

Labour Process Theory: taking stock and looking ahead

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The article critically reconstructs the trajectory of the Labour Process Theory debate from Braverman onwards. It analyses the second wave classics and the principal underpinnings of the so-called *core labour process theory*. It describes the debate spurred by the formalisation of the core theory vis-à-vis changing productive structures. It identifies a few threads of fruitful internal debate that are crucial for the analysis of current trends and transformation of work: the *missing subject*, the *connectivity gap*, and the *role of technology*. The ways in which the LPT literature has tackled such issues seems promising of an open and lively debate that reasserts the relevance of the Labour Process Theory as an analytical framework that remains crucial in the current sociology of work.

Keywords: Labour Process Theory; Labour Regime; Labour Control; Labour agency

Introduction

Labour Process Theory (LPT) is a Marxist-inspired theoretical perspective that studies the organisation of work and the agency of workers

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and managers within the workplace. At its core, LPT frames labour as a crucially indeterminate commodity whose valorisation requires constant managerial control and frames employment relations as the result of a continuous mediation between the inherently antagonistic interests of managers and workers. The analysis of the labour process carved a space in the sociological debate since in the 1970s and despite continuous critical re-examination and foretold disappearance, it is currently experiencing a renewal.

In this article we retrace the LPT debate, and we identify a few threads that are crucial for the analysis of current trends and transformation of work. Our review does not aspire to be exhaustive, and our discussion will target the issues we find more fruitful to inform analyses of contemporary labour processes. Our aim is to trace the most interesting avenues to overcome LPT's shortcomings for the analysis of current debates around work.

The article starts with a brief discussion of Braverman's work and the development of a *core* labour process theory from the second wave of labour process analyses. Then we discuss how the debate over the *missing subject*, the *connectivity gap* and the *role of technology* that the core theory triggered can inform relevant analysis of contemporary work. We conclude discussing the contribution of the special issue to the LPT debate and reasserting the continued political relevance of the approaches that LPT has inspired.

1. In the beginning was Braverman

Labour process analysis has its roots in Marxist analyses of the capitalist labour process, the reproduction of surplus labour, and its extraction at the point of production. Yet, the starting point of the LPT debate is Harry Braverman's book, *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism* (Braverman, 1998[1974]). Braverman (1974, p. 37) centres his analysis on the crucial recognition that labour is a commodity like no other. As he put it:

[Labour is]...an inalienable property of the human individual. Muscle and brain cannot be separated from persons possessing them; [...]. Thus, in the exchange, the worker does not surrender to the capitalist his or her capacity for work. The worker retains it, and the capitalist can take advantage of the bargain only by setting the worker to work. It is of course understood that the useful effects or products of labor belong to the capitalist. But what the worker sells, and what the capitalist buys, is *not an agreed amount of labor, but the power to labor over an agreed period of time.*

Under a capitalist system, therefore, the reduction of labour's indeterminacy is a driver of profit, a main aim of management, and the principal source of workers' alienation. Workers are, in fact, not only dispossessed of their means of production but also of the knowledge of the production processes they once mastered. The re-organization of work under capitalist social relations follows three principles:

if the first principle is the gathering and development of knowledge of labor processes, and the second is the concentration of this knowledge as the exclusive province of management - together with its essential converse, the absence of such knowledge among the workers - then the third is the *use of this monopoly over knowledge to control each step of the labor process and its mode of execution*. (Braverman, 1974, p.82).

This process also allows managers to order production tasks according to the skills required to workers performing each task and to calibrate the remuneration of each group of workers needed according to their replaceability. By translating workers' knowledge into an artefact, i.e., a series of time-motion datasheets and detailed instructions that can be performed by anyone, labour is stripped of his subjectivity and finally forced into a commodity like any other. Through *scientific management*, therefore, capital aims to realise an ideal of a frictionless, on demand, fully substitutable labour. As Braverman (1974, p.57) contended:

Labor power has become a commodity. Its uses are no longer organized according to the needs and desires of those who sell it, but rather according to the needs of its purchasers, who are, primarily, employers seeking to expand the value of their capital. And it is the special and permanent interest of these purchasers to cheapen this commodity. [...]. Every step in the labor process is divorced, so far as possible, from special knowledge and training and reduced to simple labor. Meanwhile, the relatively few persons for whom special knowledge and training are reserved are freed so far as possible from the obligations of simple labor.

Scientific management is for Braverman (1974, p. 60) «nothing less than the explicit verbalization of the capitalist mode of production», it «dissolve[s] the labour process as a process conducted by the worker and reconstitute it as a process conducted by management» (Braverman, 1974, p.118).

Braverman provides a Marxist analysis of technology in the workplace, it «makes the labour process and the role of science and technology within it, a legitimate object of class politics» (Thompson and Laaser, 2021, p. 143).

His work shows how capital thrives by appropriating workers' craft and situated knowledge echoing the debate of his contemporaries that were engaging with similar reflections (as Thompson and Laaser notice (2021) referring to Quaderni Rossi in Italy and to Gorz in France; see also Thompson and Pitts, this issue). His work resonates in current discussions of algorithmic management in the platform economy (Gandini, 2019). Yet, Braverman's assumption of a generalised - even though uneven - deskilling tendency, his neglect of a systematic analysis of workers' resistance and state's role, and a simplistic conceptualization of labour market dynamics called for critiques and debate.

2. A second wave of labour process analysis

While Braverman puts class back in the analysis of the labour process, the lack of an analytical toolbox to investigate the role of workers' agency and their subjectivity called for reformulation. The second wave of labour process analyses engages sympathetically with his work, but also endeavours to carry out detailed analyses of control strategies, deskilling dynamics, and patterns of workers' resistance. It emphasises the role of workers' resistance and external factors - such as the state, or product and labour markets - in shaping managerial control strategies (Thompson, 1990). Within this strand of literature, Tayloristic management is not only about deskilling, and deskilling is not the only strategy of control available to capital. Workers' resistance is crucial in shaping the forms of control that emerge in different workplaces, and state policies, industrial relations institutions, market competition, and labour market segmentation crucially influence workers-management relations and ultimately labour control systems.

Edwards (1979) recognizes three broad systems of control - *simple*, *technical* and *bureaucratic* - which coincide with different market and production structures, but which also emerge as a result of workers' resistance. *Simple control* is typical of small enterprises under highly competitive pressures. It is based on direct surveillance of employers, market coercion, but also a direct relationship between employer and workers in which employer's charisma plays a role in ensuring workers' acquiescence and discipline. With the concentration of capital and productive facilities, simple control becomes increasingly difficult, and the tyranny of foremen triggers revolt. *Technical devices* and *bureaucratic regulations* of the workplace are set to reduce workers' resistance and conceal control behind the structural features of the production process. The maximisation of work-

effort is not sustained anymore by the despotic agency of the foreman but by the carefully devised rhythm of the assembly line. The legitimacy of control, instead, is provided by the selective incorporation of workers' demands, the recognition of trade unions in work councils, the creation of specific institutional mechanisms to resolve grievances and even selective company welfare transfers, promotions, and rewards. Technical forms of control often increase workers' concentration under the same roofs and give them power to sabotage production. Their mobilisation can cause productive disruptions and lead to new social forms of control that acquire legitimacy by incorporating workers' representatives in the organisation of the labour process.

In a similar fashion, Friedman (1977) provides two ideal-types of control strategies: *direct control* and *responsible autonomy*. The former is similar to Edwards' ideal of simple control. It relies on close supervision on workers' effort and limited leeway for their initiative. Responsible autonomy, instead, attempts

...to harness the adaptability of labour power by giving workers leeway and by encouraging them to adapt to changing situations in a manner beneficial to the firm. To do this, top managers give them status, autonomy and responsibility, and try to win their loyalty to the firm's ideals (the competitive struggle) ideologically (Friedman, 1977, p.6).

For Friedman, each control strategy brings its own rigidities and contradictions and gives rise to specific forms of resistance. Managers generally combine the two strategies by dividing *core workers* - that are granted responsible autonomy and are allocated to specific production tasks requiring initiative and commitment - and *peripheral workers* - allocated in fragmented and routinised tasks under direct control.

Friedman also analyses firm-firm relations that reproduce core-periphery dynamics through asymmetrical subcontracting chains. In such subcontracting relations, peripheral companies adopting direct control strategies are crucial to maintain core companies' economic gains. These gains provide core firms with the financial viability to grant their workers with status and rewards required by responsible autonomy. Core-periphery workers and firm-firm relations are crucial to navigate the inflexibilities that are inherent of each control strategy. Responsible workers are needed for complex tasks but are organised and protected, generally hard to fire in crisis periods. Unskilled workers and peripheral subcontractors instead are replaceable at will and can be dismissed during periods of crisis and

mobilised on demand. For Friedman, differentiated control strategies respond to uneven workers' resistance. Workers' *soldiering* (idling while pretending to work) called for direct control, direct control triggered organised forms of resistance, requiring better wages and working conditions and increased autonomy. These led to ever new combinations of forms of control.

Contrary to Braverman's presumption of a generalised deskilling that subjugates all workers alike, therefore, for Friedman control is achieved by segmenting workers within the same firm and between core and peripheral firms along skills, labour market positions, gender and ethnic lines. Workers' differences constructed *outside the production processes*, therefore, are crucial in determining both workers' capacity to resist and managers' ability to control. As Friedman (1977, p.52) puts it, «[t]op managers *do not create racism and sexism, but they do use these divisions* among workers to their advantage». The reproduction and assemblage of differences, therefore, rather than the homogenization of workers (like in Braverman's work), emerge as a crucial factor in workplace relations. Despite fragmentation and control, however, resistance is never defused once and for all and no combination of managerial control strategies can be considered final.

Burawoy (1979; 1985) is perhaps the most articulate to bring workers' subjectivity back in the analysis of control strategies and to tease out the complex intertwining dynamics of control and consent. For Burawoy, despite inherent conflict of interests between workers and managers, the two parties remain co-dependent. If workers strive for better paid and more fulfilling work, maintaining their firm profitable remains at least partially in their interest if they want to keep their job. Despite their structural positions being in conflict, therefore, workers and managers end up building generally cooperative relations at the workplace.

Bringing workers back in the analysis of the labour process, therefore, means analysing the mechanisms through which workers become *active accomplices in their own exploitation* (Burawoy, 1985, p.11). Labour process analysis therefore entails analysing the dynamics through which managers build their hegemony in the workplace, i.e., how they present their interests as the interest of the subordinate classes too. In line with Edwards's idea of making control structural, and therefore less visible, Burawoy contends that factory-level *political apparatuses* such as collective bargaining and grievances mechanisms, work councils and rewards systems, are the crucial underpinnings of consent for the social relations of production within the workplace. These institutions crystalize the balance of power at the workplace and set limits on workers' struggles and managerial

arbitrariness. Any *factory regime*, therefore, includes two dimensions of production politics: the labour process itself and the factory apparatuses that stabilise workplace relations.

Burawoy's ethnographic investigations also report that, within factory regimes, workers develop shop floor games such as "making out" through which teams compete to produce higher levels of output. While games are started generally out of boredom, they provide workers with spaces of autonomy and self-organisation, a sense of accomplishment and pride, and an incentive to increase work effort. By playing games capital-labour conflict is displaced into horizontal competition for shop floor prestige. Workers who play games end up accepting the rules of the game, i.e., they consent to the given shop floor relations of production.

For Burawoy the shift between coercive and hegemonic control is the result of workers' resistance, social policies, and the emergence of labour law constraints. Here, Burawoy carefully links *macro* processes of labour market regulation with *micro* dynamics of control and consent in the workplace. The (welfare) state lifts workers from depending solely on paid work and unpaid labour for their own social reproduction. State-sanctioned trade unions' rights within the workplace limit managerial arbitrary power and push managers to seek hegemonic tools of control. Public policies, at the same time, are crucially shaped by working class pressures in the forms of unions and parties, and therefore shape and are shaped by labour's resistance. Lastly, the change of market and productive conditions are crucial to explain the viability of hegemonic regimes as the monopoly power of firms ultimately makes consent-based workplace regimes possible. As Burawoy (1979, p. 194) explains, «[a]narchy in the market leads to despotism in the factory [...]. Subordination of the market leads to hegemony in the factory». The concentration of economic power in monopoly capitalism, therefore, is also a crucial factor of workplace regimes' transformations.

The second wave of labour process analyses emphasises how managerial control is always the result of a continuous negotiation with workers. Workers' resistance, however, manifests itself in different forms, and workers' subjectivities, their consent or opposition to the given social relations of production are part and parcel of the *frontiers of control*. Control-resistance dialectical relationship, therefore, becomes the core concern of any analysis of the labour process, requiring an analysis of factors that are also *external* to the labour process itself. If for Braverman labour segmentation was the result of the technical division of the labour process in independent production tasks, for Friedman it has to be understood together with the multiple factors that are external to the labour process but still

contribute to the segmentation of the workforce. If for Braverman the state is not really part of the analysis, for Burawoy it becomes crucial in the shift from coercive to hegemonic practices of control. And finally, if Braverman focussed on the analysis of the *objective* conditions of the making of a *working class in itself*, postponing any investigation of workers' resistance to a latter moment, the accounts of the second wave put this resistance at the very core of their research.

Second wave LPT accounts presented crucial shortcomings, too. They generally envision the transformation of control systems as sequential, and in some cases, they conflate control regimes with entire, successive stages of capitalism (Littler, 1990). Moreover, they generally overlook any systematic analysis of the role of gender and masculinity in shaping control and resistance strategies (Davies, 1990; West, 1990). Feminist scholars, however, have articulated sympathetic and more comprehensive labour process analyses since the early 1980s (Cavendish, 1982; Pollert, 1981; Cockburn, 1983; Baglioni, this issue). The insights of these variegated contributions have progressively disentangled LPT from its initial determinism and have set the stage for a formalisation of the core analytical tools of a coherent theoretical approach.

3. Toward a core theory of the labour process

Thompson (1990) condensed the insights of the second wave of labour process analyses in four theoretical pillars of a *core labour process theory*.

First, as the labour process generates surplus value and through the labour process workers reproduce themselves and the economy, the role of labour and the capital-labour relations *within the workplace* is «privileged as a focus for analysis» (Thompson, 1990, p.99). Second, accumulation logics, the competition between different units of capital, and the inherent antagonism between capital and labour at each workplace, «forces capital constantly to revolutionise the production process» (Thompson, 1990, p. 100). Third, labour's indeterminacy entails that any labour process in capitalism must be driven by a control problem: to maximise work effort and therefore extract surplus, capital needs to set up structures of control within the labour process. Fourth, the relationship between capital and labour within the labour process is one of *structured antagonism*. Such antagonism does not automatically translate into open conflict but signals the conflicting interests in-built in exploitation, i.e., capital's appropriation of surplus value created in the labour process through the efforts of workers (Edwards, 1986; 1990).

The formalisation of a core labour process theory was an attempt to detach LPT from Braverman's class determinism. As Thompson and Smith would later explain, it «sought to retain a privileging of analysis of labour power and the capital-labour relationship, without the burden of traditional Marxian assumptions about class in the wider societal terrain» (Thompson and Smith, 2009, p.256). The aim was, therefore, to disentangle LPT from any over-pessimistic or *messianic* vision of conflict and control and to offer a materialist perspective of structurally antagonistic but open-ended workplace relations (Hassard *et al*, 2001). Mirroring the political weaknesses of workers' movements of the period, the core theory also represented a *reformist* shift in the study of work. The need to preserve a conceptual toolbox based on the material conflicting interest of capital and labour at work coincided with the abandonment of any quest for a revolutionary subject or trajectory. Nonetheless, LPT provided the tools for a critical reading of work relations and the space for a relatively open research agenda.

LPT privileged analysis of capital-labour relation, for example, did not entail a downplaying of other social relations outside production but was rather a matter of tracing manageable boundaries of analysis. «The emphasis of core labour process theory on the immediate processes of production», Thompson (1990, p.111) explained, «is dangerous only if it either excludes or neglects the influence of other social relations, or “invades” the spaces occupied legitimately by other spheres of analysis and subordinates them to a narrow focus, and consequent conception of struggles». Nor the focus on labour indeterminacy and the point of production entailed that control mechanisms could originate exclusively within the workplace. The so-called *relative autonomy* of the labour process (Edwards, 1986; Burawoy, 1985) did not imply insulating workplace relations from the outside but rather to take seriously the fact that common trends might be negotiated and translated in different ways in different workplaces (Edwards, 1990; Edwards and Hodder, 2022). The core theory, in other words, outlined the core analytical toolbox of LPT while calling for its expansion and combination with other frameworks, to better grasp the changing world of work (Thompson, 1990, p. 112).

4. Beyond the core

Since the early 1990s, the core LPT had already engaged with profoundly changed productive structures. The focus of second wave studies on manufacturing companies and Tayloristic control was becoming

increasingly out of sync with ongoing economic restructuring. The shift to lean manufacturing and just-in-time, the rise of the service economy, and the emergence of new kinds of knowledge workers became the new focus of core LPT (Thompson and Warhurst, 1998; Elger and Smith, 2010; Korczynski, 2003). Yet, broad processes of financialization and production reorganisation in global production networks and subcontracting chains, the changing structures of employment relations, the rise of creative, self-employed workers, the retreat of traditional forms of workers' agency and mobilisation were new challenges to LPT. Was the privileged analysis on the point of production still justified? And how could new forms of workers' agency and subjectivity be analysed with analytical tools developed in a seemingly bygone season of class struggle?

In the following sections we focus on two interrelated issues that spurred fruitful debate and pushed labour process analyses' boundaries: the *missing subject* and the *connectivity gap*.

5. The *missing subject*: changing workers agency and subjectivities

Despite Burawoy's emphasis on the production of workers' consent and the work of feminist labour process analyses that problematized the role of gender in the dynamics of control and resistance, LPT's materialist perspective of class antagonism in the workplace came under increasing scrutiny. The core theory seemed to fall short to analyse the role of workers' agency and their subjectivity at work. As Thompson himself (1990, p.114) put it, the «construction of a full theory of the *missing subject* was one of the great tasks facing LPT».

Feminist labour process analyses had carefully brought into the debate the role of gender identities and masculinity at work. Gender was seen as a socially constructed feature that workers bring with them at work with the burden of expectations, division of productive and reproductive labour, and perceived skills that such characterization implies (West, 1990). It was a source of domination and hierarchisation of women and could reproduce men's consent for work degradation as long as gender roles were maintained (Cockburn, 1983). Feminist analyses qualified Burawoyian apparatuses of consent, i.e., the games, the internal state, and the internal labour market, as profoundly shaped by processes of gender devaluation that originate outside the point of production (Davies, 1990).

Analyses of the labour process in the service sector, instead, fruitfully explored the ways in which workers' identity are increasingly part and parcel

of the labour process. Labour process in services, in fact, growingly requires soft skills, aesthetic qualities and interpersonal abilities (Belanger and Edwards, 2013; Ikeler, 2016; Dordoni, this issue). This strand of literature explains how the continuous tension over the maximisation of work effort overcomes purely manual or intellectual work and touches upon interpersonal dynamics between workers and customers, including workers' selves, their emotions and feelings. The concept of *emotional labour* (Hochschild, 1983) placed subjectivities and identities at work and made them a new terrain of contention in the workplace (Korczynski, 2003; Vincent, 2011).

Against this background of sympathetic critique and theoretical expansion, poststructuralist contributions provided, instead, a more radical rethinking of the core theory. The main tenet of such a perspective lies on the expansion of the concept of labour indeterminacy to the subjectivities and identities of workers and managers themselves. For poststructuralists, the labour process is shaped not only by the continuous negotiation over the work effort but by the very construction of the identities of the actors involved in the work relationship (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995; Collinson, 2003). As O'Doherty and Willmott (2009, p. 937) put it: «The "indeterminacy of labour" indicates that human beings are distinguished by a quality that, in contrast to other 'factors of production', *lacks* a stable identity».

Relations at the workplace, therefore, are not only about the determination and monitoring of work activities but are rather a contention over the very meaning of what a worker is (as critically discussed by Moro, in this issue). As O'Doherty and Willmott (2009, p. 938) contend:

There is no *necessary* meaning or motivational interests (cf. Burawoy, 1985), no identity or behavioural consistency that once and for all defines the worker; "worker" can therefore be considered a signifier without a fixed signified. Its meaning is historically and socially contingent and must be constantly constructed and reconstructed through political acts of representation and constitution.

Poststructuralist analyses generally focus on new forms of digital control and monitoring, and on hybrid professions (for example creative or knowledge worker, freelancers) for which the basis of a clear structured antagonism is not easily identified. These analyses focus on discursive strategies that build workplace identities and generally mobilise Foucauldian notions of governmentality and biopower to make sense of resistance and control dynamics (Collinson, 2003; O'Doherty and Willmott 1990; 2010;

Willmott 1990; 2010; Knights, 1990; Tirapani and Willmott, 2023; see also Dordoni, this issue). Poststructuralist approaches, therefore, maintain a rather comprehensive understanding of power and resistance. Forms of panopticon control often expunge any emergence of workers' resistance or are rather contrasted with over encompassing notions of resistance that include minor transgressions such as humour and cynicism. While subverting the production of company cultures and discourses, these actions often amount to forms of *decaf resistance*, as they do not aim or fall short to challenge management control strategies (Contu, 2008).

Despite post-structuralist critique, the role of individual forms of informal opposition to workplace rules such as recalcitrance, pilfering, or sabotage, has always been a matter of interest within the LPT (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995). In the 1990s, the concept of *organisational misbehaviour* was developed to capture a subterranean form of workers' agency to reappropriate time, work, product and even identity (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). Against the emphasis of post-structuralist approaches on discursive strategies as contested terrain, the debate over organisational misbehaviour equipped LPT to *see* workers agency in a time of unions' retreat and collective action decline and to put workers' oppositional practices, from dissent to open resistance, on a continuum of radicality and disruptiveness (see Peterlongo, this issue). Managerial control and workers' quest for meaning and better working conditions, therefore, continuously co-evolve, and cyber-floating and cynicism in digital start-up or platform companies respond to the same structured antagonism that generates soldiering in the Tayloristic assembly line (Thompson, 2016). At the same time, forms of misbehaviour can set the conditions for broader forms of open and collective resistance (Taylor and Bain, 2003).

Maurizio Atzeni's (2010) research on automobile plants in Argentina is perhaps the most advanced approach that systematically links the labour process to collective action. *Contra* Kelly's (1998) mobilisation theory with its focus on injustice, Atzeni (2010, p. 20) finds that the roots of workers' solidarity are in the labour process and in the structural antagonism between workers and capital inherent to it:

Spontaneous, unexpected, unorganised forms of resistance, the sudden mobilizations of previously loyal workers, the transformations of apparently economic types of conflict into political ones, are all forms of mobilization that can be explained just by reference to the existence of a structure that constantly reproduces conditions for conflict.

At the workplace, workers develop a sense of shared, collective identity, a form of *embryonic solidarity*: «solidarity is the social relation that expresses the collective nature of the labour process» (Atzeni, 2010: 25). This embryonic solidarity – or solidarity yet to be activated – can become the basis of active solidarity and collective action. The emergence of active solidarity, nevertheless, remains a contingent process, and depends on factors inside and outside the labour process (Atzeni, 2010; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020; see Moro, this issue, and Però, this issue) This highlights another theoretical issue of LPT, the connectivity gap.

6. Relative autonomy and connectivity gap

Within the LPT core theory, the point of production remains a privileged realm of analysis since workplace dynamics are *relatively autonomous*, even though not insulated, from the broader political economic pressures and social contexts. Yet, analytical tools to grasp how dynamics and relations occurring beyond the factory gates shape labour process and workplace relations are crucial to avoid the risk of a *connectivity gap*.

The core theory's abandonment of a Marxist readings of broader class dynamics, however, makes LPT poorly equipped to capture systematically such external dynamics. New theoretical approaches have therefore integrated LPT to provide analytical tools that could bridge workplace dynamics with broader contexts and processes (Jaros, 2000). Emphasising the increasing role of financialization in shaping firms' competitive strategies and their impact on the labour process, Thompson and colleagues draw on the concept of *disconnected capitalism(s)* (Thompson, 2003; 2013; Cushen and Thompson, 2016) to analyse the relationship between different circuits of capital accumulation and the labour process. More specifically, the combined pressures of globalisation, shareholder value maximisation, and systemic restructuring along global value chains (Thompson, 2003, p. 371) are analysed as drivers of multiple dysfunctionalities that profoundly influence workplace relations too. On the one hand, workers are requested to growingly invest in their "human capital" with shrinking opportunities of stable employment. On the other hand, management needs to maximise shareholder value in the short term, which leads to increasing labour cost squeezing, continuous restructuring, and outsourcing (Thompson 2016). Other authors, such as Vidal and Hauptmeier (2014) have proposed to address the connectivity gap by integrating the micro-level insights of LPT with the focus on the meso and macro-level institutions of the Comparative

Political Economy literature: «while our appreciation of the organisational-level variation produced by labour process dynamics leads us to reject determinist arguments about national institutions, we argue that national and subnational institutional contexts generate strong tendencies toward particular forms of management control strategies» (Vidal and Hauptmeier, 2014, p. 19).

With a specific focus on the changing structure of production, a strand of literature has fruitfully combined Global Value Chains (GVCs) and LPT (Newsome *et al*, 2015; Hammer and Plugor, 2019; Bagnardi 2023). Drawing on increasing evidence of a dismantling of vertically integrated Fordist production in favour of networked and asymmetrical supply relations, this literature explores the core-periphery relations between firms that Friedman had already identified as crucially shaping control regimes. GVCs and LPT are particularly complementary as the former had for long lacked an analytical toolbox to analyse workplace relations, while the latter needed the tools to grasp the change that the post-Fordist transformation implied. The focus of the core LPT on vertically integrated factory case studies, in fact, entailed a neglect of changing productive transformations. The growth of outsourcing practices and the de-verticalization of companies did not imply the end of the monopoly power so crucial in the second wave of labour process analyses, but rather its radical transformation (Harrison, 1994; Murray, 1983). Investing in high return production phases while outsourcing phases with lower returns and high costs and rigidities is common managerial practice (Borghi *et al*, 2017; Drahokoupil, 2015; Weil, 2014; Wills, 2008). In many cases, firms can go beyond coercion and consent and pursue labour control through outsourcing. Harrison (1994) labelled this process *concentration without centralization*: lead firms can *concentrate* control over the organisation of production without having to *centralise* the production process in one firm, avoiding the strings, rigidities, and costs that the direct control of the workforce implies². The combination of GVCs and LPT, therefore, becomes a tool to investigate how productive geographies are redesigned around the imperative of labour control and how the asymmetries of power between firms, the local contexts in which they are embedded, and the localised patterns of workers' struggles influence the emergence of fragmented but interdependent labour control regimes within GVCs.

Lastly, the LPT debate has addressed the connectivity gap by looking at the dynamics and mechanisms of control and resistance that develop beyond

² Bellofiore and Halevi (2011), however, note how Harrison inverted the use of terms as commonly used in Marxian terminology.

the workplace. First, the role of labour mobility and its control was incorporated in LPT through the concept of *mobility power*. As Smith (2006) noticed, labour indeterminacy does not only refer to the negotiation of work effort but the inherent power to move that workers retain. Quitting, changing job, moving, or just threatening to do so, are all good ways for workers to leverage mobility to improve employment relations. Mobility power, therefore, brings in the LPT an analysis of labour markets and migration regimes (Piro, this issue). On their side, also managers consider workers' mobility when they devise control strategies. The so-called *dormitory regimes* (when employers provide accommodation to their workers) develop as a way to limit labour's double indeterminacy and to extend managerial controls over time and spaces of social reproduction (Ceccagno and Sacchetto, 2020; Andriasević, 2022). Through dormitory regimes control expands way beyond the point of production and allows companies to synchronise workers' social reproductive time with the demands and constraints of their just-in-time production model.

The literature on the *local labour control regimes* (Jonas, 1996; Pattenden, 2016) further explores the role of control and resistance developing beyond production. A labour regime «signals the combination of social relations and institutions that bind capital and labour in a form of antagonistic relative stability in particular times and places» (Baglioni et al, 2022, p.1). The analytical starting point of this approach contrasts one of the pillars of core LPT, as it «refuses to privilege any single site in a global production system but, rather, sees the labour regime as the societal framework through which capitalist accumulation at a world scale becomes possible» (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, the labour regime literature develops as a sympathetic critique and an analytical addition to the LPT debate and endeavours to bridge the labour process with developmental studies, feminist approaches, and the study of racial capitalism.

Labour regime studies defetishise exploitation as the primary concern of the analysis, and rather investigate the interaction of exploitation with other forms of domination within situated and geographically specific histories of production and social reproduction. Labour regime analysis, in other words, puts labour processes in time and place, and highlights how *control* and *disciplining* are continuously produced and resisted at the workplace and beyond (Baglioni, 2018). As Baglioni and colleagues (2022, p.3) put it:

Labour regimes are seen as historically formed, multi scalar phenomena resulting from the articulation of struggles over local social relations, and their direct or indirect intersections with the commercial demands of lead firms in global

production networks and with the gendered and racialized politics of social reproduction.

Both mobility power and the literature on labour regimes expand the boundaries of LPT to the realm of reproduction and the multiple practices of domination and resistance that develop and are reproduced at the workplace and beyond.

7. Labour control and new technologies: LPT and the gig economy

Despite its limitations, the capacity of LPT to analyse the changing forms of work and their implications has also been demonstrated by the recent strand of literature that successfully applies LPT to a new frontier of workers' exploitation, the gig economy. This form of work organisation is centred on the intermediation and the management of labour via online platforms (Chicchi *et al.*, 2022). Given its origin from Braverman's work, for whom the relationship between technology and power relations at work was central, it is not surprising that LPT-inspired approaches to analyse platform work have flourished (Joyce and Stuart, 2021). Starting from the seminal work of Gandini (2019), the LPT literature has dissected the labour process in the gig economy, identifying certain regularities. Within the gig economy, the point of production is decentralised and work activity is individualised: «the platform represents the place whereby the social processes of production are put under logics of managerialization and work organization within a single, clearly delimited environment» (Gandini, 2019, p. 1045).

Despite this decentralisation of the point of production, platforms are able to maintain a high degree of control (Veen *et al.*, 2020; Wood *et al.*, 2019), through algorithmic management practices and gamification techniques. Confirming LPT's insight that control techniques are varied and can be combined, the literature has also highlighted other, more traditional, control tools within the gig economy, such as working time regimes (Heiland, 2021a). Despite this high degree of control, the gig economy has also exhibited a relatively high degree of workers' mobilisation. Here, Atzeni's theorisation of workers' mobilisation as arising from the structural antagonism of the labour process is relevant. As long as gig workers recognise the existence of their shared condition, through online social media and in physical waiting points, they can develop solidaristic attachments that provide the basis for the emergence of collective action (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020; Lei, 2021; Cini, 2023). Not only visible collective

resistance, but also individual acts of misbehaviour emerge as instances of workers' agency within the gig economy (Heiland, 2021b; Peterlongo, this issue).

LPT-inspired accounts of the gig economy have also grasped with the connectivity gap. Heiland (2021b) combines LPT and labour geography to analyse capital's and labour's "spatial fixes" within food delivery platforms. As migrant labour constitutes a significant share of the platform workforce, Schaupp (2022) studies the relationship between algorithmic workplace regimes and migration regimes. Other authors (van Doorn and Shapiro, 2023) have argued in favour of moving from the focus at the point of production to workers' (and platforms) social reproduction, mirroring the direction taken in the general LPT debate.+

Conclusion. Labour Process Theory: to do what and for whom?

Our brief recollection of the literature shows that LPT remains a crucial framework to analyse the changing nature of work and its social relations. New managerial control strategies and technologies, new sectors, and new forms of workers' response can be captured with the LPT changing toolbox and this demonstrates and justifies its continued relevance in academic discussions. This special issue aims to contribute and advance further this framework, and all the articles engage with different aspects of LPT.

Elena Baglioni's lead article provides new pathways to expand labour process analyses by addressing two crucial (and intertwined) blind spots in the LPT debate: ecology and social reproduction. The article emphasises the centrality of *socio-ecological indeterminacy* of the labour process and provides analytical tools to investigate the links between production and other moments in the circuit of capital: circulation, social reproduction and ecology. Annalisa Dordoni integrates the LPT literature on the labour process in services with Foucauldian concepts, with a study of the control mechanisms faced by retail workers in Milan and London, and their ambivalent forms of solidarity. Angelo Moro brings us back to the debate on the emergence of workers' consent and dissent towards the workplace regime. Through an in-depth case study of an Italian automotive factory, his article shows how generational differences among the workforce, related to distinct socialisation contexts, generate divergent work orientations towards organisational change. Davide Però bridges LPT's literature on workers' collective action with the scholarship on labour's power resources, analysing how small rank-and-file unions can empower workers even in a context

unfavourable for organising such as outsourced low-paid services in the UK. Gianmarco Peterlongo contributes to the thriving LPT debate on the platform economy with an ethnography of food delivery couriers and ride-hailing workers (mis)behaviour in Italy and Argentina. He combines LPT and a *baroque perspective* to tease out the processes through which platforms foster the reproduction of informal circuits of labour. Valeria Piro engages with the concept of ‘mobility power’ with a focus on migrant workers and rank-and-file unions in the meat packing industry in Northern Italy. Through ethnographic inquiry she teases out the mechanisms through which migrant workers’ mobility can be transformed in collective mobilisation and associational power through the agency of rank-and-file unions. Finally, Paul Thompson and Frederick Harry Pitts engage with a crucial theme of discussion within the broad LPT community of scholars, the debate between LPT and *Italian Operaismo* and its heirs. Their article dissects differences and commonalities between the two and provides crucial reflection on the analytical, normative and methodological dimensions of these two distinct approaches.

While the contributions of this special issue cover much ground, one crucial issue requires further discussion. Scholars have long debated whether LPT had to bargain academic legitimacy and analytical purchase for its political radicalism. Braverman’s attempt was to place Marx and class struggles in the sociological analyses of work of his time. His concern was to understand the making of the class in itself, through the dispossession of knowledge and the degradation of work (Spencer, 2001). While deskilling would perhaps prevent the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, such inevitable degradation of work would at some point compel the working class to revolt (Hassard et al. 2001).

Amidst the generalised retreat of the left in industrialised economies, the aim of the second wave, instead, was freeing LPT from any Marxist theological prediction and revolutionary goals (Jaros, 2005). With its core theory, LPT became a toolbox for variably radical scholars to analyse workplace matters. Even scholars in Critical Management Studies, as Hassard and others emphasised, could adopt it to investigate how management could devise more palatable control strategies (Hassard et al. 2001). Nonetheless, even in its core theory version, LPT remains a *political* project. As Thompson (1990, p. 110) has put it, while «the theory is compatible with a variety of political positions, in my view the project is inseparable from the emancipation of labour».

Braverman’s task was devising a materialistic/objective conceptualisation of alienation in vertically integrated, monopolistic

industrial firms. His aim was clearly to unveil the drivers of exploitation so that such knowledge could inspire the making of a political project for emancipation (Spencer, 2001). The need for academic validation that has certainly shaped the development of LPT also implied the mitigation of these political goals and underpinnings. And academic legitimacy does come with a price. If «research on work involves taking a side» (Woodcock, 2021, p. 138; Woodcock, 2020) the quest for academic validation deals cards that are stacked against the researchers who believe in the emancipatory role of the knowledge they contribute to generate.

Yet, we think that a radical political project of labour emancipation remains compatible with LPT and the multiple frameworks that have emerged to fill the gaps left by its initial formalization. The role of different axes of workers' domination, the interaction between productive and reproductive spheres, the changing shapes of accumulation strategies and workers' mobility, the attention to everyday acts of dissent and subversion as conducive to resistance beyond or before a fetishism of union's action, are only few of many promising paths of radical research that the labour process debate still spurs. In an age of great fragmentation of the working class, where exploitation has never been so clearly intertwined with old and new forms of domination within and beyond the point of production, LPT has followed suit. Its concepts provide avenues to engage with the radical critiques of new changing, fragmented, and digitalized productions, the labour control regime perspective, instead, has geared researchers with effective frames to reconstruct the tendency of capital to differentiate workers and valorise their differences. With this special issue, we hope to provide some tools to advance these lines of research as a collective endeavour.

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