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CALL FOR SPECIAL ISSUE

## NEW DIRECTIONS IN LABOUR PROCESS THEORY

edited by

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### 1. New directions in Labour Process Theory

In recent years Labour Process Theory (LPT) has witnessed a resurgence. A growing body of research adopts LPT as its main analytical approach in the study of employment and industrial relations, sociology of work, labour movements and collective action, labour and economic geography.

Current approaches inspired by LPT are multifaceted and diverse. LPT experienced peaks and lows in popularity and application in labour studies and inspired much analytical debate. Several of the LPT initial tenets that openly engaged with the development of a coherent approach centred on labour process dynamics (Braverman 1974; Burawoy 1985; Edwards 1979; Friedman 1977) have been put under scrutiny. Within the broad boundaries set by the approach, much has been debated, revised, modified or reinforced.

The deterministic understanding of change as outlined in the *deskilling thesis* has been challenged early on through the problematization of hegemony and the analysis of agency and strategies at the workplace as well as with the conceptualization of production politics and regimes. The *connectivity gap* - that is, the risk of focussing on shop-floor dynamics losing sight of broader contexts and structures - has been addressed by factoring in local labour markets - see the concept of *local labour control regimes* (Jonas 1996; Pattenden 2016; Baglioni, 2021) or the mobility power (Smith 2006) - or analysing labour regimes in light of broader political economy developments (Hauptmeier and Vidal 2014; see also Vidal 2013b and Thompson 2013; 2003) and restructuring dynamics captured through the lens of organizational and geographical frameworks (Taylor et al. 2015).

Even the anchorage of labour process analyses in a broad Marxist understanding of class struggle as major *loci* of societal change has been challenged and revised by positing the “relative autonomy” of workplace dynamics from the broader contexts of social relations of production and by post-materialist approaches (see the critical review provided by Thompson and Vincent 2010; Hauptmeier and Vidal 2014). On the other hand, sympathetic critiques venture to challenge even the central idea that the production site shall be the privileged arena of analysis by stressing the multiple processes through which firms valorize and extract value produced with the immaterial labour performed in broader circuits of consumption of goods and services (Böhm and Land 2012; Willmott 2010).

Amidst a lively and long-running debate, Labour Process Theory has proven to be an increasingly interesting perspective to look at the multiple recent transformations of labour, employment and industrial relations and managerial control. In fact, a preliminary review of the literature suffices to reveal that LPT-inspired analyses have fruitfully investigated in the last decade (and even more in the last few years) the new forms of control in the platform economy (Gandini, 2019; Veen et al, 2020), the

role of algorithmic discipline and technology in retail, services and manufacturing (Cini and Goldmann, 2021; Delfanti, 2021); the multiple forms of workers agency - from organizational misbehaviour (Contu 2008; Taylor and Bain 2016) to more conventional processes of solidarity formation and contentious action (Atzeni 2010; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020); the process and effects of production re-organization along global production networks (Flecker, Haidinger, and Schönauer 2013; Hammer and Plugor 2019; Naz and Bögenhold 2020) and the application of new forms of control and value extraction that put in motion the emotional performance of workers (Korczynski 2016; Ikeler 2015).

On the one hand, therefore, LPT demonstrates resilience and resurgence: it animates a lively internal debate and at the same time it remains a useful conceptual toolbox for the analysis of new forms of work organization and their consequences for labour. On the other hand, it maintains a radical approach to labour studies, offering a toolbox to analyse patterns of conflict and agency without losing sight of the role of structures and contexts of opportunities and constraints.

This special issue therefore takes stock of the LPT literature to critically evaluate its accomplishment and shortcomings, and to tease out the most promising prospects for future research within this framework. The *fil rouge* of the contributions will be the discussion of Labour Process Analyses today, its application, insights, future perspectives, and *lacunae* in addressing different issues within labour studies. The special issue will thus formalize the result of a collective engagement with the LPT literature and endeavour to a twofold purpose. On the one hand, it will take stock of the existing literature, summarize its most crucial recent developments and ‘put order’ among a growing and lively debate. This will provide a reference point for those researchers that are interested to approach the field of labour studies from a radical perspective. At the same time, the special issue will engage with the LPT and other consolidated approaches in order to spark a debate and a dialogue among scholars that are sympathetic to Labour Process Analyses and those that have rather overlooked or dismissed it too quickly. It will allow to showcase that LPT can be fruitfully applied to a variety of important labour issues. We are open to both empirical and theoretical contributions.

A list of themes of interest to be discussed include the following:

- **LPT and the platform economy.** LPT provides a useful toolbox to analyse new forms of algorithmic managerial control and the transformation of workplace dynamics in the platform economy. Between techno-optimistic accounts of liberating gig-work and depressing phantoms of panoptic control, labour process analyses tease out the contentious frontier of control and resistance in the gig economy. A lively debate and a rich series of field research signal avenues of future research but calls for systematization and critical reflection.
- **LPT, digitalisation and automation.** Early labour process analyses focussed on Fordist, vertically-integrated production processes. These same analyses were later of great use to grasp the transformations in the workplace and the stakes of the shift from Taylorism to lean production. Nowadays, digitalization, robotization and automation are still part and parcel of workplace transformation, concur to and are shaped by patterns of resistance and control. LPT remains a crucial tool in the labour sociology conceptual box to analyse these processes.
- **LPT and the logistics sector.** In highly fragmented production processes, circulation becomes a crucial site of value extraction and thus of workplace conflict. Logistics represent a crucial sector not only for its structural role but also for the speed of control devices transformation, the social composition of its workforce and the contentiousness of workers and their communities. LPT offers a privileged set of tools to grasp such open-ended, continuously

contended production process and the multiple dynamics of control and resistance that here arise.

- **LPT and the ‘new’ service sector.** In advanced capitalist economies new jobs are created in the tertiary sector and often in low-added-value services. The role of big retail chains is today relevant for their ability to shape consumption patterns, supply chains (therefore production), and of course labour control regimes. Recent insightful contributions have investigated the patterns of control and resistance in global-wide retail chains (Reich and Bearman 2018; Wood 2020). A reflection on the role of LPT in investigating the impact of retail on work and labour agency is a fruitful starting point to taking stock of what has been written and set the pace for future research.
- **LPT and Political Economy.** After the hegemonic decade of the Varieties of Capitalism approach, Comparative Political Economy is looking for new perspectives. Next to new institutionalist approaches and Welfare Studies, the Growth Models perspective endeavours to account for the role of political, societal, and economic drivers of national capitalisms. Yet, such efforts have still very little to tell on the workplace dynamics and the transformation of business models, managerial forms of control and workers’ contentious actions that are not channeled within traditional trade unions practices. How do Political Economy perspective and LPT have influenced each other? How can LPT inform Political Economy theoretical endeavour to account for macro, meso and micro transformation at the crossroads between political, economic and societal processes?
- **LPT and trade unions.** By focussing on shop-floor dynamics of control and resistance, LPT has often relied on a simplified understanding of trade unions’ institutional and political constraints and opportunities. Labour process analysis have rarely endeavored to link analytically broader factors that shape trade unions’ logic of actions and the workplace dynamics of contention over the frontiers of control. How can labour process theory inform our analyses of unions’ decay and renewal? How does LPT provide analytical purchase over the emergence of new forms of grassroots labour organization or the shifting strategies of traditional trade unions?
- **LPT and global production networks.** The reorganization of production processes along transnational and power-laden chains of production is a crucial feature of contemporary capitalism and a major shift from Fordist, vertically integrated production process that the early labour process theorists have developed their first analyses on. While GPNs and GVCs are labour sociologists’ object of inquiry for more than two decades, only recently researchers have tried to combine such approaches with LPT. What is then the relationship between LPT and fragmented production processes? How does LPT that inquired Fordist factories deals with the multiplication of differences along production chains? What are benefits and shortcomings of combining LPT and GPN?
- **LPT and social reproduction.** Labour control and resistance do not start nor end at the gates of the factory. A growing body of literature has provided new avenues to analyse how forms of control and resistance are continuously reproduced outside the shopfloor. Recent literature have mobilized feminist perspectives to analyse how everyday social reproduction dynamics are also part and parcel of the arena in which labour control is crafted and resisted. How can LPT account

for the dynamics of control and hierarchization of labour that occur outside the production processes? How can the study of social reproduction can inform the dynamics of workers' resistance to the extraction of value within and beyond the productive realms?

- **Labour Process Theory in Italy, Italy in Labour Process Theory.** On the one hand, Labour Process Theorist have, often implicitly, built upon the insights, theoretical underpinnings and research methodologies of the Italian *Operaisti*. On the other hand, labour process analyses have not featured prominently in the Italian landscape of labour studies that has rather focused, with valuable exceptions, on territorial and institutional factors of development, partially sidelining the role of labour conflict and managerial disciplining imperative in industrial transformation. Can a fruitful exchange be established between the main theoretical approaches within Italian labour sociology and Labour Process Theory?

## 2. Conditions and deadlines

Article proposals in Italian or English should be submitted via email to the Journal web page: <http://ojs.francoangeli.it/ojs/index.php/sl/about/submissions> no later than **15th March 2023**. Authors should follow the instructions to upload the complete articles. Articles should be no longer than **8,000 words**, and must adhere to the journal's style and editorial standards: [https://www.francoangeli.it/riviste/NR/Sl-norme\\_EN.pdf](https://www.francoangeli.it/riviste/NR/Sl-norme_EN.pdf).

Any article that does not comply with the word limit or the style and editorial standards indicated in this call for papers will not be accepted. Correctly formatted articles submitted via the journal's online platform shall be subject to a process of double-blind peer review.

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