Spectres of Marx and Braverman in the Twilight of Postmodernist Labour
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What is This?
Spectres of Marx and Braverman in the twilight of postmodernist labour process research

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ABSTRACT

John Bellamy Foster's 1998 introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of Braverman's Labor and Monopoly Capital (1998) missed an opportunity in failing to engage the industry of (largely British) postmodernist labour process scholarship that followed the first edition of the book. This research 'almost universally rejects [Braverman's] understanding of the labour process' (Spencer, 2000: 223). Using Braverman (and Marx) as benchmarks, this article finds the postmodernist tradition deficient in several respects. First, it consistently underappreciates the political aims and impact of Braverman's work (notwithstanding constant rhetorical support for political engagement). Second, it remains incorrigibly philosophical (logocentric) — entrapped in incessant recycling of philosophies of undecidability. Despite claims to reject the hubris of Cartesian analysis, it remains infatuated by it. Third, it misconstrues Braverman's anthropological humanism as a degenerate form of (idealistic) humanism, and thus leaves unexplored the dialectical politics of transcendent negation. Fourth, it psychologizes social and political processes, and ultimately retreats to an unreconstructed notion of ideology, where working people are construed as wrongheaded for seeking refuge from coercion in supposedly false identities. Fifth, in urging working people to release an 'inner self' from a false identity, the analysis presupposes an underlying human essence that is atheoretical and essentialist. Finally, the analysis is blind to the social and historical specificity of Braverman's political task, exposing 'skill upgrading via education' as an ideology that obfuscates economic decline, recession and deindustrialization. The upgrading canard — expounded by all recent US presidents up to George W. Bush III — is dutifully discharged (to this day) by most business schools and management centres, including those in Britain.

KEY WORDS
capital / Cartesian / dialectics
Introduction

The 1998 publication of the 25th anniversary edition of Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1998) occasioned a well-deserved celebration for critical researchers. With sales exceeding 200,000 copies, this Marxist challenge to academic orthodoxy is unmatched in the size and diversity of audiences it engages within and (especially) beyond academia. While the new edition provides some welcome clarification of Braverman’s deskillling thesis, his larger agenda remains underexplored. Foster’s introduction to the new edition offers only a cursory response to criticisms that Braverman neglects the subjective dimension of labour processes (the problem of the ‘missing subject’; Foster, 1998: xx). Braverman’s 1976 comments (reprinted in the 1998 edition) concede the importance of the subjective dimension:

Marxism ... is a theory of revolution, and thus a tool of combat. From that point of view, the value of any analysis of the composition and social trends within the working population can only lie in precisely how well it helps us answer questions about class consciousness. (Braverman, 1998: 313)

Unfortunately, neither Foster nor Braverman respond directly to the more radical criticism that his work is doubly flawed: first, that the distinction between ‘objective’ and (a non-existent) ‘subjective’ vitiates the work as ‘a tool of combat’; and, second, that his (and Marx’s) investigations are premised on an essentialist theory of human nature, and thus fail to show how subjectivity is inextricable from exploitation (Jackson and Willmott, 1987; Knights, 1990; Knights and Willmott, 1983, 1990; Spencer, 2000; Thompson, 1989, 1993; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995; Willmott, 1990). These criticisms merit consideration. This article shows that, ultimately, the criticisms are self-limiting insofar as they fail to appreciate what is core and what is contingent in Braverman and in Marx. Moreover, as the subsequent evaluation shows, what endures in Braverman and Marx is not adequately encapsulated by existing attempts to identify ‘what is core’ in labour process research (Spencer, 2000).

The following section provides a succinct summary of the evolving critiques of Braverman. The critiques divide into two parts: first, those that centre on deskillling at the ‘point of production’ in Braverman’s accumulation process; second, those that focus on the constitution of the subjectivity of management and workers (i.e. the missing subject debate).

The ‘deskilling’ thesis in labour process theory

Criticisms of Braverman’s work question whether the impulse of capital accumulation alone provides a sufficient explanation of the process of deskillling and the subordination of labour (i.e. the appropriation of life activity, including customs, knowledge and skill) (see Armstrong, 1987; Burawoy, 1979; Friedman, 1977; Knights and Willmott, 1990: 10). While Braverman’s ‘relentless applica-
tion of Taylorism’ is targeted as the questionable theoretical basis for subordinating workers to the accumulation imperative (Knights and Willmott, 1990: 9), this reading can only be sustained by ignoring those parts of Labor and Monopoly Capital that discuss non-Taylorist means for extracting surplus value. The ‘Habitation of the Worker’, the human relations movement (Ch. 6), the discussion, in that context, of Fordist family (wage) policies, and the linking of Veblen’s publicity engineer with the growth of monopoly surpluses all serve to rebut claims that Braverman was oblivious to the wider cultural constitution of worker subjectivity (Aronowitz, 1978; Braverman, 1998: 184–5).

Other assessments of Labor and Monopoly Capital focus on the many contingencies that might qualify, ameliorate or even reverse deskilling tendencies. The work stands accused of romanticizing craft work (Cutler, 1978); failing to situate craft labour in its particular industrial settings (Littler and Salaman, 1982; Stedman-Jones, 1975); abstracting deskilling processes from their specific material and ideological conditions (Brighton Labour Process Group, 1977; Elger, 1982); underrating the importance of reskilling in the ‘real’ subsumption phase (Penn, 1982); underestimating strategic alternatives to labour degradation in the pursuit of capital accumulation (Armstrong, 1985, 1987; Friedman, 1977, 1984; Palmer, 1975); omitting consideration of the subjective importance of ‘tacit’ skills, such as knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of particular machines (Manwaring and Wood, 1985); ignoring domestic (non-waged) work (Beechey, 1982; Knights and Willmott, 1986); being inattentive to the operation of external and internal labour markets (Knights and Willmott, 1990; Rubery, 1980); not exploring more fully the ‘fusion of concerns surrounding class struggle and the forming and reforming of classes’ (Carter, 1995: 66); and ignoring ‘non-productive’ state workers, whose distance from the accumulation process excludes them from consideration (Carter, 1995, 1997).

Criticisms that Braverman failed to anticipate specific historical, organizational and other contingencies do not always survive careful scrutiny. As Armstrong argues, Braverman’s general propositions refer to long run tendencies. Augmenting surplus value through reducing the value of necessary labour (by deskilling and other means) remains a significant tendency of the capitalist labour process (Armstrong, 1988). Even though new skills are continually thrown up by the constant revolutionizing of production, they soon become vulnerable to the same process that ‘sets them free’ (Braverman, 1998: 176–7). Even trenchant critics of Braverman concede that:

fine-grained detail ... was beyond the scope of Braverman’s analysis ... [as] ... Labor and Monopoly Capital ... was intended to provide an overview of trends and a stimulus for the revitalisation of critical studies of work and class, not to present a precise specification of the organisation and control of each and every form of capitalist labour process. (Knights and Willmott, 1990: 11)

Criticisms of Braverman are wide of the mark on several counts. The focus on deskilling in Labor and Monopoly Capital was, in part, to allow Braverman to debunk a common belief about American capitalism: that skill upgrading
and education could reverse the present slide into depression, and counter America’s long-term industrial decline and restore what, in popular culture, are believed to have been ‘better times’ (Braverman, 1998: 3, 265; Foster, 1998: xviii; Thompson, 1989: 4). Some variations of the upgrading thesis have been used as planks in the platforms of a succession of American presidents, including Johnson, Carter, Bush, Reagan and Clinton. George W. Bush III’s administration places education at the forefront of his new policy declarations. It is an ideology that promises an escape from a burger-flipping future and, more generally, promises to restore America’s halcyon days of high-wage, Eisenhower prosperity.3 The introduction to Braverman’s book and the contents of the final chapter – challenging the upgrading thesis on statistical, educational and historical grounds – support this interpretation.

The same thesis was proposed by Perrow some eight years later. Perrow questions: ‘The prevailing assumption is that our labour-force skills must be upgraded to fill the high-technology positions. But high-tech industries reduce skill requirements and demand only miniscule numbers of highly skilled personnel’ (Perrow, 1986: 270). The results that Perrow cites to support his analysis (Berg, 1970; Rumberger, 1981a, 1981b; Stanford University Institute, 1993) have been replicated by more recent in-depth case investigations by Aronowitz and Difazio (1994). In a passage that qualifies as a perspicacious anticipation of this article’s reading of Braverman, Perrow observes that:

[T]he symbolic nature of schooling is overstated. There is a large element of myth and ritual in it ... [b]ut that account may be appropriate only to the past, when literacy, Americanization, and socialization into a permanent wage status may have been all that the schools really needed to do. In the 1970’s and 1980’s, though, the cultural approach to organizations requires that powerful interests outside of organizations, including the state, must be taken into account. (Perrow, 1986: 271)

Braverman provides an inkling of a counter-critique of the vulgar deskilling interpretation of his work with the defiant assertion that the average skill content of work has ‘obviously’ increased over time (because of the increased amount of ‘dated labour time’ of science and technology embodied in labour processes; Braverman, 1998: 294–5). He uses this (which, to some, might be a somewhat perplexing remark) as a dramatic segue to his counter-thesis: that skill polarization (not deskilling) results from capital accumulation, whereby labour is ‘set free’ at increasing rates.4 That so many critical evaluations of Braverman fail to take note of these passages suggests little more than a cursory acquaintance with Labor and Monopoly Capital, and supports the contention that many attacks ‘appear to be based on a shallow and probably second-hand reading’ (Thompson, 1989: 3).

Braverman’s (and Perrow’s) theses concerning the ‘powerful interests’ behind the upgrading ideology in the USA are given credence by a variety of examples. For example, professional accounting education has been a major terrain of conflict in the USA over the last 20 years. Large accounting firms (the ‘big five’) have mounted a sustained assault on the labour supply of their small
Certified Public Accounting (CPA) firm competitors under the pretext of needing to close a ‘skills gap’ between educational standards and the requirements of practice. They contend that state-supported undergraduate education (which typically supplies small CPA firms) falls far short of the occupational skill requirements of the new ‘global’ economy (even though contemporary accounting software technology would indicate that less – not more – skill and time in college are needed). The large firms have succeeded in imposing new Master’s-level entry requirements into the profession on students largely from state institutions. Typically, these students are from poor urban areas. The large firms who lobbied heavily for the changes hire, in the first instance, from graduate-only, private Ivy League schools. Only if this supply is insufficient do they ‘cherry pick’ graduates from a select number of state colleges. The result, for small CPA firms, has been a 25 percent drop in the supply of new graduates and higher labour costs. Students, faced with the additional year’s tuition and loss of earned income, are seeking alternatives to careers with small CPA firms (Tinker, 2001; Tinker and Koutsoumadi, 1997).

Recent ‘innovations’ in US high school education also testify to the Braverman-Perrow thesis. Ten years ago, New York’s teachers earned $2000 less than newly qualified lawyers. In 2001, the difference reached $100,000. In the summer of 2001, in response to a dire shortage of New York teachers, the state released 500 teaching fellows (with only one month’s training) into ‘underperforming’ public schools. What teaching fellows lacked in training, qualifications and preparation, they made up for (it was argued) in enthusiasm, devotion and commitment.

Braverman’s analysis is resilient not just in exposing education policy as a palliative for depression and deindustrialization, but also in understanding attempts to reconstitute the educational labour process in both the Bush and Blair administrations. What better exemplars of the struggle to separate head from hand – to wrest control over and manageralize the labour process – than the instigation of a national curriculum, merit-based pay, charter schools, voucher-based systems, private partnership initiatives, and increasingly digitalized delivery systems. The scope of estrangement is not restricted to the labour process (viewed narrowly as the workplace), but extends to the labour product (of teachers). In many schools and colleges, relatively broad-based curricula are being supplanted with a technocratic (vocational) syllabus, thereby reducing children to the raw material of labour power. As Braverman reminds us, Taylor’s three principles involve dissociating the labour process from the skills of workers, separating the execution from conception, and preplanning and precalculating all elements of the labour process (Braverman, 1998: 77–83). All these elements are in evidence in the US and UK educational settings.

The much larger lessons conveyed by Braverman’s and Marx’s research – aspects that endure over decades and centuries – are almost completely overlooked by postmodernist commentators on Braverman’s book. These enduring lessons belong to ‘the method’ of political engagement (dialectics) and an anthropological view of human development that is transhistorical and
transpsychological. It has been long recognized that Marx (and Hegel) consciously structured their analysis in terms of different levels of generality and specificity (see Hegel, 1967; Mandel, 1977: 31–2; Rubel, 1926), yet critics invariably fail to distinguish the general from the particular. They are thus unable to determine what can, and what cannot, be legitimately imported into an analysis of the present. The result is that attacks on a straw man have become something of a blood sport in British labour process research (Thompson, 1989: 3).

An especially egregious case of such misspecification is the contention that Braverman’s labour process analysis is ‘parochial’, and that in an era of monopoly capitalism, he ignores venues for accumulation other than deskillling at the ‘point of production’ (Morgan and Hooper, 1987). These ‘new’ venues include intensified marketing, monopolistic pricing, currency speculation, asset stripping, production relocation to cheap labour markets, and so on. Critics contend that, instead of focussing exclusively on ‘the moment of production’, Braverman should have examined the contradictions within and between the moments in the circuit of capital (Kelly, 1985: 32; Wren, 1982), including interdependencies between management control strategies and product market conditions (Burawoy, 1979; Cressy and MacInnes, 1980).

Such criticism is only possible with a ‘plant sociology’ reading of Braverman (where production is conceived – literally – as only that which occurs on the factory premises). Such a reading does not conform to the relational perspective of either Marx or Braverman, and requires that we ignore Part III of Labor and Monopoly Capital, especially those chapters on the universal market, the role of the state and the modern corporation. These aspects of Braverman’s analysis have been taken further by other researchers. As capitalism expands in space, time and into subjectivity (see Harvey, 1987; Smith, 1990), so Marxists have reconceptualized the sites of struggle underlying workplace relations of exploitation (Aronowitz, 1981; Cleaver, 1979; Eagleton, 1984; Jameson, 1990, 1991; Tinker, 1991). Cultural analysis (cultural materialism) introduces the ‘supporting cast’ of workplace exploitation: the realm of liberal democracy, state apparatus, media, family, educational and spiritual institutions, and so on. As WTO protestors showed, the degradation of work in the 20th century must be combated by deactivating a force field that extends beyond the factory gates (Tinker, 2000a, 2000b). The same sentiments are expressed more systematically in Grundrisse, where Marx notes that while exchange, circulation and production are separate determinations, they also imply and embody each other, forming a greater whole in which production is dominant: ‘production, distribution, exchange and consumption are ... [not] ... identical, but that they all form members of a totality, distinctions within a unity’ (Marx, 1973: 99).

Some of the greatest confusions over Labor and Monopoly Capital are fostered by the assertion that Braverman understates the subjectivity of both workers and management (Burawoy, 1985; Knights, 1990: 297–335, 2000–1: 69; O’Doherty and Willmott, 2000–1: 113; Willmott, 1990: 336–78). Braverman’s analysis should be extended (it is argued) to the subjectivities underlying worker
resistance, as well as those of management (and capitalists) that are infused in various strategies of control. Such a reformulation is obstructed (critics insist) by Labor and Monopoly Capital's excessive reliance on Frederick Taylor's concentration on the separation of planning from execution (the formal subsumption underpinning 'the genesis of management') (Braverman, 1998: 31–58; Edwards, 1979; Littler and Salaman, 1982; Pollard, 1965). Critics contend that Braverman conflates one particular management control strategy – Taylorism – with management authority itself (Friedman, 1977). Instead, these researchers have begun to explore the diversity of strategies employed by management. 'Responsible autonomy' is a strategy that allows workers greater discretion, which may redirect, mitigate or augment deskilling (Friedman, 1977). Such tactics are likely to be favoured by firms seeking greater flexibility in production and striving to retain skilled workers (Nichols and Beynon, 1977). In a similar vein, Edwards (1979) found that bureaucratic control strategies co-opt employees with 'progressive' personnel and promotion policies and structured career prospects.

A variance on the above criticisms is the so-called Panacea Fallacy that is leveled at writers like Braverman (1998), Freidman (1977) and Edwards (1979). Allegedly, these researchers are guilty of a form of Marxist functionalism that overlooks the unresolved differences that inevitably result from attempts to negate inherent contradictions of capitalism (Littler and Salaman, 1982: 256). Unintended consequences invariably result from management strategies because of the impossibility of complete closure and containment. Thus, it is important to explore the multiplicity of dimensions, mechanisms and levels of control that mediate particular capital-labour relations (Knights and Willmott, 1990: 14; Littler and Salaman, 1982; Storey, 1985; Thompson, 1989). It is a small step from these criticisms to a 'decentering of the subject' and the recognition that neither management nor workers are unified, hyper-rational, passive or powerless (Salaman, 1982).

**Structuralism in labour process theory**

Burawoy extends the previous critique by contesting the utility of bracketing the subjective from the objective in Braverman's analysis. He notes: 'It was not Braverman who offered insights into my daily life [on the shop floor] but curiously, the abstract theories of politics and ideology found in Gramsci, Poulantzas and Althusser – very much in fashion at the time' (Burawoy, 1985: 10). His participant observation study, as a machine operator, reveals that subjectivity is a constitutive process of active engagement, whereby 'we participated in and strategized our own exploitation' (1985: 10). The subjective is the medium through which the objective processes of exploitation are made real. An understanding of the labour process cannot be reduced to 'inexorable [objective] laws of capitalism', where capital and labour's interests are pregiven and inevitably opposed. Rather, in Burawoy's view, class interests are defined,
organized and made real in shop floor politics, where expedient – albeit unstable – equilibriums are struck (1985: 10).

For Burawoy, Gramsci’s analysis of the formation of hegemonic blocs, where unstable coalitions of traditional, precapitalist, state and other interests coalesce, apply as much to the factory realm as they do to the public sphere (Burawoy, 1985; Lehman, 1993; Lehman and Tinker, 1987). Hegemonic governance structures favour consensual processes, and muddle management’s authoritarian and despotic inclinations (Burawoy, 1985). Hence, this form of regime ‘gave workers the opportunity to construct effective working relations and drew them into the pursuit of capitalist profit … [and] … set limits on workers’ struggles’, and encouraged an acceptance of the alienation of planning from execution (Burawoy, 1985: 10). The resultant residual autonomy provides workers with the space for creative games (‘making out’) to derive ‘relative satisfactions’ from a deprived work environment (Burawoy, 1979). The ‘false empowerment’ of gaming in Burawoy’s hegemonic bargain not only elicits worker consent and permits the reproduction of capitalist relations of production, but also mystifies the expropriative underpinnings of those relations by directing attention away from ‘imposed’ market (accumulation) conditions to areas of autonomy and play.

Burawoy apart, the criticisms outlined previously focus on the absence of historical and contextual specifics in Braverman. As long as these problems can be redressed by further studies emanating from within the corpus of Braverman’s project, then the damage done to Braverman is limited (Armstrong, 1988: 143–59). However, the criticisms reach beyond Braverman’s bracketing of the subjective from the objective. They have parented new postmodernist research programs for labour process theory, together with new pretenders to the throne of the ‘Missing subject of labour process theory’ (Thompson, 1990: 114). Reviewed below are the credentials of two of these candidates: a gendered subject and an existential subject (Knights, 1997, 2000–1; Knights and Willmott, 1983, 1990; O’Doherty and Willmott, 2000–1; Willmott, 1990, 1997).

Poststructuralism in labour process theory

Gendered subjectivity

For labour process postmodernists, it is not sufficient that subjectivity be recognized; rather, its constitutive part in effecting (and being affected by) the context is also central. These scholars aim to go beyond replacing ‘Braverman’s determinism with a control-resistance dualism or paradigm … [which results in] … the limitations of reducing subjectivity to resistance’ (Knights, 1990: 305). Rather, it is important to transcend this ‘sterile polarization’ and ‘debilitating bifurcation’ to ‘raise the nature of work … with the aim of developing political prefigurative forms within capitalism’ (Knights, 1990: 306; Cresssey and
MacInnes, 1980: 6). Only an examination of subjectivity ‘in the same rigorous and critical fashion as political economy’ is likely to produce the answer. The argument continues: ‘Subjects are as much constituted as constituting’ (Knights, 1990: 308), and, while Burawoy’s analysis of subjectivity is ‘a vast improvement on previous studies of industrial workers ... [his] ... analysis ... is not so much wrong as incomplete’ (1990: 308–10).

It is debatable whether political economy (let alone subjectivity) were ever subject to serious critical scrutiny in British industrial sociology prior to 1990. The foundations for an uncritical subjectivism (and a concomitant neglect of the structural context of political economy) were provided by Goldthorpe’s ‘action frame of reference’ (Goldthorpe, 1966), Blauner’s ‘up-skilling’ thesis (Blauner, 1964) and the later Affluent Worker studies (Nichols, 1999: 111–13). Nichols notes that, notwithstanding the arrival of the labour process debate in 1978, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that ‘the linkage to capital accumulation ... [had] ... been more in evidence in industrial sociology [since 1978] ... than a stress on the importance of subjective meanings’ (Nichols, 1999: 113).

For labour process postmodernists, worker resistance and management control are not exogenous to the labour process. They cannot be parachuted in from a disembodied ‘Capital’ or from the essentialist needs of workers; they must be integral to the activity. The modern workplace is the locus of competition, pressures for economy, and technological upheaval that fragment, atomize and isolate the lives of working people (Cleaver, 1979). The result – according to postmodernism – is a growing sense of a lack of control. The associated stress, insecurity and anxiety trigger their own counter-reaction; a machismo identity of ‘what it is to be a man’, based on tough physical labour and hard, practical, down to earth living. ‘Macho man’ is a gendered assertiveness that gives the appearance of being able to ‘control the uncontrollable’ – a patina of independence, integrity and dignity (Cleaver, 1979; Knights and Willmott, 1986; Knights et al., 1985). Importantly, in contrast to Burawoy, the macho persona of postmodernism does not spring from an exogenously constituted ‘human nature’, but is endogenously formed within the workplace.

Postmodernism’s assertion that machismo is a futile response to the problems of insecurity arising under capitalism is never closely examined by its proponents. Should we blithely assume that working people are so misguided? Daily life is not a conflict-free happy land. Finding immediate relief from brutality and coercion by meeting force with force has a necessary and compelling logic. Capitalism is ‘revolutionary’ in the violent manner in which it wrenches people’s entitlements from them, denying them access to the very means of subsistence. This involves not just the classical examples of the deprivation of pre-capitalist (i.e. feudal) rights in order to become free wage labour. Today’s workers are threatened by hazardous and unhealthy working conditions, pay cuts and job losses that drive their families into destitution. It is patronizing in the extreme to conjecture from a university cloister that they have got it wrong for vigorously opposing violent assaults on their livelihood.
Early strictures of postmodernists against dualisms needed considerable refinement. Originally, they did no more than declare that the problem of dualisms was one of imposing rigid categories on phenomena that, in reality, were permeable, porous or even spurious (Knights, 1990: 305). Such an argument hardly poses a challenge for orthodox philosophy, as it merely instances ‘bad classification’, that is, failing to meet the Cartesian condition of mutual exclusivity – a clean division into ‘I’ and ‘not I’. The message from the philosophical orthodoxy would be to simply ‘Go forth and reclassify’. The crudity of this early formulation of the problem of dualism was compounded by a perplexing reluctance to harness the rich tradition of Marxist literature on dualisms; the dialectics of internal relations that moves beyond classificatory imperfections to an alternative, anti-Cartesian political philosophy (cf. Adorno, 1973; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979; Arthur, 1986; Ollman, 1976; Smith, 1990; Tinker and Neimark, 1987).

More recently, labour process postmodernists have sharpened their critique of dualistic analysis by nailing their colors to the Derridean mast of deconstruction (Knights, 1997, 2000–1). Dualisms, in Derrida, are distinctions made with a political purpose. What is not incorporated in the sovereign ‘I’ belongs with a repressed, unexamined and undertheorized ‘other’ (Bernstein, 1987; Derrida, 1978). Insanity is the repressed counterpart of sanity; uncivilized is the dark relation of civilized; disequilibrium is the remainder of equilibrium; underdeveloped the underside of developed, inefficiency is the repressed counterpart of efficiency; and unfree the inevitable consequence of free. For Derrida, theoretical assertions are never innocent; they are ways of including, but also excluding, repressing and silencing. The purpose of deconstruction is to redeem the repressed by delimiting the canon and unraveling trails of hidden meanings (Derrida, 1978).

‘Hanging out the dirty washing’ is a public confession on behalf of postmodernists that explores what was inadvertently repressed in their own earlier work in producing ‘a representation of the world that denies their own construction of security within it’ (Knights, 2000–1: 75). Specifically, Collinson’s failure is said to lie in a tacit reliance on ‘that self-same humanism that constructs autonomous subjects seeking ... to secure ... identities in competition with everyone else’ (2000–1: 75). ‘Willmott’s failure ... [is] ... to recognize and theorize the relationship between gender, or more particularly masculinities, and disembodiment’ (2000–1: 76). For the finale, academics are found guilty of being ‘comparatively unaware of their own preoccupations with [a careerist] identity in pursuit of what is, without question, otherwise scholarly output’ (2000–1: 76). The implication is that academic research is inaccessible to the bulk of ordinary people.

Concern about inaccessible writings by careerist academics is laudable, however it rings a little hollow coming from those devotees of the impenetrable Foucault, who are usually silent when it comes to appreciating the success of Labor and Monopoly Capital in reaching thousands of non-academic audiences. What is more, criticisms of academic careerism and pleas for greater clar-
ity and accessibility need to be supported by an institutional and sociologically informed analysis. The abolition of tenure (job security) that ‘frees’ academics as wage labour, oppressive research assessment exercises, and the radical reconstitution of the cultural and political conditions of academic life also need to be considered. Individualistic acts of contortion (‘hanging out dirty washing’) are of little relevance compared with deepening our collective understanding of these factors as a vital precursor to effective political engagement.

What is perplexing in the postmodernist account is how rival perspectives are either ignored or discredited with selective quotations and the occasional (crucial) misreading. Such is the case with the writings of Marxist historians (Poster, 1984) and historical theorists (for example, White, 1987) that predate Foucault’s entry into British labour process and organization literature. This is also the case for Marcuse and Adorno, and other Frankfurt theorists, whom Foucault himself admits to never having read, blaming his teachers for never uttering the words ‘Frankfurt school’. Callinicos notes that the uncritical reception of Foucault by postmodernism in the UK:

represented a depoliticization of radical theory, and its aestheticization, so that the critique of bourgeois society was transformed into striking a knowing, ironic attitude towards both the defenders of the status quo and those still benighted enough to wish to overthrow it. (Callinicos, 1995: 180)

Postmodernists even repress Derrida! Derrida didn’t merely say that ‘we should [not] abandon Marx, since his spirit of critique continues within what are often seen as the most “outrageous” of postmodern discourses’ (Knights, 2000–1: 81); the cover of Derrida’s Specters of Marx bellows out:

Derrida argues that there is more than one spirit of Marx and that it is the responsibility of his heirs – we are all heirs of Marx – to sift through the possible legacies, the possible spirits, reaffirming one and not the other. (Derrida, 1993: jacket)

Derrida’s entreaty continues:

It will always be a fault not to read and reread and discuss Marx … to go beyond scholarly ‘readings’ or ‘discussion.’ It will be more and more a fault, a failing of theoretical, philosophical, political responsibility … we no longer have any excuse, only alibis, for turning away from this responsibility. There will be no future without this. Not without Marx … . (Derrida, 1993: 13)

This resurrected specter of Derrida would seemingly commend the efforts of writers such as Armstrong (1988) and Rowlinson and Hassard (2000–1) who have been branded by postmodernists and others as ‘fundamentalists’ (even in an alleged ‘Glossary’ of labour process terminology) for their careful reading (and rereading) of Marx and Braverman (Grugulis and Knights, 2000–1: 15; Thompson and Smith, 2000–1: 45–6). It is trite (but apparently necessary) to observe that some literature is hardly worth reading at all; in other cases it may be deeply informative, no matter how often it is revisited. Textual meaning is not immutable, but varies with the reader, context and times. Hence, these
‘fundamentalists’ (and Derrida) are surely on the right track in their continuous reinterrogation of texts.

Postmodernists have reified insecurity in their proposals for reforming labour process research. There is an intriguing parallel between, on the one hand, Knight’s thesis that we must learn to recognize insecurity as ‘ultimate data’ and, on the other hand, the perspective of the insurance industry (with which he has had a long-lasting relationship) that also reifies risk and uncertainty as statistically random occurrences (‘acts of God’). In both cases, risk is rendered politically inert. The reification of risk excludes its social genesis – hence its social and political malleability. Job security, worker safety, health wellness programs, exchange rate stabilizations, ‘God’s’ global warning, and even scare advertising by the insurance industry itself are not natural inevitabilities; they are terrains of struggle under capitalism that, at times, can only be combated in a violent (machismo) manner (Knights, 1989, 2000–1; Knights and Tinker, 1997). The conditions of possibility – the historical and social contexts that reproduce insecurity – are never properly engaged by labour process postmodernists, theoretically or politically. Instead they urge something akin to a return to the 1960s; not this time to mind altering drugs, but to an equally politically tepid, individualistic withdrawal into meditation, trombone playing and heavy-duty self-reflection.

Examining what exactly the postmodernists remainder in Marx and Braverman helps us move from the conservative politics of resignation to a political vehicle for transcending the present. In calling for the rejection of subject–object dualisms and for the endogenization of subjectivity, postmodernists have the opportunity to enter well-trodden territory in the management and related literature (Adorno, 1973: 183; Held, 1980: 82, 213–16; Ryan, 1982; Tinker and Neimark, 1987: 62–4; Tinker et al., 1982). This literature clearly acknowledges the social constitution of theoretical subjectivity: ‘the subject–object split is a false assumption: observers (subjects) are a product of the reality ... they observe’ (Tinker et al., 1982: 168), and rejects Cartesian analysis (identity thinking) as the sovereign and exclusive basis for scientific categorization (Ollman, 1976; Ryan, 1982). While orthodox (Cartesian) philosophy overstates the permanence of conceptual forms (to ‘externalize’ their presence), dialectics stresses categorical transitoriness: non-distinctness, interrelatedness, mutability, degradability and the eventual senility of categories (Marx, 1977: 163–77; Ollman, 1976; Ryan, 1982). Dialectics replaces the epistemic orthodoxy with categorical forms that are rarely mutually exclusive, but are immanently (internally) connected – thereby expressing ‘non-identity’, a ‘unity in difference’ or an ‘interpenetration of opposites’ (Arthur, 1986; Cleaver, 1979; Gunn, 1989; Held, 1980; Ollman, 1976).

Stigmatizing Marxist literature with teleological assumptions of the grand narrative (of progress, anthropocentricity, and so on) can only be accomplished by ignoring this literature. For example, Adorno and Horkheimer (1979: xi) began by contemplating the prospect of ‘slipping back into barbarism’ (1979: xv), noting that ‘the enlightenment has relinquished its own realization’ (1979:
40) and that ‘the enlightenment must examine itself if men are not to be wholly betrayed’ (1979: xv). They describe the development of capitalism in terms of the elucidation and subjugation of nature – including human nature. They explicitly reject the sovereignty claimed for identity by theorists of the emergent social order. No pregiven human essence is ever posited: ‘nature’ is socially and anthropologically determined, but not without a remainder, providing a ‘terror for transcendence’ (1979: 15).

If there was ever a comprehensive indictment of the hubris of Cartesian analysis and humanist idealism, it is to be found in a tradition that begins with Marx’s critique of Hegel (Marx, 1943; see also Adorno, 1973; Arthur, 1986; Dews, 1986; Eagleton, 1990; Smith, 1990). Even though this critique predates labour process postmodernism by decades, inexplicably this lineage of thought is either bypassed or caricatured. For instance, Ollman’s ‘theory of internal relations’ is dismissed as ‘refusing to make distinctions … [t]he logical conclusion of such a philosophy is the collapse of all analytical distinctions’ (Knights, 1990: 330–1). Yet, Ollman’s reservations about analytic distinctions accord exactly with postmodernist concerns about dualisms – except that Ollman voiced them more than a decade earlier (Ollman, 1976). There is no serious effort to explore this alternative philosophical tradition of dialectical philosophy, so as to elucidate, more accurately, valid concerns about bifurcations and dualisms.

An antecedent to the postmodernist critique of dualisms is to be found in Negative Dialectics (1973), wherein Adorno not only rejects bifurcations and confirms the mediation of the subject and the object, but at the same time asserts the priority of the object. Objectivity (the social and material world) includes the subject, but the reverse is not the case. Thus: ‘To be an object also is part of the meaning of subjectivity; but it is not equally part of the meaning of objectivity to be a subject’ (Adorno, 1973: 183). The poignancy of this becomes clear when we consider the postmodern desire (and failure) to realize ‘prefigurative forms that are politically and morally relevant’ (Grugulis and Knights, 2000–1: 3).

The postmodern antipathy towards Marxist constructions of political resistance stems from the acceptance of the Althusserian schism of the ‘two Marxisms’, whereby an idealistic, humanistic ‘immature’ Marx was eventually replaced by a more economicist, structurally ‘mature’ successor (Althusser and Balibar, 1974; Gouldner, 1980; Smart, 1983). This Althusserian dichotomization has been rebutted, however, not just by careful textual analysis (see Smith, 1990, 1993; Marsden, 1997a, b), but also by questions about Althusser’s motivations to appease the officialdom of the French Communist Party (Cleaver, 1979). None of this troubles postmodernists who selectively cite Aronowitz (1978: 140) to support the view that ‘one result of Marx’s analysis in this sphere “has been to abolish the possibility for a theory of subjectivity” ’ (Knights, 1990: 299), while failing to mention that elsewhere Aronowitz carefully limits this criticism to capital logic ‘readings’ of Marx, and has authored numerous (Marxist-based) applications of dialectics, including a cultured subjectivity embedded in a cultural materialism (Aronowitz, 1981).
In ruling out dialectics and cultural materialism, postmodernist analysis is self-limiting in several respects. First, anxiety and insecurity are treated as unproblematic; their social underpinnings are never fully explicated in order to develop effective political engagement. The unqualified assumption that there is a blanket, psychic need for security is not dented by the ubiquity of such popular pastimes as gambling, bungee jumping and rollercoasting. ‘Dicing with death’ on such a scale is a form of mimicry that anthropology cannot dismiss as a mere aberration. Any general theory of (even psychic) conduct should be able to account for such phenomena.

Second (and in consequence), the opportunity to transform ‘macho man’ into a culturally and symbolically interpellated subject is thereby missed. Macho man is a gendered subject, derived inductively from partial anecdotes. While postmodernists call for an analysis that is historically and institutionally informed (devoid of ‘dualisms’ and ‘totalizing’), this is rarely present in their research. Lost is the opportunity to help macho man mature from overly-psychologized adolescent to a political and cultural being (see, for instance, Eagleton, 1984; Hall, 1980, 1982; Jameson, 1990, 1991).

Third, while aspiring to develop ‘political prefigurative forms’ within capitalism, postmodernists are unable to deliver. Typically, macho man comes across as a rather pathetic being, posturing with attitudes and prejudice, resorting to futile acts of non-conformity. (These remarks refer, of course, to the inadequacy of theory, qua theory, not to the actual subjects.) Other subjectivist constructions — consumers (Knights and Sturdy, 1997), children (Knights and Collinson, 1987) and managers (Knights and McCabe, 1999: 219) — are a dubious crop of expedient empiricism and researcher precepts. For instance, in an ethnographic investigation into Total Quality Management (TQM), management are deemed to suffer from a ‘naive belief’ that TQM breaks with existing relations of hierarchy and power (1999: 219). This hardly reflects an abiding ethnographic respect for actor rationality.

The same insecurities and anxieties that underlie gendered identity are also formative in the second candidate for ‘missing subject’: existential identity. The review of existential identity below shows that, as with gendered identity, political transcendence becomes a problem. In both cases, postmodernist labour process theory is forced to resort to absurd and even condescending suggestions as to how working people might find relief by transforming their predicament. This paradigmatic degeneration of postmodernism (see Lakatos, 1970) is attributable to the reluctance to deploy a theoretical and political episteme that is adequate to the occasion.

**Existential subjectivity**

As with gendered subjectivity, existential subjectivity shares Burawoy’s contention that Braverman’s bracketing of the subjective from the objective is untenable (Willmott, 1990: 370). Postmodernists find Burawoy’s resolution flawed because it is premised on an essentialist theory of human nature, where
worker resistance is rooted in an externally constituted (undefined) human nature (1990: 365).

On the face of it, proponents of existential subjectivity shun the palpable antipathy displayed towards Marxism in gendered subjectivity, and deploy the rhetoric of praxis and dialectics to overcome dualisms and endogenize subjectivity. This is accomplished by ‘reconstructing Marx’s understanding of subjectivity ... [to recognize] ... anxieties about identity and attachments to routine, which are fuelled by the individualizing effects of capitalist relations of production’ (1990: 339). Existential subjectivity implicitly grants that the theoretical antecedents and ramifications of ‘individualization’ extend beyond psychic anxiety and insecurity, however the contours of this broader landscape are never systematically incorporated into the analysis. The inherently variegated character of capitalism disrupts all aspects of life, including employment, wages, health, education, spirituality and family. Of course, life does have a psychic correspondent, but to collapse all existence into cerebral individuation is to commit psychological reductionism (Knights, 2000–1: 77). While rejecting the Althusserian ‘hard-break’ thesis – an abrupt discontinuity between ‘the young’ and ‘the mature’ Marx – existential subjectivity resurrects a weaker, ‘soft-break’ model. In this view, the mature Marx downplayed the elemental tools of dialectics and praxis of his youth, and, for reasons of ‘analytic strategy’ (Willmott, 1990: 341), focussed on commodity fetishism in an attempt to explain capitalism’s capacity to disguise its expropriative and degrading affects (1990: 350, 352). To put Marx back on his feet, existential subjectivity restores the mature Marx by adding ‘identity fetishism’ to commodity fetishism. Hence: ‘It is not just the identity of commodities but the commodification of identities that requires critical consideration’ (1990: 358).

This analysis of dialectics in Marx’s Capital (Vol. 1) is skin-deep, however. A caution to those who assert that, for reasons of ‘analytic strategy’, Marx downplayed the dialectics and praxis of his youth, may be found in the longstanding observation that an understanding of Hegel’s ‘entire shorter Logic’ (Wallace and Findlay, 1975) on dialectics is essential for making sense of the commodity form of Ch. 1 of Vol. 1 of Capital (Arthur, 1986; Cleaver, 1979; Lenin, 1976; Smith, 1990). As for the neglect of the ‘commodification of identities’ in Marxism, Aronowitz, Eagleton, Jameson and Hall are just a few of the writers who have made the historical-cultural commodification of identity the centrepiece of (Marxist) research. Existential subjectivity takes no cognizance of this literature.

Gendered subjectivity (and its corollary, identity fetishism) mistakenly equates the concept of the commodity in Vol. 1 of Capital with its specific historical expression in that work. Writing at the dawn of English capitalism, Marx faced the incipient industrialization of a largely agrarian society. This was an era of brutal factory regimentation, gin babies, heroin-addicted children (who ‘looked like wizen monkeys’) and women who pulled canal barges because they were cheaper to reproduce than horses (Marx, 1977: 517). The complaint about ‘Marx’s inattentiveness to ... the existential dimension ...
... his emphasis upon labour's physical existence to the neglect of its symbolic existence' is grossly ahistorical. Labour process postmodernists deny Marx the kind of empathetic reading they rightly expect for themselves (see Willmott, 1997).

The concept of identity fetishism is of doubtful theoretical value. Labour is the star commodity in Capital; it places no restriction on (the commodities that reproduce) the labour commodity (Marx, 1977: 125–38). The second paragraph of Vol. 1 indicates that this work is as much concerned with commodities that 'satisfy the imagination as with those that satisfy the appetite' (1977: 125). If we take an abridged definition of a commodity as being itself produced by socialized wage labour, then non-commodities that enter into the (fetishized) reproduction of the labour commodity (domestic labour and 'spiritual' activities being common examples) must also be incorporated into the analysis for effective political engagement (Cleaver, 1979). Labour is fetishized – like all commodities – and, thus, 'identity fetishism' is fully anticipated in the original commodity genre. Identity fetishism is a redundant concept: commodities invented after 1859 (automobiles, computers, Disneyland, and so on) do not, in themselves, necessitate new categorical spaces (auto-fetishism? cornflake fetishism?, and so on).

Time and circumstance eventually render all specific historical applications jejune, and thus all theoretical categories need to be constantly rejuvenated with new empirical content to make them adequate to extant conditions. The historical conditionality of existential fetishism is itself underdeveloped and needs to be explicated. At present, it appears to be limited to the labour processes of 'senior’ western capitalist economies; it has less relevance for the labour processes of 'junior' and 'developing' capitalist economies, and those historical circumstances that Marx investigated (Poulantzas, 1975: 15).

In addition to eurocentricity, existential subjectivity betrays a certain psychocentricity. In a reading reminiscent of the anti-Marxist polemic of Barry Smart (1983), existential subjectivity slants the meaning of Marx's injunction to 'deal with individuals only insofar as they are the personification of economic categories, the bearers of particular class relations and interests' (Willmott, 1994: 87). Marx wrote at a time when economics, sociology and history were fused (and psychology belonged with philosophy and religion). 'The economic' not only includes extensive moral, epistemic, aesthetic, historical and sociological components (as a reading of Vol. 1, with its subtitle A Critique of Political Economy, will testify), but also the incipient psychological categories of the times.

The individualistic focus of existential subjectivity hides as much as it reveals. Cultural, political, state and other institutional activities require a theoretical apparatus that must be borrowed from outside its psychocentric orientation. These transpsychic considerations cannot be simply tagged on, but must comprise an integrated theorization that admits conditionalities and nuances within a theoretical totality. Thus, for example, Gramsci's different hegemonic regimes (hegemony of consent, hegemony of coercion) are likely to individuate
differently, and to be associated with different expressions and responses of insecurity and estrangement. Self-declared middle-range theorists, such as Hall (1982) and, more recently, Giddens (1995), have proposed just such bridging frameworks (Lehman and Tinker, 1987).

Postmodern labour process researchers begrudgingly dismiss Burawoy's attempt to bring state, cultural and other hegemonic forms into 'the point of production'. This is unfortunate given the silences in their own work concerning such matters (Burawoy, 1985; Knights and Willmott, 1990). The paucity of their social analysis is evident when the political options for 'people working in modern organizations' are spelt out (Willmott, 1994: 121). Zen meditation! Free improvisation jazz playing! Admittedly, the reader is forewarned about the questionable relevance of this analysis for 'the mundane realities of people working in modern organizations' (1994: 121). This gesture is of little consolation for most working people however. Rather, it signals a state of crisis for postmodernist labour process theory. The project is running out of steam (and relevance). Even postmodernists obliquely acknowledge this in commenting on existential subjectivity:

The best we get is what could be seen as a fairly cognitive account of de-subjection: ... examples are jazz musicians' experience of losing themselves in their improvisations or Buddhist-inspired references to 'deconditioning' that effect a loss of self, as we (i.e., Western humanists) know it. (Knights, 2000–1: 77; Willmott, 1994: 119–22)

Existential subjectivity reduces to a politics of cerebral experience; attaining a state of mind where it is possible to 'let go' of the sovereign control of self, releasing non-intentional, unconscious quality of feelings, habits, and actions that reproduce the taken-for-granted “habitus” or life-world' (Knights, 2000–1: 76). Following Foucault, this brand of existential subjectivity presupposes a 'pre-discursive and uncapturable spontaneity, whether under the title of madness, resistance, or the body and its pleasures and desires' (Dews, 1986: 37). Modern civility represses this pre-discursive spontaneity – civility that postmodernists look to suspend, either by meditation and music (existential subjectivity) or by cognitive reflection (gendered subjectivity). In either case, postmodern labour process theorists posit the existence of a repressed (and unexplained) human essence that is imprisoned by the cage of modern civility.

These are the self-same postmodernists who previously condemned earlier work for essentialist precepts (Knights, 2000–1: 71; Knights and Willmott, 1990; O'Doherty and Willmott, 2000–1: 116). The resurrection of this pure and repressed inner being not only signifies an unexamined essentialism in postmodernist research, it also betokens a flight back to Cartesian identity thinking. The elevation of a secure identity over an insecure or false identity is not a transcendence of identity thinking (a 'fusion of opposites' or a 'unity in difference'), but a reaffirmation of it. In Adorno's terms, the 'pure singularity of a “secure other” is itself an abstraction (a new identity) that owes its existence to an “insecure self” for its inspiration; it is, the waste product of identity thinking' (Adorno, 1973: 146; Dews, 1986: 38).
The postmodernist reduction to a naturalistic and spontaneous (unexplained) self stems from a reliance on Foucault. Some postmodernists admit this weakness when they refer to Foucault’s work as ‘fundamentally capricious, individualistic and ultimately nihilistic’ (Willmott, 1994: 115), thereby yielding to warnings voiced several years earlier (Dews, 1979, 1986; Petras, 1991). As this article shows, however, postmodernists have not fully absorbed the limitations of Foucault for their notion of identity. Foucault is alive and well in supplying a naturalistic conception that champions non-identity over identity – failing to acknowledge that identity and non-identity are mutually constitutive of each other. Inciting non-identity to mutiny against identity is like inviting the hand to overthrow the head. What is needed is an ‘interpenetration of opposites’ that retains the grain of truth of each opposite, and yet transcends both, forming a new identity.

Unlike Foucault’s labour process supporters, Adorno does not retreat to incomprehensible primordial forces. Rather, the ‘pain of individuation’ both constitutes and splits the subject from his/her ‘real’ and spontaneous self. The aim is to ‘use the force of the subject to break through the deception of constitutive (sovereign) identity’ (Dews, 1986: 36). As Dews observes: ‘Living within the rebuke that the thing is not identical with the concept is the concept’s longing to become identical with the thing – this is how non-identity contains identity’ (1986: 38). This rubric of negative dialectics is overlooked by postmodernists. Immanent criticism, the immanent method and non-identity thinking are tools used to ‘break the freeze of conceptual systems’ (Held, 1980: 213–14). Concepts always apprehend phenomena partially – with remainder. By working from the inner history of phenomena, immanent criticism ‘operates within the “force field” between concept and object, idea and material world. ... [It] ... thereby strives to surpass ... the object’s self-image, and brings the object into flux ... a heightened perception of the thing itself’ (Adorno cited in Held, 1980: 213). Transcendence is obtained through socially disciplined engagements at historically specific ‘points of production’.

Postmodernism’s difficulty in forming a socially efficacious political project is compounded by epistemic precepts that – in the last instance – are logocentric and sovereign. This is evident in debates that degenerate into a perpetual dance of undecidability (Bernstein, 1987). Postmodernists are swift to jump onto a bandwagon that condemns global capitalism as the villain, however they quickly realize that they may be caught out in the open without an epistemic warrant. Invariably, they cover their embarrassment by beating a hasty retreat into the bushes of ‘nuances’ and ‘rich and messy details’ (Willmott, 1997: 263). Terry Eagleton offers a tailor-made cover for their discomfort:

Why bother to debate ... when you can argue that all social analysis is blinded and indeterminate, that the ‘real’ is undecidable, that all action beyond a timorous reformism will proliferate perilously beyond one's control, that there are no subjects sufficiently coherent to undertake such actions in the first place, that there is no 'total' system to be changed anyway, or that there is such totality but it is always terroristic, that any apparently oppositional stance has always already been
included within what it resists, and the way the world is is no particular way at all, if indeed we can know enough about it in the first place to even assert that? (Eagleton, 1990: 92)

Anthropology in Marx and Braverman

Grounding existential identity in dialectics and praxis sets it apart from gendered identity, however each approach overspecializes the analysis of labour processes. This becomes clear in their treatment of the anthropological analysis of Braverman and Marx. Labour process postmodernists dismiss this work as being based on an unarticulated, essentialist notion of needs that underpins an 'expressive theory of human nature' (Knights, 1990: 301). Contrary to this reading, there is no essentialist declaration of human needs in Braverman. His first chapter (the most overtly anthropological) merely makes an empirical assertion that, of all the species, human history exhibits a secular tendency towards social and self-transformation. (The corollary is that capitalism threatens to usurp this development with its own priorities.) This does not commit Braverman to essentialism, where needs must have a single Archimedean point of origin. Rather, his reliance on the anthropological and historical writings of Engels and Marx indicates an appreciation of human nature as a historical and social product.

The strength of Braverman’s analysis is that it is ‘imbued with a deep and abiding humanism … an anthropology of humanism’, around which we should be unapologetic in structuring research (Nichols, 1980: 28). Nichols explicitly rejects the dualisms noted by postmodernists: ‘In Marx the historical, structural and humanist come together: to make exclusive claims for one or the other is not to follow the method of Marx’ (1980: 18, 34–5). This approach leads to a respect and empathy for working people, not to a berating of them for assuming allegedly false identities.

Gender subjectivism’s faulty conclusion is that Marx falls into a dualistic analysis (labour versus an alien capital) that can be remedied only by endogenizing gendered resistance and oppression. Existential subjectivism makes the same faulty conclusion, and then compounds the error by trying to rescue the mature Marx with tools borrowed from the young Marx – praxis and dialectics – thereby arming post-Marxism with identity fetishism and ‘the commodification of identity’ (Willmott, 1990: 338, 352). Once again, new conceptual innovations by postmodernists short-change Marx, Braverman and other Marxist scholarship. Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment (1979) posits that the search for control is more fundamental than the postmodern preoccupation with individualistic feelings of angst and insecurity. Indeed, ‘insecurity’ is only one of many behaviors associated with the quest for control. Centre-stage in their anthropological analysis is the evolution of religion, language, culture, history and social institutions as instruments of control over all conditions that constitute and reconstitute life itself. This begins with
nature and then broadens to the populous (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: xviii, 3-42). Certain patterns reappear across time and cultures. For example, many traditions (including religious practices such as prayer) are premised on a belief in reciprocity as a natural regularity; that ‘everything that happens must atone for having happened’ (1979: 12). Reciprocity, requital, atonement and retribution – every action has its reaction – underlie the rituals of control practiced by many social systems. This extends to mimical practices. By assuming the semblance of a threatening part of nature (the spirit of sickness, weather, pestilence, death, and so on) it becomes possible to dupe, compromise, humor or placate (hence control) these spirits. Sacrifice, repeated identification, incantation, prayer, repeating pictorial and hieroglyphic patterns are recurring motifs that are mimical forms, designed to appease and control. Thus, the magician ‘imitates demons; in order to frighten them or appease them, he behaves frighteningly or makes gestures of appeasement ... his task is impersonation’ (1979: 9). ‘Like science, magic pursues aims, but seeks to achieve them by mimesis – not by progressively distancing itself from the object’ (1979: 11).

In contrast to the psychological reductionism of postmodernists, Adorno and Horkheimer’s case studies range over historical, political, cultural and institutional circumstances. From the Odyssey and the Iliad to Julienne and Hollywood’s culture industry, they exemplify a form of analysis in which psychological, institutional, cultural and historical factors cohere in the manner suggested previously (Nichols, 1980: 28). ‘Control’, understood in these terms, obtains a social and institutional presence. Psychological angst is merely one piece of a larger landscape.

The dialectical anthropology of Adorno and Horkheimer extends the anthropology of Marx, and casts light on the work of Braverman, Burawoy and labour process postmodernists. First, it provides a unifying understanding of what are seemingly disparate instances for postmodernism. Acting-out, machismoism and other forms of identity estrangement are instances of control by mimicry. As belief systems, they stand alongside religious and magical objectifications of gods, demons, spirits and ‘the little people’. They help make the unknowable knowable and the uncontrollable controllable. As systems of cognition, they are both false or illusory, but essential, and are stubbornly resistant to pleas of ‘just say no!’ (to machismoism, or whatever):

‘Religious’ suffering is at the same time an ‘expression’ of real suffering and a ‘protest’ against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of the soulless conditions. It is the ‘opium’ of the people. (Marx, 1992: 279-401)

Core theory in Braverman and Marx

Specters of Marx and Braverman lurk in the twilight of postmodernist labour process research. The most recent attempt to discern their form involves a search for a ‘core’ of labour process theory (Spencer, 2000: 235-9; Thompson,
1990). Spencer, for instance, suggests priority be given to a ‘value-theoretic approach’ in delineating the core, in his review of Braverman, 25 years on. Thompson proposes a theory of there being four parts to the core of labour process theory. Value theory is central to both proposals, yet there seems to be little awareness of the Pandora’s box this opens up. Marx never uses the term ‘value theory’ anywhere in Vol. 1 of Capital. He did not subscribe to the bifurcation of ‘theory’ and ‘reality’, where the aim of a disembodied theory is to be properly aligned with, or to accurately depict, an objective reality. This correspondence-theory-of-knowledge formulation fails to acknowledge that theory is also part and product of that reality (Cleaver, 1979; Smith, 1990; Tinker et al., 1982). For Marx, ideas are integral to, and operative in, an extant social system, and the ‘truth’ of ideas lies in the quality of the social life to which they give effect (Smith, 1990).

Contrary to the proposals of core theorists and postmodern subjectivists, what is required is an approach to the labour theory of value (sic) that assists in developing a politics of production – one that is quite different from that contemplated either by ‘core’ theorists or postmodern subjectivists. Elson, for instance, has proposed a dialectical formulation of a ‘value theory of labour’. Here, it is ‘labour’ (that residual ‘other’ of ‘labour power’) that is the undigested remainder, which can be harnessed to animate political movement, activating a force field between the dialectical forms of use value and social value (Elson, 1979: 144; Smith, 1990).

We don’t have to look far for Braverman’s specter. In Ch. 1 of Labor and Monopoly Capital, he begins with an anthropological argument about what it is (historically) to be uniquely human; our capacity to renovate ourselves – institutionally, culturally and individually – and the limits that capitalism imposes on the development of that potentiality (Braverman, 1998: 31–8). In the same chapter, he notes that, while the capitalist attempts to buy only (surplus-value producing) labour power, this is inseparable from the fullness of humanity (labour). Thus, the capitalist always bites off more than he can chew. Hence:

But if the capitalist builds upon this distinctive quality and potential of human labor power, it is always this quality, by its very indeterminacy, which places before him his greatest challenge and problems. The coin of labor has its obverse side: in purchasing labor power that can do much, he is at the same time purchasing an undefined quality and quantity. What he buys is infinite in potential, but in its realization it is limited by the subjective state of the workers, by their previous history. (1998: 39)

If we must have a ‘core’ for labour process research, then the above indicates that it consists of a number of components: first, an anthropological, humanist and historical awareness that recognizes patterns that persist across different cultures, distinguishing between what is – and is not – specific to capitalism at various hegemonic junctures; second, any core of Marx’s and Braverman’s work needs to accommodate what endures in their investigations and interventions – the dialectical method; third, for political efficacy in the
present, historical analysis is subordinate to this dialectical engagement with social reality (Lenin, 1976; Ryan, 1982; Tinker and Neimark, 1987). This is not to say that history does not matter, only that the political intelligence that endures – that can be transported from one historical site to the next – is dialectical. In that sense alone, it is primary. This is vividly demonstrated in the structuring of the first chapter in Vol. 1 of Capital, where, although historical and dialectical components are present, the primary guiding logic is epistemic. It is a dialectical rationale that guides the rendering of historical facts. In these passages, the emergence of money (the universal equivalent) does not follow an ‘actual’ historical path or correspond with the chronology of a ‘real’ society; rather, it reflects a sequence of logical (dialectical) movements (Carling, 1986; Cleaver, 1979; Smith, 1990, 1993).

This revised notion of a core provides a benchmark for assessing other labour process contenders. First, its application reveals a general failure to properly historicize deskilling, relative to Braverman’s task of debunking the ideology of economic revival and industrial renewal through education, upgrading and reskilling. Second, social processes have been overpsychologized and the potential of anthropological dialectics underestimated. For instance, postmodernist labour process theories fail to locate their own works in the historical conditions to which they pertain. Thus, existential subjectivity eternalizes praxis and dialectics as political and cultural practices, and underestimates how their very efficacy is predicated on specific historical conditions (Willmott, 1997). Political options are assumed to be always available to their individual subjects – a logocentric voluntarism that pays no heed to the social conditionality of praxis and cultural analysis. Praxis thrives only in periods of ‘class defeat…’. The impulse to praxis corresponds to adverse historical circumstances … [and that the converse] – the appeal to blind historical forces … is a tendency associated with the most optimistic periods’ (Aronowitz, 1981: xix).

E.P. Thompson underscores the same point in The Making of the English Working Class, where he shows that, in periods of acute political repression and economic deprivation, religion provided an escape into the solace of a pure ‘inner self’ (Thompson, 1957). He further notes how this reservoir of repressed energy nurtured an abundance of spiritual institutions that, in time, fermented into new political institutions. Such a view contrasts with that of labour process postmodernists who locate politics at the level of social atoms that function in a public vacuum.

**Implications**

British labour process postmodernists, who have recently held their 20th annual conference, are among the most vociferous critics of Braverman and Marx. The 25th anniversary edition of Braverman’s Labor and Monopoly Capital presented an invaluable opportunity to review the veritable industry of postmodernist research, which Braverman’s book helped invigorate. This article
contends that such a review would have revealed that postmodernist labour process research is entering the twilight of its paradigmatic decay. Symptomatic is the increasingly frivolous (if not condescending) and politically timorous advice offered to working people, together with a return to the crudest form of ideological analysis, whereby actor rationality is judged (by postmodernist theorists) to be ‘false’ and misguided. The missing subject is no longer missing: he/she has been found – but found to be deficient – because of a warped machismo and his/her failure to embrace their existential angst. (Hopefully, this regression back to vulgar theories of ideology will not require us to retroact a torturous path like the one that began with homo economicus.)

For specters like Adorno, the remedy lies with engendering a politically efficacious missing subject. Such a personage will not be found in the self-indulgent embrace of angst or an escape into trombone-playing meditation. Rather, the first step is to validate ‘false’ identities as provisional yet necessary steps towards synthesizing a politically energized other. This entails a fusion of the old and the new, not a repression of the former in favour of the latter.

A critique of Braverman cannot proceed without distinguishing between what is transhistorically enduring and what is historically specific to particular sites of analysis and contestation. This methodological spectrum ranges from the dialectical method, dialectical anthropology and praxis to specific historicity. These different levels are interpenetrated, however they provide a rough guide to assessing what is general and what is local in Braverman and Marx. The failure to meet the challenge of labour process postmodernism – exemplified by Foster’s new introduction – is due, in part, to a failure to distinguish between these different levels of analysis in Braverman and Marx. For instance, at the level of specific historicity, Braverman’s deskilling analysis cannot be ripped out of its context of countering US upgrading and educational ideology. At a more general level, ‘the missing subject’ and the lack of praxis in Braverman are also matters of historical conditionality. A greater political impact is assumed possible in ‘good times’, whereas ‘inexorable dialectical laws’ hold greater sway in ‘bad times’. At a more general level still, Marx, Braverman and Adorno point to a dialectically- and politically-armed alternative to overly-psychologized postmodernist creations who are mired in a morass of undecidability.

We are now better able to assess the contents of Braverman’s work. His first chapter parallels that in Vol. I of Marx’s Capital, in the reactions of bewilderment and neglect they have evoked among readers. Yet here he establishes the anthropological (and more implicit dialectical) antinomies that foreshadow the remainder of the book. The missing subject is, as he has readily acknowledged, a vital aspect of class consciousness, requiring the attention of further studies. However, its omission from Labor and Monopoly Capital is no mere oversight. It reflects a level of analysis and a political era when opportunities for praxis were in recession. His reliance on capital logic laws of accumulation deserves to be credited with proper contextualization, in this respect. As an intervention, the brilliance of Labor and Monopoly Capital lies in its timing and breadth of
appeal. It debunks academic dogmas of management, popular nostrums about skill upgrading via education, and the tacit promises to restore a ‘golden past’. That this is so undervalued by some (but not all) British writers, who are infatuated with philosophy and exhibit such little empathy for poor people, is itself worthy of sociological inquiry. Braverman’s work speaks to a present day that differs markedly from the times in which he wrote. And it will speak again, with renewed vigor, when (something like) his times return.

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Notes

1 Spencer’s (2000) review of Braverman’s contribution differs from this article in several important respects. This article acknowledges the continuing relevance of the US context for Braverman (further underscoring the lost opportunity of Foster’s (1998) introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of Braverman’s text). Few of Braverman’s surviving compatriots from his New York home turf at Monthly Review Press would concur with Spencer’s remark that ‘Braverman … is almost universally rejected for understanding the labour process’ (2000: 223). Contra Spencer (2000), this article shows why Braverman’s work remains vital and relevant for many in the USA and UK.

2 Carter correctly notes the absence of a systematic discussion of the relation between (objective) issues of class and (subjective) matters concerning various functions within the labour process (i.e. coordination, control and supervision). These are vexed and elusive issues (as Carter’s able review and tentative conclusions demonstrate), which may account for Braverman’s decision to sideline the matter. Insofar as Carter seeks an investigation into the relationship between ‘labour process, class formation and social transformation’ and uses ‘a [fluid] conception of class structure … [that] should allow for contradictory class positions’ (Carter, 1995: 63), then this accords with the reading of Braverman and Marx offered in this article. As E.P. Thompson notes, class is a systemic relationship, and thus it is fallacious to attempt a one-to-one assignment of individuals to classes (Thompson, 1957: 10–11). Because of multiple class memberships, we may become victims of our own repression (as instanced by security guards and gas-guzzling wage labour). Carter’s other criticism – that Braverman makes no explicit reference to the labour process within the state – is also substantially correct, although this does not mean that Braverman’s analysis is of no relevance for state employees.

3 The phrase ‘workshop of the world’, frequently invoked in these policy speeches, was first coined during British industrial decline. It shows that the ‘upgrading ideology’ knows no boundaries in time or space. Harold Wilson’s 1964 ‘white hot technological revolution’ and Edward Heath’s ‘Mr Efficiency’s’
were variations on the same ideological tune, and underscore the importance of writings, such as Braverman's, in debunking the myth.

Some critics seem to be unaware of the etymological changes in the meaning of the term 'skill', by clinging to a lineage of meaning that comes from the artisan 'mystery' of precapitalist guild forms. Braverman, in contrast, recognizes the social mutability of linguistic forms in contending that, under capitalism, 'skill' refers to waged work that is productive of surplus value (Braverman, 1998: 294–309; Coward and Ellis, 1977; Mandel, 1977).

A complex set of issues remains entangled in Spencer's value-theoretic analysis. First, Spencer is surely erroneous in suggesting that other authors are oblivious to the compound of 'value-theoretic' (structural) variables he posits. Moreover, it is unclear how far his nominalist 'value-theoretic' offering takes us beyond earlier contributions. What remains unresolved is how his value theory is to be operationalized in a clear and unambiguous manner. Even if a clear operationalization were possible, empiricism suffers from inherent and irreducible ambiguities. Empirical work always entails the simultaneous testing of not one, but two theories: the substantivist (i.e. Marxist) theory, and a theory of measurement or observation theory (Firestone and Chadwick, 1975; Quine, 1980a, b). It is never possible to determine conclusively which theory the empirical results confirm or refute. These epistemic issues place limits on what might be obtained from any empirical pursuit of a core theory. Second, Spencer's proposals are hierarchical and unidirectional relative to dialectical alternatives proposed by other writers (for example, Arthur, 1986; Elson, 1979; Smith, 1990, 1993).

Thompson's core theory consists of four parts: first, it recognizes the primary role of labour and the capital-labour relation as a privileged focus for analysis; second, that there is a logic of accumulation which forces capital to constantly revolutionize the production process; third, that there is a control imperative (as market processes alone cannot regulate market processes); and fourth, that the social relation between capital and labour is an antagonistic one (Thompson, 1990: 99–101). Thompson's analysis exhibits a number of shortcomings that render his core inadequate as a basis for progressive research. First, the authority for the choice of parts is a social conclusion, not a logical or epistemic one. While Thompson's four traits are putatively important, the criteria for their selection remains implicit, resting on an asserted consensus among protagonists. Consensus alone is not a tenable standard of truth for epistemology; it opens the door to every whim of popular ideology (i.e. that the earth is flat, that God exists). Second, Thompson's core underrates the historical specificity of Braverman's and Marx's political projects. This is most evident in regard to the importance to Braverman in challenging the ideology of upgrading.

References


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