions behind capitalist organisation of work. Following from Marx, Lukács has pertinently defined this reification: “Its basis is that a relation between people takes on a character of a thing and thus acquires a “phantom objectivity”, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (Lukács, 1971, 83). The shift from direct control to technically and bureaucratically embedded forms of control, with their logic of “objective necessity”, an instrumental reason centred around the demands of profitability and impersonally stratified command structures (Edwards, 1979), has paradoxically helped to create a veneer of genuine workers' autonomy in some cases (within more or less narrowly determined limits).

One option in a variety of methods by which hierarchical control has actually increased, while assuming an air of an objective, unalterable technological imperative, has been the particular way in which “the agents and guardians of capital facilitate or concede changes in the work of middle groupings, such as maintaining and developing hierarchies as buffers and barriers within the collective labourer” (Smith, Knights, and Willmott, 1996, 30). The degree to which the development of intermediate positions in the corporate hierarchies has been used to deal with the workforce through a strategy of “divide and conquer” is hard to substantiate, let alone quantify, yet we posit that this “political” organisational criterion has been one of the significant factors behind the recent rise in middle management. By the turn of the twenty-first century it was already apparent that the widely advertised tendency towards flatter hierarchies was replaced with the expansion of managerial grades. While the proportion of managerial jobs was being reduced in about an eighth of workplaces, managerial grades were actually being expanded in twice as many workplaces (White et al., 2004).

A specific popular strategy in “human resource management” (HRM) entails attempts to induce employee individual and group self-identification with and commitment to the product/service and the company (Walton, 1985), often including modernised, Westernised forms of what is, as we have already noted, conspicuously close to Stakhanovism, and to the old Taylorist piece-rate system for that matter. This “high-commitment” HRM strategy is often employed far beyond the privileged core of semi-autonomous, highly-skilled workers, whose goodwill, creativity and dependability are of critical importance to the company (Watson, 2008), as evidenced (for instance) by various attempts of coffee-shop chains such as Starbucks to promote workers identification with the company and its products. These new expectations on workers seek to control workers' minds as well as bodies, threatening their personal autonomy. On the potentially more positive side, as a Joseph Rowntree Foundation study (Meadows, 1996) ascertained, “personal skills” appear to be increasingly sought after across the traditional skilled-unskilled occupational divide, including the ability to take

initiative and to creatively solve problems. These and other strategies are implemented by a layer of “human resource” consultants and employment relations managers, who have become more central and numerous during the 1980s and 90s (Millward et al., 2000). This trend has continued since then, and, up to 2004, “the proportion of managers with employment relations-specific job titles has doubled since 1998, when only 11 per cent of managers had an employment relations-specific job title” (Kersley et al., 2007, 38).

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON SKILL LEVELS

There are several major difficulties in assessing employee skill levels. Firstly, the definition of “skill” itself is socially constructed (Steinberg, 1990), and tends to be related to the social status of the typical employee of a particular job (Reskin and Roos, 1990). Additionally, there are numerous dimensions and kinds of skill, which can evolve in different ways and in opposite directions (Block, 1990), and are difficult to quantify (especially since they exist along a continuum). Furthermore, it is difficult to assess long-term changes in employee skill levels, and subjective employee pronouncements are of dubious value for assessing objective skill levels, which is why it is difficult to compare studies using these subjective vs. objective criteria. While Crompton and Jones (1984) found that 91 per cent of clerical employees in their sample had low-skilled, routine jobs and exercised no workplace initiative, Marshall et al. (1988) tentatively rejected this finding on the basis of workers’ self-assessments in a sample of 1,770 male and female employees (only 4 per cent of interviewed female clerical workers and none of the male clerical workers reported job deskilling).

Popular upskilling arguments have often centred on the “post-industrial society” thesis, and Bell’s (1973) auguries on the supposedly nascent processes of upskilling as a result of the “post-industrial” expansion of specialist professional and technical occupations have been particularly influential. Braverman (1974) riposted to these arguments by positing that the occurrence of upskilling is largely a statistical illusion based on the preconception that non-manual work is more skilled than manual work. Clearly, however, new technologies, products and services sometimes also lead to the development of new skills.

Research has thus far tended to indicate that complex dynamics are at play in processes of skill change, with many national, sectoral, occupational and workplace differences, and multidirectional and multifaceted change in skill is common. Research made under the UK Social Change and Economic Life programme (Penn, Rose and Rubery, 1994) and the Employment in Britain survey (Gallie et al., 1998) found that the majority of respondents (63 per cent in the latter study) who had held a job five years earlier reported a certain (usually modest) *upskilling* during that time, a large minority claimed no change and a small minority reported significant deskilling. More recently, Gallie’s (2005) analysis of skill change in 15 EU countries also found that the dominant trend was upskilling (with a more recent decline in the pace of upskilling in the UK). However, the presence of a significant limitation on company demand for the supply of skilled work has been identified, and has been explained

(among other things) by the decline in the role of skilled manual work as a result of Britain's changing economic structure (Keep and Rainbird, 2003), by the rise in temporary and part-time employment, which is often associated with lower skill requirements (Dex and McCulloch, 1997), and by the disincentive to raise workers' skills caused by the employers' concern that other firms would poach them due to their low wages (Lloyd, 1996).

An important point made by the advocates of the "post-Fordist" thesis against the notion that employees are losing their skills is that a broadening of employee tasks and therefore "multi-skilling" is occurring. This is sometimes interpreted as a result of "flexible specialisation" (Piore and Sabel, 1984; Piore, 1986), a kind of enskilling that is considered necessary under the new, post-Fordist conditions of non-repetitive production. On the other hand, Thompson (1993) contends that the extension of tasks does not lead to increased skill levels, and that "multi-tasking" (rather than "multi-skilling") is a more accurate term to describe current changes. This view is corroborated by survey and case study evidence which indicates that a lot of this loading of tasks on employees does not introduce any new tasks on a higher skill level (Elger, 1991; Garrahan and Stewart, 1992; Stephenson, 1994). More positively, "multi-tasking" might, in certain cases, significantly reduce work fragmentation. It may also play an important part in the psychological management of the workforce by alleviating the strain of oppressive work routine, though it could potentially also facilitate work-related stress (Robinson and Smallman, 2006). The strong association between multi-tasking - as well as "employee autonomy" - and higher levels of work-related illness implies that these changes represent another aspect of job intensification (Robinson and Smallman, 2006).

Spenner's (1983) comprehensive but dated review of studies on employee skill established that those defining skill in the sense of task complexity generally supported the "upskilling" thesis, while those emphasising the role of employee autonomy and control usually found that automation of work led to "deskilling". Apparently validating Spenner's conclusion about skill trends and terminology, Felstead et al. (2002) found that, despite supposed "upskilling", UK workers of both sexes actually experienced a significant decline in job control between 1986 and 2001 (the percentage of workers who said they had a lot of work autonomy fell from 52 per cent in 1986 to 39 in 2001). De Witte and Steijn (2000) established that internal differentiation (increased job complexity which isn't accompanied by increased job autonomy) especially holds true for "blue-collar workers". Gallie et al. (2004) accounted for the survey evidence of significant decline in task discretion in the UK in the 1990s by positing that increased international competitiveness leads to job intensification and increased monitoring of employee work. This is a plausible but reductionist explanation of changes in work autonomy, especially as it disregards the impact of various political and cultural changes brought on by the rise of neoliberalism. Even more recently, Gallie (2009b) found that a decline in general employee job control was occurring in the 1990s, with the percentage of workers who reported that they had a great deal of influence over how they performed their tasks falling from 57 per cent in 1992 to 43 per cent in 2001, and the percentage of workers who reported that they had a lot of influence over choice of task fell from 42 per cent to 30 per cent between 1992 and 2001. Besides, even more autonomous UK

workplaces (apart from a handful of cooperatives perhaps) do not even approach the German *Mitbestimmung* (or “co-determination”) model of workers’ participation in decision-making. In any case, “task discretion” and “semi-autonomous circles” notwithstanding, the final word still rests with the employers.

POLARISATION IN EMPLOYEE SKILL AND JOB CONTROL

The shortcomings of his analysis aside, Braverman was among the early authors to emphasise the misleading nature of accounts which do not acknowledge contrasting trends in skill levels: “To (...) say that the “average” skill has been raised is to adopt the logic of the statistician who, with one foot in the fire and the other in ice water, will then tell you that “on the average”, he is perfectly comfortable” (Braverman, 1974, 424). Comparative European trans-occupational analyses established that a particularly strong upgrading in skill demand has occurred for some UK non-manual employees, along with a marked skill polarisation (and possibly as a partial result, a sharp rise in wage inequality) which has developed since the 1970s both among men and among women workers (Tåhlin, 2009).

In comparison with Germany, for instance, skill formation appears to be largely formed on-the-job, within firms (rather than the formal education system) and less portable between companies (Tåhlin, 2009). This corresponds with claims that the UK has been pursuing a low-cost competitive strategy based on a weak education and training structure compared to many other West European countries (Keep and Rainbird, 2005), and a relatively low-skilled, low-value added economic activity (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004), which significantly under-utilizes even the existing workforce skill levels. While the provision of training was increasing during the course of the previous decade, a large proportion of “over-skilled” workers (Kersley et al., 2007) demonstrates a partially destructive, or at the very least negligent, approach to workers' skills and abilities. At the same time, both Green (1994) and Machin and Wilkinson (1995) have disclosed that job-training is far more likely to be made available for more skilled, and especially better paid, workers.

There are also significant differences in task discretion and work practices between different occupational grades. In 2004 (Kersley et al., 2007) in workplaces with at least ten employees, a degree of task discretion (in the sense of being given responsibility for specific products or services) among work teams was most common among sales and customer service employees (92 per cent), professional occupations (91 per cent), associate professional and technical occupations (89 per cent), administrative and secretarial occupations (86 per cent). It was least common among process, plant and machine operatives (67 per cent) and elementary occupations (74 per cent). These occupations often entail less complex tasks and are therefore easier to closely monitor and control. Simultaneously, teams most commonly jointly decide how work is to be done among professional employees (80 per cent), associate professional and technical workers (69 per cent), caring, leisure and other personal services (69 per cent). This was least common among sales and customer service workers (48 per cent), process,

plant and machine operatives (50 per cent) and skilled trades (51 per cent). While much of this data seems unsurprising, some of the results might not be simple to interpret without much closer analysis. Yet, at least in relation to the high degree of task discretion associated with sales and customer service employees in these figures, it is important to note that in some cases task discretion is actually likely to correlate with lower skill levels, as much highly-skilled work operates according to precisely defined instructions and protocols.

Unsurprisingly, there is also evidence of a two-tiered structure according to age whereby younger workers report lower levels of job influence (Kersley et al., 2007), and temporary workers also tend to have lower task discretion (Gallie et al., 2009). Britain stood out among most other Western European countries as the job autonomy of temporary workers in the UK, and the skill polarisation along class lines (lower skilled workers vs. professionals and managers), grew significantly worse during the 1990s (Gallie et al., 2009b). Gallie (Gallie et al., 2009b) also states that a polarisation in task discretion among different skill categories of UK workers has occurred, positing that tighter control has been easiest to impose on the less skilled workers. Using data from the Employment in Britain Survey (1992) and the Skills Survey (1997, 2001), he has established that a particularly sharp decline in task discretion has occurred among the lower skilled employees, even though he notes that the higher skilled category of workers has also suffered from decreased job control (Gallie, 2009b). Sales and customer service employees, the bedrock of the widely adulated “service sector”, tended to report lowest levels of overall job influence, which includes control over work time, choice of job tasks, order of tasks, the way they are performed and the pace of work (Kersley et al., 2007). A promising hypothesis which might account for these divergent occupational trends is that differences in skill and job control levels reflect varying levels of bargaining power, levels of unionisation and trade union cultures.

SERVICES, OFFICE WORK AND “PROFESSIONAL” EMPLOYEES

We shall now turn to an initial assessment of the position of the new service-sector working class, including “white-collar” occupations, which have become an increasingly numerous and expanding section of the UK workforce in the last several decades, as both unskilled and skilled manual work declined.

Contrary to optimistic pronouncements by neoliberal and other propagandists, who postulated a flowering of liberated non-manual, post-industrial work, Braverman (1974) pointed out that the deskilling and centralist processes extended beyond traditional industrial production to include services and clerical labour, which was, according to him, going through a process of proletarianisation, especially when compared to the position of the traditional office clerk. Although available evidence does not confirm a more simplistic version of this thesis, and significant improvements in general working conditions have occurred during the twentieth century, the “massification” of office work (largely in response to the increasing load of administrative and other information which needs to be processed) does indeed appear to

have downgraded the status and the conditions of much of contemporary office work. Even an isolated labour process analysis of office work, which does not examine the position of (lower-grade) office work in the wider division of labour, seems to at least partly bear Braverman's vision out.

Despite undifferentiated popular (and usually media-induced) accounts of a potent and privileged state administration and public sector in general, the public-private divide on the issue of skill levels and work quality is to a large extent fictitious. The routinisation and inflexibility in the performance of tasks is, of course, a traditional feature of certain lower sections of the civil service, largely due to the emphasis on control and compliance made by the state bureaucracy (Merton, 1957). Such trends have been reinforced through the introduction of new managerial layers in public services, notably in the NHS. In addition to undermining public services by stressing the role of "cost effectiveness" and targets, of market or market-equivalent criteria, these reorganisations have in some cases increased conflicts between professional and managerial layers in the public sector, for instance between medical staff and managers (Dent, 1993), considering that these changes run counter to the principles of autonomy and professional discretion by, for instance, pressurising doctors to closely consider costs as well as health criteria (Dent, 1996). This – in conjunction with staff shortages - induces a "conveyor-belt" approach towards patients. In addition to previously mentioned changes in employment patterns among public sector workers, these changes appear to demonstrate the state's emphasis on eliminating the public sector's function as a haven of social democratic workplace practices, as part of a wider strategy in the entrenchment and intensification of neoliberal trends in the economy as a whole.

The routinisation of office work (Crompton and Reid, 1982; Crompton and Jones, 1984; Sturdy, 1992; Korczynski, 2004), which is often strictly controlled, highly bureaucratised and low in skills, has many parallels with traditional, Fordist manual labour. Moreover, certain "service employees", such as retail workers, are *de facto* largely engaged in manual work, and are often exposed to very high levels of computerised surveillance, for instance through the EPOS (Electronic Point of Sale) technology which records the rate at which supermarket checkout staff process items (EPOS is also widely used in Distribution, hotels and catering, Leisure and personal services – White et al., 2004). Nearly a half of all UK workplaces (half in larger ones and more than a third in the smallest group) are continuously monitoring workers' activities through information and communications technology (White et al., 2004). Other monitoring systems besides EPOS include a wide use of electronic switchboards and of digital electronic recording equipment and computer systems, enabling a very significant degree of centralised surveillance and control over office workers. Additionally, as already mentioned, the use of electronic time recording (ETR) and time checks helps monitor employee attendance and time spent at work (White et al., 2004). A disciplinary and surveillance regime that is seen to resemble the model of the Panopticon is perhaps likely to induce the creation of a docile workforce which internalises managerial expectations (Strangleman and Warren, 2008), as a resolution to cognitive dissonance caused by the tension between the pursuit for job security and work autonomy.

Some other “technical” or organisational innovations, such as the use of open-plan offices, have made control easier. In addition, open-plan offices have contributed to the proletarianisation of office work through its status or symbolic degradation and “industrialisation”. A divide is developing between privileged workers with personal offices and the growing number of workers in open-plan offices (White et al., 2004), which largely resemble the factory floor rather than traditional offices. Even more radically, ICT development has enabled the extension of hot-desking (a practice where work-stations are depersonalised and used by pre-booking or on a first come, first served basis), which has been introduced in over a quarter of workplaces (White et al., 2004). While these quite recently popularised types of workspace organisation lower rental and infrastructural costs, they are also likely to reduce productivity through accompanying distractions, and it seems likely that their introduction is largely motivated by efforts to intensify control and monitoring of employees. Open-plan and hot-desking arrangements are mutually reinforced by teamwork (White et al., 2004). These relatively recent trends have a dual potential – either to stimulate the development of more cooperative relations among the workforce, or to induce tensions and competition among workers, depending on the details of each concrete case.

While certain popular work methods mostly associated with professional occupations, such as “quality circles” and other forms of teamwork, are popularly associated with skill acquisition, increased autonomy and decreased alienation (and might in some circumstances even foster a cooperative spirit and aspirations for self-management among members of semi-autonomous work groups), some researchers have reached different conclusions (Sennett, 1998). It certainly seems hard to corroborate more extreme claims that private and state companies selflessly seek to empower their employees and to democratise decision-making. In any case, there are very significant differences in the actual content of work labelled as “teamwork”, considering that more than a half of all employees reported in the early years of the 21st century that they work in a group, up by ten percent from 1992 (White et al., 2004). In her study of the group-production approach practiced by a Japanese-owned car plant in Indiana, Graham (1995) established that the attendant peer pressure to increase productivity, as well as management’s attempts to promote an anti-union, conformist “team player” attitude among the workers, counteracted the more optimistic expectations about the effects of teamwork. The rise in group-related incentives has also been associated with the likelihood of increased peer pressure in work groups (White et al., 2004). Harley (2001) noted there is limited survey evidence that team-working is associated with “positive” work experiences in the absence of more fundamental reform in the organisation of work relationships. In a study covering the period between 1996 and 2001, Gallie et al. (2004) also corroborated the view that teamwork does not in itself eradicate hierarchical workplace relations, and is often quite distant from the ideal of semi-autonomous work groups characterised by job initiative and task discretion, as well as satisfactory colleague relationships. This emphasis on autonomy is only likely to be significant in those cases (mainly of professional employees) where the narrowly understood need for managerial control and “cost-effectiveness” of labour is balanced by the need to

bolster employee good-will, creativity and innovation. Still, as nearly four in ten workplaces are supposed to have some “self-directed teams” without direct supervisors (White et al., 2004), and considering that some economic sectors tend to seek an innovative workforce capable of acquiring competitive market advantage, it is clear that a significant minority of work teams does in fact operate along principles of genuine semi-autonomy. This creative, semi-autonomous nucleus has the potential to solidify and greatly expand under favourable social and economic circumstances. Unlike many proponents of the “post-industrial society” thesis, however, we do not believe there is convincing evidence that such favourable circumstances yet exist.

At this point, we should also indicate another debate regarding the occupational differences in skill levels. Namely, broadly in concord with the old Marxian assertion that capital seeks to restrict skill-based employee bargaining power, some authors (Pignon and Querzola, 1978; Baran, 1988) have argued that highly-paid and largely autonomous professional and managerial employees are especially exposed to deskilling considering the economic incentive for companies to “Taylorise” their work, reduce labour costs and preserve material and ideological hierarchies. Empirical research on this question has given somewhat contradictory results. In their analysis of skill surveys between 1986 and 2001, Felstead et al. (2002) observed a particularly marked decline in job control (or rather in workers’ perception of job control) among “professional” employees, and in education, public administration, finance and real estate/business services. However, the results of the Employment in Britain Survey (1992) and the Skills Survey (1997, 2001) summarised by Gallie (2009b) indicate that, while a decline in task discretion occurred among both higher and lower skilled workers during the 1990s, the greatest decline occurred among the lower-skilled workers. Despite their recent “setbacks”, office workers (and especially professionals) are often still among the more highly skilled, better paid and more autonomous workers.

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY

It is obviously quite impossible to assess the impact of technology – let alone of broad technological trends – on work autonomy and skill levels in general. Only a concrete analysis of concrete work practices, technologies and conditions can help us here, and it often leads to diametrically opposed findings. Through an examination of workers’ experiences in four different industries with varying levels of technology, Blauner (1964) came to the view that automation reduced workers’ feelings of disempowerment, isolation and alienation in comparison to work on assembly lines. In contrast, Smith, Child and Rowlinson (1987) observed that the introduction of automated and semi-automated work process at the Cadbury factory in Bournville didn’t alter the highly fragmented division of labour and routine job design. Even more negatively, as already mentioned, Crompton and Jones (1984) found (in their analysis of female clerks in a bank, an insurance company, and in local authority) that automation, instead of empowering workers in their sample, was actually associated with a strengthened division of labour, more specialised, standardised and routine work, and that it

helped transfer additional control to upper administrative layers (which further separates task conception from task execution). Sennett (1998) came to a similar conclusion in his study of automated, computerised work techniques in a bakery, which he saw as a source of deskilling, routinisation and disempowerment. Even in the case of highly skilled engineering work, technological change such as computer-aided manufacturing and design has been associated with deskilling (Cooley, 1987), introducing “elements of machine-pacing, extended hours, task fragmentation and loss of autonomy associated with manual workers” (Smith, Knights and Willmott, 1996, 8). In fact, technological innovation has been directly associated with efforts to subjugate the workforce (Bruland, 1982), and Marx asserted that “it would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830, for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolts” (Marx, [1867] 1967, 435-6).

The application of technology is largely dependent on, and often subordinate to organisational choices. Indeed, technological change is to a large extent influenced by the economic and political interests of those in control of technology. In her research on the use of IT in companies, Zuboff (1988) concluded that outcomes for skill and autonomy levels largely depend on managerial priorities: IT can help decentralise workplace decision-making, or it can decrease direct communication in favour of creating an office of isolated modules. Similarly, IT can enhance autonomy for highly skilled and qualified professionals (who engage in analytical processes of “informating”), and it can also be used to “mechanise” clerical work and to intensify surveillance and control, as tends to be the case in call centre or data entry jobs (Taylor and Bain, 1999). Research on analogous technological innovation in comparable production processes in British chemical and brewing factories found that “in chemicals it led to a polarization of job requirements and worker control, while in brewing it led to single-grade, largely unsupervised working” (Batstone et al., 1987, 206). In his research on airline telephone sales agents, Taylor (1998) found that telephone responses were often scripted, largely precluding employee discretion. Gabriel (1988) identified a similar emphasis on “neo-Fordist” industrialist principles of standardisation and routinisation in catering. Associated production models are present in numerous other branches of the economy, both in manufacturing and in modern “service” work (Ritzer, 1993; Ritzer, 1997), including such “service sector” occupations like banking and retailing, often reversing the expected tendency towards “post-manual” and “post-industrial” labour practices (Beynon, 1992). On the other hand, there is a strong positive correlation between high-tech/extensive ICT, high-commitment and high-benefits company strategies (White et al., 2004), which seems to demonstrate the inadequacy of reductionist interpretations of technological and organisational change.

Technological innovation has thus been associated with various changes. It is, however, hard to determine the actual impact of technology on these changes, or even to separate technological aspects from organisational factors (the theory of technological interactionism is hence a necessary starting point for analysis of technological change). Routinisation, deskilling and centralisation of decision-making, as well as the reverse, could be interpreted

in numerous ways, and there is certainly a variety of intervening variables which exert their influence on these processes. Thus, for instance, research in the Netherlands (de Witte and Steijn, 2000) and in the US (Milkman, 1997) found that technological and organisational change tended to upskill the rising population of “white-collar” workers and to deskill or retain existing skill levels for “blue-collar” workers, whose numbers were declining. This would point to the existence of a net upskill trend (Blackburn, 2014).

Some of the most clearly positive effects of technological development on working life have been a certain “sanitisation of work” for many manual workers, who have largely turned into technicians who direct and supervise technology instead of having to engage in physically dangerous and heavy, unhygienic manual work. Technological changes have, in addition to economic restructuring (outsourcing being one of its most notable aspects), helped induce major transformations in the structure of the workforce. And while non-manual work tends to avoid the worst forms of assembly line work, introducing more task discretion and spontaneity in some interaction with customers for example (Gallie, 2009b), it hasn't ended the drudgery of alienating, tedious, fragmented, frustrating activity which characterises so much of contemporary “service sector” jobs. Despite significant structural changes in the modern economy, physical immobility, tedium and mental fatigue have (to various degrees) remained a constant for many jobs. Additionally, new office work technology has also been associated with physical health problems such as eyestrain, carpal tunnel syndrome, radiation, repetitive strain injury etc. (Tenner, 1996).

The brunt of the evidence (some of which we have just mentioned) seems to persuasively confirm Braverman's (1974) fundamental assertion that the capitalist mode of organisation tends to use technology – although it opens up the possibility of transcending the authoritarian model of corporate governance and replacing it with a dealienating, democratic model of decision-making – in ways that preserve or sometimes even entrench the existing hierarchical division of labour. New technology is developed and used only to the extent that can be reconciled with the pursuit of central ruling class objectives. Technological change and development, and in particular the forms in which it is used, are thus circumscribed by the existing political and economic relations of power in the workplace, and in society as a whole. Nevertheless, technology also introduces its own, partially autonomous dynamic, which can significantly modify and, in some cases, even fundamentally transform socio-economic relations. The example of high-tech workplaces, which we have just given, is potentially among the most transformative cases where rapidly evolving material forces of production alter workplace and wider social relations of power.

Be that as it may, technology is hardly ever perfectly neutral: it operates in a given social context and is usually constructed, directed and applied in ways which support existing social relations and the social division of labour. Moreover, forces of production are not always potential assets for social progress, but can instead function as agents of domination and “forces of destruction” with regards to democratic possibilities. There is a process of mediation in the development of productive forces by the existing relations of production,

which are (crude versions of historical materialism notwithstanding) frequently superimposed upon productive forces. To paraphrase Engels, who made a distinction between “determination” and “dominance” with regards to the interaction of “the base” and “the superstructure” (reductionist concepts to begin with), forces of production might be determinant “in the last instance” (Engels, 1890) but they are not always dominant, and are in some fundamental ways frequently moulded by the hegemonic relations of production. Ultimately, however, Harvey rightly puts these predominantly scholastic preoccupations to rest by emphasising “the dialectical interpenetration of productive forces and social relations”, which should be thought of “as two aspects of the same material labour process” (2006, 99).

While many teleological Marxist (as well as other optimistic) accounts assume an uncritical perspective on the development of productive forces, these are often “developed in a deformed way, so that they are, if we consider them from the point of view of social needs, useless” (Gorz, 1976, 161). Marx himself, in contrast to simplistic technological optimism (of which he himself has sometimes been accused), asserts that, under capitalism, “the instrument of labour becomes the means of enslaving, exploiting, and impoverishing the labourer; the social combination and organization of labour processes is turned into an organized mode of crushing out the workman’s individual vitality, freedom, and independence“ (Marx, [1876] 1976, 506).

However, while the current development of workers’ skills and of organisational and technological implements often falls very much short of the criteria required for democratisation, the general imprint or matrix of more fundamental scientific and technological innovation seems to extend the technical possibilities for emancipatory schemes (including the reduction of working time, improved working conditions and raised material standards, more democratic decision-making structures and processes etc.). However, their actual social impact will ultimately depend on a complex interplay of social and technological factors. It is perhaps possible that the development of productive forces in ways directed by the interests of capital (the mediating force) does not enhance capitalist contradictions after all.

The development of automation in particular still carries the promise of less dangerous, less repetitive, freer, more creative and more fulfilling work, though much of the enthusiasm from the early days of robotics has by now evaporated as the ruling system underplayed these liberatory possibilities. Electrifying new prospects for social progress have recently also emerged as a result of innovation in communications technology, considering the participatory democratic possibilities of internet-based social networking, “e-democracy” and “tele-democracy”, even though most of this potential still lies dormant. The private appropriation of technology has placed systematic constraints on its public utility. Like Heron’s *magnum opus* in that mighty creative cauldron that was Hellenistic, Ptolemaic Alexandria almost two thousand years ago - the steam engine - found no economic role in a slaveholding class system with its ossified social division of labour, so the self-imposed

socio-economic and cultural limitations of contemporary capitalism are holding back potent new productive forces capable of facilitating an unprecedented cultural and democratic revolution.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The recent few decades in Britain have in many cases been characterised by work intensification, including an increase in average working time and a long-hours culture among less skilled as well as professional workers who are often unwilling to risk their immediate jobs and longer-term career prospects in exchange for a better work-life balance. Male workers in the UK tended to have the longest work hours in the EU.

Although, according to some researchers, a certain upskilling or enskilling of UK employees has been found to be the dominant trend at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the analysis of employee skill levels is fraught with difficulties. Skill trends are dependent on various sectoral, occupational, workplace and other differences. Multidirectional and multifaceted skill change is common. The difference between “multi-tasking” and “multi-skilling”, as well as the difference between the understanding of skill in terms of job control and task complexity, are two examples of the definitional and analytical problems in analysing skill levels. The implications of skill changes on employee wellbeing and empowerment also evade easy generalisations. For example, enskilling can both improve autonomy and contribute to job intensification.

The polarisation of job autonomy and skill polarisation across class lines has significantly increased during the 1990s (with lower-skilled workers experiencing a particularly sharp decline in task discretion). Deskilling can be functional in terms of preserving material and ideological hierarchies, yet it is not always perceived as necessary or useful. The general employers’ interest in increasing hierarchical control is pursued in numerous ways and to various degrees. Higher-skilled workers also appear to have suffered from an overall decline in levels of job control. Despite their recent setbacks, office workers (and especially professionals) are often still among the more highly skilled, better paid and more autonomous workers. However, while lifting many out of the misery associated with unattractive forms of manual work, the massive expansion of office work (with the attendant negative impacts on income levels, on the status of such work, etc.), as well as various increasingly important employment practices such as the use of open-plan offices and work intensification, have contributed to the proletarianisation of much office work.

After several decades of supposedly “post-industrial” change, many of the essential contours of working life in the developed West have remained essentially the same or have even grown worse, vindicating Gorz’s words written at a moment when workplace democracy was on the minds and lips of millions of Europeans:

“On the margin of civil society, with its formal liberties, there thus persists behind the gates of factories, a despotic, authoritarian society with a ... hierarchy which demands of the workers both unconditional obedience and active participation in their own oppression. And it is only normal that this militarized society should, on suitable occasions, assert itself as the true force of capitalist society“ (Gorz, 1967, 36). It would be folly to expect a servile workforce, a mass of workers estranged from the means and relations of production (hovering over them as an alien force) to become free-thinking, creative protagonists of wider social processes, or of their working lives. The central creative essence of the labour process shall remain alienated from the workers as long as they remain excluded from the processes of democratic decision-making, and as long as their participation in the work of conception – the determination of the main parameters of the work process and of the final product - is rigidly circumscribed by undemocratic hierarchical control.

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