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Debating Labour Process Theory : The Issue of Subjectivity and the Relevance of Poststructuralism

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ABSTRACT   This paper locates labour process theory in broader sociological debates concerned with the action-structure dualism before examining three broad programmes for research that have emerged in response to the question of subjectivity and agency. Whereas the 'orthodox' school tends to re-assert the structuralist and economistic features of Marx, the 'anti-realist' or deconstructionist position invites the abandonment of analysis that has traditionally been orientated by the polarities of 'structure' and 'agency'. We identify and develop a third, 'hybrid position', one that is informed by poststructuralist insights but does not neglect or reject established traditions of 'modern' sociology and labour process research. Critical examinations of two recent studies of 'subjectivity and the labour process' – Mike Sosteric's (1996) case study of a night club and Douglas Ezzy's (1997) paper on 'good work' – are undertaken to show how poststructuralist insights may offer an instructive way of understanding how subjectivity is co-implicated in the accomplishment and reproduction of capitalist employment relations.

KEYWORDS   capitalism, labour process, poststructuralism, praxis, resistance, subjectivity.

The flurry of interest that accompanied the publication of Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital* has been followed by accusations of the exhaustion (Storey 1985), and irrelevance (Lash and Urry 1994) of labour process analysis, whilst repeated doubts have been expressed about its theoretical coherence and purchase (Littler and Salaman 1982; Tanner *et al*. 1992). The neglect of agency, subjectivity and resistance has been central to this emergent critique of orthodox labour process analysis (see also Burawoy 1979; Knights 1990, 1995; Knights and Willmott 1989; Newton 1998; O'Doherty 1993; Thompson 1990; Willmott 1990, 1994, 1995). In this paper, we focus directly upon efforts to address the problem of '*the missing subject*' (Thompson 1990, emphasis added; see also Thompson and Ackroyd 1995; Thompson and Findlay 1996). This line of critique, we will argue, provides space for a revitalisation of labour process analysis.[1]

We position our interest in labour process theory in relation to two distinctive responses to discussions of 'the missing subject'. First, a 'realist' response that   457

commends a return to the structuralist orthodoxy of Braverman and the labour theory of value; and second, an 'anti-realist' position, which marks a dramatic departure from the established concerns of labour process theory. Outside of these comparatively well-defined positions, that either embrace the orthodoxy or reject it, a wide range of responses identify problems with orthodox labour process theory but disagree about how best to address and overcome them. In this third disparate group, there are those who, when push comes to shove, tend to retreat to the familiar, secure ground of structuralist orthodoxy, while others, including ourselves, lean more towards synthesis and dialogue by exploring and applying insights garnered from other traditions, including feminist research and poststructuralism. To elucidate and illustrate the value of poststructuralist thinking for addressing the problem of 'the missing subject', we reinterpret two recently published articles (Sosteric 1996; Ezzy 1997). Both titled 'Subjectivity and the Labour Process', these articles focus directly upon the presence and significance of subjectivity within labour processes. First, though, we sketch the background to a debate that resonates with questions of determinism, voluntarism, agency and structure that are widely debated within sociological theory.

Debating labour process theory

A distinctive contribution of labour process theory resides in its capacity to show how 'the rationality of technique in the modern industrial enterprise is not neutral in respect of class domination' (Giddens 1982:38). In the main, this critique has been mobilised through a 'structuralist' reading of capitalism and organisation that challenges bourgeois analyses of the workplace where workers are represented as 'free agents' by virtue of their seemingly sovereign control over the sale of their labour. Such analyses accept at face value individual responses to things like job satisfaction surveys, and thereby legitimise the use of such survey instruments in the management of organisation and the measurement of its success.

Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital* targets the individualism and voluntarism of bourgeois, plant sociology that forgets how each person remains the creature of social relations 'however much he may subjectively raise himself above them' (Marx 1976[1867]:92). To this end, Braverman's analysis derides the findings of job satisfaction surveys that purport to reflect the reality of work when, arguably, they simply mirror how worker attitudes are constituted within relations of production that condition both the questions asked and the responses elicited. In its commitment to treat individuals as simply 'the personification of economic cate- gories, the bearers of particular class relations and interests' (Marx 1976[1867]:92), however, Bravermanian analysis marginalises, and indeed aspires to exclude, consideration of the role of consciousness and action in the reproduction and transformation of the interdependent, though asymmetrical, relations of capital and

labour. For the critics of this orthodoxy, the marginalisation of worker subjectivity is problematical because, not infrequently, 'employees' feelings of identification with … the enterprise' are supportive and stabilising of a *modus vivendi* between managers and workers (Littler and Salaman 1982:260). Ignoring or denying the presence and significance of subjectivity impedes the analysis of how relations of capital and labour are practically accomplished and challenged at the point of production. Acknowledging the issue and question of subjectivity opens up for inspection the 'complex-media' of capital–labour relations, that difficult space where work organisation gets produced and reproduced in the everyday accomplishments of agency and social interaction.

It might have been expected that labour process analysts would take up the challenge of addressing the question of how theory might be reconstructed to incorporate an understanding of subjectivity in the mediation of capital–labour relations. Instead, a schizophrenic position has emerged (Willmott 1995). All but the most iron-clad structuralists acknowledge the indeterminacy of human agency, but are then reluctant to reconstruct their position in a way that accommodates it. This hesitation, we suggest, arises from the perception that moves in this direction inescapably involve the restoration of a high degree of voluntarism or subjectivism, and thus a return to the errors of bourgeois, 'plant sociology' where the study of work is abstracted from analyses of its embeddedness in history, culture and politico-economic relations. The polarisation and associated impasse in labour process analysis, between defenders of a fundamentally 'structuralist' stance and others who find this position unhelpfully restrictive, was clearly signalled in the late 1980s in a heated exchange in this journal between Storey (1985, 1989) and Friedman (1987).

Storey's (1985) quarrel with orthodox labour process theory is that it rests upon the (functionalist) premise that capital constructs systems of control in order to secure the structurally necessary extraction of surplus value from labour. Against this, Storey points to the existence of a multiplicity of levels, circuits and forms of control that, he argues, are not exclusively formed by an essentialist logic of capitalism. 'Capitalist interests', Storey declares, are not given *a priori*, nor do they rest upon a single precarious mode of control. Rather, 'control devices oscillate, are activated, deactivated, merge and are constituted anew', formed out of the 'struggle between various groups – both within and between workers and managers' (Storey 1985:207–8). However, despite this sophistication and apparent advance, Storey offers no insight into how mundane 'struggles' are practically organised, pursued and accomplished in organisation. Apart from a vague conception of agents as 'negotiators' who, in the case of managers, exercise their agency through the manifestation of 'style' (Storey 1985:200), there is no consideration of how his 'systems' and 'agents' interact in the labour process.

In response, Friedman (1987) accuses Storey of neglecting the constraints imposed by the specific nature of the capitalist mode of production. An emphasis on

indeterminacy and contingency, Friedman argues, marginalises to the point of invisibility the significance of the labour process as a vehicle for the economic appropriation of surplus value and the private accumulation of wealth. At the same time, Friedman (1987:293) usefully stresses the importance of avoiding the 'iron logic implied by production functions in neo-classical economic models', so that the presence, potency and effect of other 'influences' are recognised. Nevertheless, he offers no way of analysing how the process of influence and/or resistance operate.

Our own position, to be developed below, resonates with Storey's concern to recognise how processes of capital accumulation are more complex and contradictory than orthodox theory is inclined to allow. With Friedman, we are critical of Storey's free-floating contingency analysis in which 'struggle between various groups' is not only indeterminate but also seemingly unstructured by any particular mode of production through which these struggles are enacted. For us, an attentiveness to the processes of constitution, translation and mediation between capitalist market pressures and managerial strategies is important and central to any critically informed analysis of the labour process. At a fundamental level, the problem with the respective positions advanced by Storey and Friedman is that their (unexplicated) ontological and epistemological commitments leave little space for analysing how relations of production are accomplished in practice. If we are to explore these influences, inspiration and direction must be sought elsewhere. The highly acclaimed contributions of Michael Burawoy, whose theoretical work engages with questions of ontology and epistemology, offer one such avenue.

Subjectivity and the dualistic categories of labour process theory

In *Manufacturing Consent* (1979) Michael Burawoy presents a persuasive demonstration of the importance of subjectivity for understanding the dynamics of capitalist work organisation. Based upon ethnographic study and participant observation of shopfloor work, he shows how existential and group dynamics provide the conditions whereby consent and co-operation are intertwined and 'manufactured' at the point of production through what he calls 'the political and ideological realms of production'. In *The Politics of Production* (1985), orthodoxy is valuably problematised by Burawoy's stated efforts to shift 'from a question of domination to one of reproducing social relations' (1985:14); and, relatedly, by arguing that 'Braverman's restricted attention to the "objective" elements of work does not allow us to understand the nature of control [which] involves what Braverman would refer to as "subjective" aspects of work and which I will refer to as political and ideological processes' (Burawoy 1985:35). By 1985 Burawoy resolves what might have appeared ambiguous in *Manufacturing Consent* (1979) as he now contends that political and ideological as well as economic dimensions of produc-

tion are all 'objective inasmuch as they are independent of the particular people who come to work, of the particular agents of production' (Burawoy 1985:39, emphasis removed). So, Burawoy (1979) opens up the problem of the 'missing subject', only to close it down again by declining to explore how struggles between capital and labour are articulated *within* and *through* the subjectivity of those engaged in them.

When reviewing the debate about subjectivity that had escalated during the 1980s, Thompson (1989) makes the observation that those who struggle with the question of subjectivity are engaged in an 'important project – that of inserting and integrating an understanding of "the missing subject" into the labour process' (Thompson 1989:237, emphasis omitted). The task of integration, Thompson argues, is not only important but 'different' (ibid.) because it can shed light upon key questions that orthodox theory is unable to illuminate – such as why 'workers get attached to routines that are seemingly devoid of self-expression' and how 'gender identities shape and constrain individual opportunities at work' (Thompson 1989: 250). Despite this promising intervention, Thompson's subsequent contributions to labour process analysis ignore or disregard the 'importance' he had previously attributed to subjectivity. In the 'evolution' of his work there is a retreat to a more orthodox position from where it is declared, for example, that the concern to theorise the subjectivity of labour 'denies the objectivity of capitalist relations, property interests and any systemic tendencies within something called capitalism' (Smith and Thompson 1992:14). Such declarations are symptomatic of a more general unwillingness or incapacity to think outside or beyond structure–agency dualism, and an associated antipathy towards analysis that questions the independence of structure *vis-à-vis* agency.

Later, when considering two recent studies that purport to address 'subjectivity and the labour process', we will argue and illustrate how an increased attentiveness to subjectivity does not necessarily entail the wholesale abandonment of the traditions of labour process theory. There we will show how, by opening up the question of subjectivity, the conceptual inheritance of 'system', 'structure', and 'objectivity', can be de-reified in a way that enables us to better understand the enigmatic 'space' where capitalism both finds its source *and* gets reproduced and maintained. Post-structuralism, we will argue, can assist us to re-think this space in ways that do not necessarily fall back upon the either/or of structure/agency. First, though, we identify two very different responses to 'the subjectivity question' in labour process analysis, a bifurcation that looks set to divide research into what we identify as 'orthodox' and 'anti-realist' positions.

The orthodox tendency

The first response we characterise as 'orthodox'. It is distinguished by efforts to retain the position set out in the preface to the first edition of Marx's *Capital* and

subsequently reaffirmed by Braverman in *Labour and Monopoly Capital*. The role of subjectivity in the mediation of capital–labour relations is consequently marginalised, viewing its preoccupation as a reactionary return to the limitations of bourgeois analysis (Nichols 1992). Condemning recent efforts to incorporate subjectivity within labour process analysis, it is complained that 'radical labour process critiques have effectively been ceded to researchers concerned more with the labour process as a site for the production of relations of subjectivity' (Martinez-Lucio and Stewart 1997:52). Attending to subjectivity is said to imply a belief that work is an individual process or that subjectivity is not socially or collectively produced (Carter 1995; Martinez-Lucio and Stewart 1997). A concern with subjectivity is also understood to imply the neglect of labour as an economic commodity that results in 'the sublimation of questions of structure to themes of subjectivity' (Martinez-Lucio and Stewart 1997:55). In a similar vein, Rowlinson and Hassard (1994:73) have claimed that 'labour process theory has moved away from questions of profit and efficiency and towards issues of power and subjectivity'. An either/or logic is invoked so that the question of subjectivity is considered to be equivalent to 'the abandonment of politics of work' (Martinez-Lucio and Stewart 1997:52), a neglect or denial of work as 'labour', the 'demise of collectivism (1997:49), an ignorance of valorization (1997:50), and the endorsement of managerialism' (1997:77; see also Spencer 2000).

From this position, a recognition of how 'the individualizing tendencies of capitalist relations of production', such as individually negotiated contracts, flexitime, and performance-related pay, can 'accentuate existential insecurity to the point where privatized efforts to gain a secure identity take precedence over collective efforts to transform the historical conditions that promote such self-defeating tendencies' (quoting Willmott 1990:371) is interpreted not as a caution but, perversely enough, as an abandonment of approaches anchored in the metanarrative of collectivism (Martinez-Lucio and Stewart 1997:57). Here Martinez-Lucio and Stewart conflate a metanarrative of collectivism – which rightly understands work to be a collective process undertaken by 'the collective labourer' (Willmott 1997) – with analysis that understands how, within the contradictions of the labour process, 'privatised efforts' may emerge that are self-defeating in so far as they *impede, undermine* or *displace* collective self-transformation as a strategy of emancipatory change. In a similar vein, Spencer (2000) assumes and maintains a dualism between public and private, and between determinism and voluntarism. Notably, he asserts that those who are attentive to self-identity study how 'individual workers discipline themselves through *private* activity'; and that employees '*voluntarily* produce' extant relations of power and domination (Spencer 2000:236, emphases added). As we shall show in our reinterpretation of Sosteric and Ezzy, this ascription of sovereignty (and privacy) to agents is radically problematised, not naturalised, in poststructuralist analysis. Moreover, the connections between the processes of self-identity

(re)formation and the (re)production of the institutions of capitalism are not incidental, nor are the latter mere 'add-ons' that assume 'an entirely separate existence from the core analysis of workplace subjectivity' (Spencer 2000:237). To the contrary, the attentiveness to self-identity is stimulated by the problem of the missing subject within orthodox (Marxist) analysis of the reproduction of the core institutions of capitalism (Knights and Willmott 1989).

It is equally ill informed and potentially mischievous to contend that (Foucauldian) analysis of self-identity' offers a specific ideology supportive of the extant social order' (Spencer 2000 : 240); or to claim that an interest in subjectivity is inspired by a managerialist concern to understand how control strategies (Rowlinson and Hassard 1994), such as Taylorism, have to be adapted to accommodate or better exploit workers' subjectivity; or, for that matter, to account for why a revolutionary working-class consciousness has not emerged (Tanner *et al.* 1992). Let us be clear here. We do not deny the tendency to commodify labour, nor that capitalism ferments antagonistic relations in production that can motivate the mobilisation of collective resistance. No less relevant, however, for analysing the development and transformation of labour processes, is the question of how these relations come into being in tandem with multiple lines of tension and division. As our reading of Sosteric and Ezzy seeks to embody, there is nothing inherently inconsistent about questioning the adequacy of orthodox theory while leaving open the question of whether a revolutionary consciousness will eventually develop, or whether control strategies will be engineered that indefinitely postpone this possibility.

The anti-realist tendency

An anti-realist position is ascribed here to those whose allegiance to labour process theory has become weakened to the extent that little connection remains either to its tenets or to the mainstream literature. The most prominent amongst these figures is David Knights, although the work of Parker (for example, 1999) and Grey (for example, 1994), that seek to reposition labour process analysis in the realms of ethics and aesthetics respectively, also lean in an anti-realist direction.

Knights (1992) draws upon post-existential and anti-phenomenological ideas and concepts, turning his attention to the writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Students of the labour process are now asked to consider their 'episteme of representation' (1995:4, 1997:1), the violence of 'logocentric and phallocratic reason' (1995:7), the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness', and the benefits of archaeological and genealogical analysis. Poststructuralist and posthumanist sources come to displace Knights' earlier debt to Marx, Freud, Fromm and Marcuse (see, for example, Knights and Roberts 1982, 1983; Knights and Collinson 1985).[2] A pivotal re-positioning occurred in a jointly authored chapter (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994), where the authors commend a shift away from the totalising generalities of

determinism and structuralism in order to appreciate the complexities of the particular – a move that has some affinities with Storey's (1985) critique (see earlier). The shared failing of the assumptions informing orthodox and neo-orthodox re-workings of labour process theory, it is argued, concerns the tendency to cast 'capitalism' as an ontological and oppressive entity so as to allow authors to identify a simple and well-defined target for critique against which resistance should act. Foucauldian analytics, in contrast, understand power and resistance to operate through dispersed, more multiple and disaggregated networks. Quoting Wittgenstein, it is contended that the tradition of labour process analysis has been rather dis-missive of the particular: 'the price to be paid for "our craving for generality" is a contemptuous attitude towards the particular case' (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994:174).

The danger here, as we see it, is that the more one abandons some form of 'generality' by embracing the 'methodology' of Foucault, or the deconstructive textual gymnastics of Derrida, the more one falls into the quicksands where 'nothing' appears to govern, structure or provide meaning in the social world. The complications of working with Derrida and adopting aspects of Foucault's work need to be developed and made more clear. Reading *Spectres of Marx* (Derrida 1984), which Knights references, encourages one to 'see' social relations as 'ghost-like', or 'spectral'. Terms such as 'capitalism' or 'labour' rapidly lose any correspondence with the material practices in the so called 'real-world-out-there'. They become, instead, signifiers – the product of language games or temporary discursive stabilisations secured by regimes of power/knowledge. By shifting the focus of critique away from the workplace and what might be thought of as the *extra-discursive*[3] realm of labour and its process, Knights becomes preoccupied with the texts and existential inadequacies of those writing about the labour process. The primary target of critique moves from the lack of subjectivity in the study of industrial relations to the subjectivity of authorship, the chief objection to labour process analysis being that it exemplifies a mode of masculinist, 'positive knowledge', that does not sufficiently reflect upon the existential processes and denials involved in its re-presentations of the empirical world. Ethnographic studies that seek to reconcile structure and agency, or subjectivity and objectivity, such as Collinson (1992), are then interpreted primarily as personal projects that are engaged as vehicles for the elevation and confirmation of heroic and masculine identities.[4]

In making a 'linguistic turn', Knights circumvents what could be termed the 'practical' and 'material' *instantiations* of power/knowledge. For us, it still makes sense to talk, or better *appreciate*, that capitalism is something that exists in part outside of language and text, even if it is only through language that this existence is communicated. In which case, terms like 'agents of capital' and 'labour' signal something more than simply an exhaustive masculine desire to render the world order-able and know-able. In the use of such labels and divisions, like 'capital' and

'labour', we obtain some analytical purchase – however precarious and prob-
lematical - on how social relations become ossified, regimented and divided in the
practical work of producing and reproducing capitalism.[5] This, we suggest, is
precisely the kind of analytical practice that Foucault (1980) exercised to disclose
how power/knowledge regimes are maintained in the institutions of psychiatry,
prisons and hospitals. Such analysis is, in our view, to be welcomed in so far as it
sheds light upon previously neglected or disregarded dimensions of the governance
and management of power relations. It is by exploring these dimensions that we can
appreciate how order and organisation are sustained and realised, or, in other words,
cultivate an intellectual sensitivity to the presence and significance of what Derrida
might call the 'aporias' or 'hinges' through which systems are simultaneously
problematised and reproduced.

From our perspective, the chief merit of Knights's position is that it incorporates
an appreciation of the under-determined capacity of agents (from the Greek *agon* -
reflecting the tensions and strife involved in subjectivity) in a way that allows for, and
invites the prising open of, space between subjectivity and the crushing weight of
objectification (Knights 1995). The difficulty is that Knights abandons the language
of structure and agency as a means of exploring this space. This move courts the
danger of slipping into a self-referential solipsism with no agreed upon procedures
or anchors to engage with what is taken to be the world-out-there. It is worth
recalling that concerns about the dualistic separation of 'structure' and 'agency'
motivated the early theoretical work of Knights (Knights and Willmott 1983, 1985,
1989). In this earlier work, however, the understanding of 'individual and society',
'agency and structure', and 'subject and object' as ontological categories, was
questioned without denying their heuristic value. As heuristics, such categories can
be 'strategically engaged' as a means of making sense of the complex social processes
that construct and deconstruct institutions, power and resistance. As *problematics,*
these heuristics can be deployed to stimulate and facilitate dialogue and dispute,
acting as contingent but agreed upon starting points in the development of
understanding and critique.

The contribution of post-structuralism to labour process theory

Instead of the wholesale abandonment of subject/object or structure/agency
that an anti-realist approach tends to endorse, we favour a more critical, and we
would argue *post-structural*, as contrasted with 'anti-structural', sensitivity. This
involves a self-critical and multi-disciplinary exploration of complex political,
economic, psychological and existential processes that inter-articulate and combine
in the practices of the labour process. Poststructuralism, as we demonstrate in our
re-reading of Sosteric and Ezzy, allows us to appreciate the seductive opportunities

provided by capital *and* the heterogeneous struggles that remain part and parcel of its existence. Subjects are understood to be constituted and formed by social relations that cannot be reduced or equated with the singular abstract logic of economic categories. Multiple forces clash and interact to generate inconsistency and paradox in the practice and the theory of labour processes – both for those employed in the labour process and those engaged in its research. In such ways, poststructural analysis takes us some way beyond the simple dualisms of orthodoxy, even when these are conceived to be dialectually related, but without falling back upon those failings of interpretative and existential schools of social theory that tend to isolate agents and their routines as the constitutive fulcrum of society and its institutions (see Layder 1994:57–74).

In contrast to the theoretical position developed by Knights (1995, 1997), our interest in poststructuralism is not motivated so much by the opportunity it might offer to *resolve* or *reconcile* dualistic thinking,[6] but rather for the perspectives it opens up on the material practices in the labour process. One of the dangers with the more recent theoretical work of Knights is that it courts the danger more of an infinite regressive and reflexive solopsism. The discourse of labour process theory has been, in the main, far too mechanistic and dualistic, but we would argue that some of the conceptual tradition – such as the signifiers 'capital' and 'labour'; 'organisation' and 'individual'; and the epistemological convenience, that there are material practices 'out there' in the world and theoretical representations of the word in here, can be exercised and critically re-fashioned from 'within'. Indeed, if there is a lesson from Derrida, it is that there is no *aufhebung* step outside of the limitations of our inherited metaphysical legacy. In other words, there is 'always-already' a field of tension between conceptual oppositions – both a condition of possibility and impossibility – that inhibits and inhabits the negotiations involved in sociological and empirical research.

We acknowledge that whether we mobilise the language of subject/object, macro/micro or the economic language of capital and labour, an element of arbitrary organisation and division is taking place. Knights's attribution of the language of the labour process to the 'episteme of representation' is, however, questionable since, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault identifies the discourse of 'exchange' and the analysis of 'wealth' as the 'ground and object of "economy" in the Classical age', wherein we find the 'episteme of representation' (Foucault 1994:116ff). The discourse of *labour*, by contrast, emerges in the *reflexive* modern episteme that, according to Foucault, 'abandons the space of representation' (1994:250) in favour of an unsteady space between 'the knowing subject and the object of knowledge' (1994:252). In this space, categories like 'labour' emerge out of a new complex ontological depth where 'words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things' (1994:304).

Knights's interpretation is perhaps the result of his efforts to draw simultaneously

on Foucault and Derrida. He tends to conflate the positions of authors whose respective positions are adjacent in some respects, yet in others are antagonistic and incompatible, as is evident in their occasional, vitriolic and hostile exchanges. Knights is to be commended, nonetheless, for his research on the boundaries of disciplinary study that has provided an important stimulus to greater reflexivity in labour process theory and analysis. For us, Knights's radical interventions usefully prompt reflection upon how the established categories and terms of labour process theory may be revisited in self-critical and reflexive ways to provide a 'window of opportunity', or a point of passage, through which the limits of modern knowledge and understanding may be tested. Inevitably this entails, as Foucault writes, 'following Nietzsche, an experiment with our own' all too human limits. Indeed, there are many ethnographic studies that attempt just this – whether in anthropology (see Taussig 1993), or more directly focused on the workplace (Kondo 1990) – adopting, yet adapting and transforming, the language and categories of their respective disciplines. In this way they expose the precarious, insecure foundations of subjects, their identities and the fragile coherence of social scientific disciplines. In the maturation of the modern episteme, Foucault writes (1994:240), representation 'is in the process of losing its power to define the mode of being common to things and to knowledge'. In the hybrid position we are developing here, and that we put into effect later in our re-readings of Sosteric and Ezzy, we try to work in those interactions between subject and object, self and other, 'the word' and 'the world', the author and text.

Post-structural ideas can offer ways of thinking and conducting empirical research in the labour process that avoids both free floating contingency (as in Storey 1985) and constrictive determinism (as in Friedman 1987). It stimulates us to think beyond those dualistic orthodoxies that view capitalism either as an oppressive *objective* entity that conditions and determines the behaviour and thought of individual and collective subjects, or as a constructed product of rational and autonomous, voluntary agency. In our reading of Foucault and in other popular expositions of post-structural theory (such as Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Game 1991), poststructuralism also avoids understanding capitalism in simply textual terms, and thereby averts the danger of reviving idealism. We do not have to see everything as discourse in order to appreciate the ontological complexity and the epistemological elusiveness of capital. Neither should post-structuralist analysis be equated with the idea that capitalism persists simply because of existential preoccupations, namely masculine pretensions to authority, security and control.

Finally, it is worth noting that poststructuralism does not reify under-determination and unpredictability as some essential human freedom. In their summary of post-structural thinking on subjectivity, Coward and Ellis (1977:77) note how the subject is 'constituted of, and in, contradiction, but sociality necessitates that there should be a subject in order that any predication, and

therefore communication, can take place'. Poststructuralism offers a way of understanding the constructed, historical and contingent nature of social relations through which the sense and meaning of freedom is experienced. In the remaining sections of this paper, we seek to substantiate our claims that (i) a focus upon subjectivity is, contra to 'realist' objections, congruent with labour process analysis; and (ii) that the insights of poststructuralism have relevance for such analysis.

Sosteric's 'Subjectivity and the Labour Process'

Sosteric's (1996) 'Subjectivity and the Labour Process' is one of the few examples of case study research that focuses directly upon the presence and significance of subjectivity at the point of production or service delivery. Yet, in doing so, it pays no attention to the contradictions associated with employees' sense of 'being' autonomous and unified.

Sosteric's study sets out to explore a series of changes that took place over a four-year period in management–staff relations in a nightclub of a large hotel complex. Sosteric charts how a successful trend-setting nightclub, attracting a 'communitas' of 'professional football players and other individuals of status' (Sosteric 1996:300), and where club employees enjoyed working in a high trust setting, became a fractious and disputatious organisation marked by authoritarian management, stress and increased employee turnover. The fraternity and community enjoyed by employees and customers alike was disrupted by the imposition of a 'quality first' initiative designed to dismantle what, in the eyes of corporate management, had become an elite customer service hierarchy. *Inter alia* management introduced new forms of staff training and eliminated intermediary supervisors. Senior management began to exercise closer surveillance and performance monitoring and instituted a policy of job rotation in an effort to re-design attitudes and reassert managerial control (Sosteric 1996:307).

To make sense of these changes, Sosteric adopts from Friedman (1977) the categories of 'direct control' and 'responsible autonomy'. Prior to the introduction of the 'quality first' initiative, management–staff relations are conceptualised in terms of a strategy of responsible autonomy[7]. During this phase, employees are deemed to be 'free', 'authentic', and 'genuine', enjoying the opportunity for 'self-expression'. Later, they are seen to be repressed, becoming subordinate under conditions of 'direct control' as senior management insists upon the strict adherence to codes of conduct that regulate the terms of interaction with customers.

It would appear that a limited and cursory reading of Foucault leads Sosteric to overlook the complexity of surveillance and discipline associated with management control. A more sensitive analysis, guided by the insights of poststructuralism, would have brought to his study an appreciation of the historical and contingent nature of social relations through which the sense and meaning of 'freedom' is constituted and

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experienced. Sosteric seems to ignore the extent to which employees were *already disciplined* by their own sense of self-identity during the period preceding the imposition of rigid criteria of service. Later, when examining the phase when management intervened to impose and enforce this rigid criteria of service, Sosteric contends that there was 'none of what Knights (1990:311–12) has termed the individualisation of the worker' (Sosteric 1996:316). Perhaps because he is guided and blinkered by Friedman's (1977) direct control/responsible autonomy framework, Sosteric is unable to move beyond the understanding that individualisation indicates a process whereby individuals regain an autonomy and control of themselves as sovereign individuals.

Humanist assumptions lead Sosteric to regard the identity of club workers as initially authentic, free and independent, when, arguably, they had already been forged into subjects by mechanisms of surveillance and discipline that had enabled them to engage in particular kinds of communication and so forth. When considering the introduction of a less 'indulgent', 'quality first' regime, Sosteric is unable to grasp how this move to a 'McDonaldized' (Ritzer 1993) service culture, involving a fragmented division of labour, requires the performance of each member of staff to be monitored and disciplined *on an individual basis*. Instead of examining how the existential and social dynamics of work organisation render employees abstract, vulnerable and individualised, Sosteric's analysis is confined to the rehearsal of a familiar labour process meta-narrative, organised around the direct control/ responsible autonomy couplet of deskilling and degradation.

In a way that complements and extends the orthodox critique of the abstraction of the consciousness of employees from its social and historical context, post-structuralism de-centres the autonomy ascribed to individuals and authors (authorities), in an effort to open up that 'anterior space', as Foucault (1994) calls it, where capitalism – the focus for labour process study – gets maintained and reproduced. Neither an oppressive object nor the product of free-floating social agents – or to paraphrase Foucault (1994:xi–xiv), not in the consciousness of the knowing subject, nor in the institutions and structures of which they seem a part – capitalism is produced and reproduced through the disciplinary media that are occluded in studies like that of Sosteric, where social relations are framed within the reified categories of orthodox structuralist theorising. Notably, in Sosteric's study, there is no appreciation of how employees may become entranced by an idea of themselves as independent subjects – a process that paradoxically enables *and* constrains their range of practices. At the nightclub, employees' capacity to resist measures perceived to impugn their sense of identity was blunted as a consequence. Mesmerised by a sense of autonomy that was formed prior to their employment at the club, and that was subsequently reinforced within a regime of 'indulgency', employees were ill prepared to resist changes that challenged this sense of independence.

The kind of analysis exemplified by Sosteric is incapable of developing a more

productive and radical critique with a capacity to appreciate and address inequitable and exploitative relations that are always–already immanent in our practices – immanent in that they have provided for by the sense of who we are and what we value. It falls back instead on reified categories that posit exceptional moments of instability that periodically puncture and disrupt the harmony of employment relations. If only management had reverted to 'responsible autonomy', Sosteric implies, then business-as-usual could be restored.

In contrast, post-structuralist analysis understands employees to be inescapably embedded within fractious and disputatious power relations – both as subjects and objects. Rather than power simply being exercised by management during the phase of 'direct control', post-structural analysis understands power relations to be co-implicated with existential concerns and identity, together with the economics of managing the employment relation. This analysis adumbrates capitalist work organisation in ways that discover it as always–already subject to the threat of conflict, resistance and disorder. Instability arising from the dynamic and contradictory organisation of capitalist enterprise is exacerbated as well as dimmed down by the precarious status of subjects that remain in-part-media-and-outcome of productive, profitable labour (see earlier quote from Coward and Ellis 1977). Instabilities are smoothed-over by opportunities to secure and maintain an established but malleable sense of identity, as occurred during the first phase of Sosteric's study. Subsequently, resistance, conflict and disorder were precipitated by moves that restricted such opportunities and, indeed, punished their manifestation. Here, we would note that if we want to understand what orthodox theory calls 'the revolutionary consciousness', we must open up and engage with these complexities of agency-formation-in-action.

Ezzy's 'Subjectivity and the Labour Process'

Turning now to Ezzy's (1997) 'Subjectivity and the Labour Process' we find a more theoretical effort to redress what, in common with Thompson and Ackroyd (1995), is viewed as the debilitating consequences of post-structuralist analysis and, specifically, the detrimental influence of Foucauldian thinking. Foucault's conception of subjectivity is rejected as inadequate because, Ezzy claims, it 'leads to an almost behaviourist conception of the person, as responding to disciplinary power' (1997:428). For Ezzy, then, post-structuralist thinking, in its Foucauldian variants at least, eliminates individuals as active agents or subjects in the workplace. In our reading of Sosteric, we have already gone some way in challenging this misconception. Here we extend our critique.

Ezzy finds Foucauldian poststructuralism devoid of any conception of agency and subjectivity as it reduces agents to the status of inert objects 'overwhelmed by social forces' (1997:441). An alternative reading of Foucault, focusing upon the

continuities in his major texts, from *The Order of Things* (1994[1966]) to his later three volume study of *The History of Sexuality* (1976–84), suggests that he was struggling to develop a post-dualistic understanding of subjectivity and identity (see also Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982). Foucault's concern, we contend, was to explain how human beings become tied to an arbitrary sense of self and identity, and thus are subjects in the double sense of being *subjects* who make choices, for example and who are simultaneously *subject*(*ed*) to something or someone (Willmott 1994). The question of how we are historically made as subjects, and the ways in which this process of subjection inhibits a critical relationship to power, knowledge and society, runs throughout Foucault's writings, a passion simultaneously pursued by Foucault in his political and personal activities. Ezzy makes no attempt to discuss these texts or to address this reading of them. Instead, he relies, in the main, on secondary sources and well-worn citations of Foucault's work.

What, then, of Ezzy's 'good work'? According to Ezzy, it is the *context* within which work is performed that determines whether employment is dignified as 'good work', or is experienced as degrading and alienating. Drawing on Simone Weil, he claims that the routine labour of sewing children's clothing might be considered oppressive and alienating to the convict working in a prison workshop, but it provides a source of dignity, self-worth and meaning to the expectant mother. This understanding is consistent with the managerial humanism, so pungently berated by Braverman, that identifies 'job redesign' or a change of 'managerial style' as an effective remedy for job dissatisfaction. The appeal of such accounts, and their associated prescriptions, depends critically upon the acceptance of the analytical disjuncture made between 'work' and its 'other' – namely the shared social and cultural context that provides the resources and opportunities within which work can be made dignified by strategies of 'self-narrative' pursued by individuals. In dualistic fashion, Ezzy effects a division in order to provide an opportunity to present 'narrative identity' as the means to reconcile its breach. His resolution to this divide remains crude, however, linking self-understanding far too mechanistically to the 'pre-existing cultural discourses, the structuring effect of a person's social location, and the individual's creative use of these resources' (Ezzy 1997:440). What is overlooked here is any recognition of a dialectical totality that Marxist analysis can provide (Ollman 1971), the 'negativity' and 'contingency' of the 'dislocated whole' developed in post-structural theory (see Laclau 1990:26–7 and 41–84), or the space of *différance* disclosed in more deconstructive study (Derrida 1968). In their different ways, these approaches are able to uncover the subtle inter-articulation and relational tensions that lie *between* the 'macro' and the 'micro', the 'part' and the 'whole', or 'work' and the 'cultural and social context' that comes before category definition and entity stabilisation in the volatility of agency-in-action . If we avoid the challenge of thinking in – and *of* this fathomless space, a space moreover of struggle and strife – we risk accepting the restrictive ontology of dualistic categories

that occludes and closes down the unformed swarm of social activity diffuse across the labour process. The seemingly benign language of 'good work' attempts to reconcile and seal a traditional sociological dualistic division whose originary dislocation is the product of a more profound theoretical intolerance towards thinking the processual, the complex and the paradoxical (see Chia 1996).

It transpires that for Ezzy, 'good work' is something that is possible through the subjective will-to-power of individuals and collectives who, it is implied, are capable of constructing, by means of negotiation and dialogue, a re-envisioned Habermasian style project of socio-political utopia. The liberal and idealistic implications latent in Ezzy's paper assume, yet at the same time require, a sovereign rational individual, or posse of sovereign managers and consultants, to bear the burden of reconstructing a narrative of 'good work'. Through the exercise of reflexive self-consciousness the individual acts as the sole obligatory point of passage, or bridge, between the experience of degradation and meaningful, dignified self-worth. Poststructuralism, and the work of Foucault in particular, problematises this ground to which Ezzy wants to return – namely, rational self-understanding and the construction of 'narrative identity'. And it is here that we find common cause with the critics of poststructuralism in so far as we too are disparaging of the humanist conceptions of self invoked by Sosteric as well as Ezzy, who fail to explore how these categories 'self' and 'value' are generated in historically specific modes of production and contingent networks of social relations.

That said, there is much in our critique of Sosteric and Ezzy that also chimes with the anti-realist critique of orthodoxy advanced by Knights (1995, 1997). In our analysis and re-readings of Sosteric and Ezzy, we recognise the often uncomfortable space of *différance* that stimulates its premature analytical closure and ossification – an effect, we conjecture, of a subjective will-to-power shared by researcher and researched alike. By re-opening their texts and reviewing their theoretical and empirical work we seek to invite a more tolerant (and collective) relationship with *différance*, extending its space and play in an effort to excavate the epistemologically difficult domains of power/knowledge, subjectivity and discipline. But, crucially, we have stopped short of abandoning the central concerns and familiar linguistic terrain of labour process analysis – whether that be 'direct control', 'responsible autonomy' or 'capitalism', preferring instead to deconstruct and reconstruct by working within, rather than seeking a complete break with, the traditions of modern sociology.

Conclusion

The issue of how capitalism is reproduced and contested through practical and 'messy' routines and interactions in the labour process will not go away; nor, is there likely to be any significant slackening of interest in a reflexive concern with how we, as academics, produce accounts of such processes. The pursuit of the latter

project can, however, degenerate into narcissism and/or the preoccupations of bourgeois analysis if unaccompanied by a determination to interrogate the historical and socio-economic conditions of its possibility. With this proviso, we have sought to show how attentiveness to subjectivity can complement and enrich our under-standing of organization and the dynamics of (capitalist) employment relationships, and thereby further open up space and scope for a radical emancipatory praxis of change, liberated from the confines of orthodox assumptions about its conditions and means of attainment. To this end, we have (i) connected the question of subjectivity to earlier phases of the labour process debate and, in particular, the action – structure exchange between Storey and Friedman; (ii) drawn attention to the schizophrenic attitude of contemporary analysts towards the problem of 'the missing subject'; (iii) disentangled and explored three stances within con-temporary debates on subjectivity: orthodox, anti-realist and post-structuralist; and (iv) provided a demonstration and defence of the potency of post-structuralist analysis through a reinterpretation of two interventions (Sosteric 1996; Ezzy 1997) that aspire to shed light upon subjectivity and the labour process.

NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this paper were read at the 1998 International Labour Process Conference, UMIST, Manchester, and the 1999 Critical Perspectives on Accounting Conference, Baruch College, New York.
2. The work of Derrida seeks to move beyond or rather shift to an oblique position *vis-à-vis* the latent aporetics that inhibit/inhabit Western metaphysics. However, as he illustrates, any attempt to do this, without reconstructing the grounds of metaphysics, poses extremely complex questions of authorship, text and writing.
3. It is worth noting that in his writings after 'The Order of Things', Foucault uses the term 'extra discursive' (Foucault 1972), and arguably returns to a form of empirical research and exercise he began in 'Madness and Civilisation', where an interest in power and material practices informs, yet sits in some tension with, discourse analysis. For some, this might reflect his turn from archaeology to genealogy.
4. In this limited respect, we share the concerns of orthodox labour process analysts (see previous section) who complain that the 'class dimension of the domination of capital over labour' (Spencer, 2000 : 238) becomes obscured in some Foucauldian analysis. Yet, at the same time, we maintain that adequate analysis of the reproduction and transformation of the capital–labour relation requires a radical reconstruction of labour process theory in which full account is taken of the processes of self-identity (re)formation.
5. Here we note our own paradoxical co-implication in the work of ordering and rationalising. As Derrida is at pains to demonstrate in his writings, however, there is no pure self-presence, or pristine extra-reflexive realm outside of language from which we can survey the field.
6. To be fair, it is not entirely clear from his recent work whether Knights is interested in 'reconciling' dualism. One the one hand he critiques ethnographic studies, like the one by Collinson, for its efforts to resolve 'structure/agency', but on the other he seems to find the work of Derrida promising, precisely because of the 'complete eradication' of dichotomous thinking.

7. Yet it is doubtful whether what took place in the nightclub prior to the 'quality first'
    initiative was in any sense the kind of deliberate strategic management that Friedman had
    initially intended to signal by the term 'responsible autonomy'.

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