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Collective narratives and politics in the contemporary study of work: the new management practices debate

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Abstract
In this article we explore the question of how as sociologists of work we might research those who constitute the substance of our labour process. We approach this question through an examination of the new management practices debate, principally in the labour movement where a distinctive and critical view of NMP developed in the late 1980s. Second, we argue that there is a link between this debate and the wider politics of labour process discussion both within and beyond the labour movement which has witnessed a shift away from an earlier engagement with worker interventions. In response we suggest the need to re-evaluate the nature of academic engagement with labour thus reanimating a closer engagement with labour-in-work and collective worker narratives.

Keywords
labour movement, labour process analysis, new management practices, public sociology

Introduction
Our central question is this: how, as researchers, can we explore the labour processes of those who constitute the substance of our labour process? How do we research labour? We attempt to illustrate this through an understanding of the trajectory of the so-called new management practices (NMP) debate, which took off in the late 1980s. By new
management practices we are referring to the panoply of workplace changes summed up under the broad notion of human resource management (HRM). For many, such developments represented a major turn in the way management was addressing personnel affairs and defined a new ‘pernicious agenda’ (Keenoy, 1990). While involving technological changes to production, inter alia teamwork, quality circles and continuous improvement programmes, their principal concern was with new ways to manage-subordinate labour in the context of trade union quiescence or exclusion. In brief, they were designed to change the focus of workplace relations from a union to an employer driven agenda. We want to exemplify this moment because it drew upon the resources of a range of engagés including worker-intellectual-activists that we might describe collectively, in Gramsci’s terms, as labour movement organic intellectuals. Interestingly, works-based worker responses, once prominent in this debate within and without the labour movement, have become less audible. Thus, to research labour, we suggest, assumes participation with labour as committed scholar activists (Bourdieu, 2003). Moreover, the history of the NMP debate shows how this can be done and the extent to which from the point of view of labour this might achieve some success, helping to enhance an emancipatory project.

Associated with this move away from what was sometimes perceived to be a radical-oppositional stance is the way the debate has focused on outcomes, occasionally in isolation of context. Furthermore, this is partly associated, ironically, with the increasing role within the academy of the very NMP more easily derided in other labour processes by academics. In response to these shifts we need to re-evaluate the nature of academic engagement with labour-in-work in the context of workplace subordination and dissonance often left out by the ‘official’ voices of labour, broadly speaking. We argue that a project of critical public engagement, which Burawoy (2005) would describe in terms of ‘public sociology’, allows support for those subordinated in work.

This article seeks to advance and explicitly articulate the voices and narratives of the excluded and to elaborate their critical views (not necessarily the same thing). This requires attention to alternative and independent narratives. Specifically, we are referring to literature and initiatives developed by worker activists, but this also includes training and seminar resources that have been independently developed at the local level, and alternative media-oriented materials and the working through of this in terms of shop floor practices and strategies. It is active and conscious worker voices and their place in the constitution of narratives of collective interventions and practices that concern us here. We seek to highlight patterns of collective expressions of what work does to people, their various struggles to make sense of this together with their practical struggles against it. This constitutes a vital element of what Ossewaarde (2007: 800) describes as the contemporary new sociology driven by the desire for an understanding of the needs of the excluded. Ossewaarde argues this oeuvre constitutes a ‘moral and emancipatory enterprise’ (2007: 800), requiring the utilization of research methods antithetical to positivist research agendas.

Hence, the article focuses on a particular moment of the discussion and experience of change at work. During the late 1980s and early 1990s a series of academic interventions set in motion a discussion of what were taken to be new forms of managerial control at work. Debates among some within the academy were paralleled within the labour movement, where trade unionists were witnessing an array of changes in managerial approaches
to workplace control. These reflected the dynamics of neo-liberal policies and market-oriented approaches to managing labour. What was going on in the workplace was therefore part of a broader debate among activists and academics. An important feature of this labour movement interest was the fact that local activists and trade union research departments, essentially the organic intellectuals of the labour movement, drove initiatives in critical understanding of the new phenomena. There was, for example, a significant link between new forms of management practices and the theme of deteriorating health as a consequence of new work regimes. Towards the end of the 1990s a greater focus on questions of performance and efficiency began to prevail in aspects of the debate. Many of these interventions began to look at the role of new forms of management control within the workplace in such new organizational spaces. In many ways, the NMP debate was reborn, as we will show, but de-contextualized from the myriad social antagonisms in which it is enmeshed.

In terms of structure, this article begins by presenting an outline of a discussion of NMP in the labour movement through reference to some brief cases, especially that of car manufacturing and postal services. In the first section, our argument is that worker intellectuals and scholar activists (organic intellectuals) constituted a debate, which was both a practical and an intellectual response to NMP. This was a radical and innovative agenda and our point is that while traditional intellectuals in the academy subsequently responded to NMP alongside officials within organized labour, a more conciliatory view of NMP took shape which undermined these autonomous debates. Following this, in the second section, the article offers an account of the implications of this latter view on labour process discussions within and beyond the labour movement. In this second section the various dynamics that have limited collective independent worker voices from key aspects of the academic discussion on NMP are addressed. Finally, in the third section, through a discussion of alternative perspectives, we suggest the need for closer engagement between worker-intellectual-activists and scholar-activists.

**Framing the new politics of production: origins and character of a labour movement response in the 1980s and 1990s**

The critical discussions in the late 1980s and 1990s on NMP brought together academics and labour movement researchers, but also many shop floor activists. A number of critical, labour-oriented researchers had already given attention to aspects of the character of a new management agenda, which claimed both a paradigmatic break and enhanced worker experience of the employment relationship (Beale, 1994; Delbridge et al., 1992; O’Connell Davidson, 1990; Scott, 1994). We are all familiar with these and many of them (inter alia ‘one-best-way’, ‘working-smarter-not-harder’) have become important elements in the new management assault on labour standards and union organization. It is axiomatic of much labour movement and radical academic critiques that these imperatives perform the dual roles of ideological under-labourer to, and the substantive form taken by, neo-liberalism in and at work. In an earlier reflection on this moment, which we termed a new politics of production (Stewart and Martínez Lucio, 1998), we argued that it was precisely in the interstices of labour, labour movement and management...
engagement that the possibilities for worker and trade union development in the context of neo-liberalism were made explicit. In the present period the current denouement of workplace engagement with the politics of NMP has highlighted the opening up of two spaces, one delineated by moments of compromise around business and service union agendas, and another, by the content and expanse of a new agenda of workplace struggle engendered with, and by the re-composition of, the organic intellectual. Moreover, the debate must consider the question of what it is that we research and the means by which we conduct our research. Making sense of restructuring and labour engagement can be better understood if we locate them in a broader discussion of the way NMP were historically understood within the labour movement. There is a very interesting story of the way in which the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU, later UNITE) came to the NMP debate (Martínez Lucio and Weston, 1992; Stewart et al., 2009).

At the end of the 1980s, a number of TGWU regions with responsibility for members in the auto sector began to develop a distinctive critique of the NMP. This critical agenda was developed first at plant level. A number of key union activists, many of them long-standing stewards who continued to work on the assembly lines, had noticed the synchrony of proposed technical and organizational change. Unlike previous attempts to address the balance of forces in the assembly plants, management was eschewing direct confrontation in favour of a more strategic approach encompassing a new discourse using a worker-centred vocabulary of involvement (Stewart et al., 2009). This was much more than the traditional nostrums of employee involvement; the new approach became the basis for a range of new management narratives. Significantly, workers increasingly were reporting health problems on the lines (Stewart et al., 2009; Rinehart et al., 1997). Together with the Transnational Information Exchange (TIE), stewards from GM-Vauxhall, Ford, Rover and Peugeot-Citroen organized four international conferences on NMP and their impact on the shop floor, but they also addressed the fundamental question of the character and trajectory of NMP on unions and worker organization. In parallel, TGWU stewards at Vauxhall-GM developed a radical agenda for confronting NMP with the support of the Labor Notes current in the USA. This interaction with a radical labour undercurrent was of inestimable value to the campaign to defend the union (Stewart et al., 2009).

Significantly, the conclusions reached by the TGWU at Vauxhall-GM were similar to those offered in Parker, Slaughter and Moody’s Labor Notes prognosis. These were that NMP constituted a new form of management control, which if not always reaching for anti-union rhetoric, understood the shop floor as the battlefield in pursuit of a new management hegemony. If workers, themselves, could be won over to a company agenda (lean production), the attitude of trade unions would be irrelevant. This is where a number of academics, such as Jones (1992) and Oliver et al. (1994) played a vital role in naturalizing lean production. This was notably because of their institutional role in providing it with intellectual credibility arguably because it would be imbued with the scientific authenticity deriving from the ‘academy’. However, a range of labour movement intellectuals continued to challenge such managerialist frames of analysis. Any assessment of the import of the latter response must take note of the vital work of critical mainstream scholars whose research focused upon challenging many of the nostrums of pro-NMP scholars (Berggren, 1993; Gottfried, 1992; Webb, 1996; Williams et al., 1992). This counter-oeuvre still represents the salient critique of NMP although by the late 1990s it was socially and politically enriched by the strategic prognoses of the Canadian Auto
Workers and their path breaking response; in effect a successful, if only briefly, practical counter attack on lean on the shop floor (Rinehart et al., 1997). In the UK, stewards became increasingly prominent in this debate (Stewart et al., 2009) as did their counterparts in continental Europe as a result of the TIE and related information networks (Martínez Lucio and Weston, 1995). The new politics of production were characterized by shop floor debate about the social and political character of NMP, regarded by management and labour alike as lean production.

By contrast, the TGWU’s events on lean inevitably tended towards more institutionalized concerns around the way that union interpretation of NMP might be company ‘friendly’. The thinking went something like this: if unions might understand what lean was about and organize adequate defences, they would be better placed to issue sound and ‘sensible’ advice to management about the best way to simultaneously protect the firm and workers’ rights and jobs. Thus, at the end of 1992, the TGWU organized the largest international conference to date on lean production. Speakers included proponents of NMP, including the International Motor Vehicle Program guru Dan Jones, Nissan’s Director of Personnel and other spokespersons from GM and Rover. To offer some balance to this debate David Robertson from the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) offered a fundamental critique of the whole lean agenda. Yet if the trade union line at the national level was that lean was revolutionary yet negotiable – ironically mirroring the line of the evangelists in the corporation and the traditional intellectuals in the academy – then it would become impossible to challenge its fundamentals.

However, many participants, especially those aligned to TIE, searched for an oppositional critique based on the view that lean production was essentially a deeper form of workplace control. Capital was driving labour across a number of aspects of workers’ lives reflected increasingly in the deterioration of aspects of the quality of working life. The emerging view was that workers’ health was potentially the Achilles heel of NMP. Specifically, organic intellectuals in the labour movement began to play a vital role in the formulation of this space of opposition through documentation, seminars and steward training.

In other cases where critical debates on NMP were driven by local activists allied to individuals or organizations, a similar process of steadily undermining or softening their critique by elements within the national leadership was witnessed. The Post Office’s union in the 1990s was heavily influenced by the critical debate in other unions such as the TGWU as the employer began to introduce total quality management (TQM) and teamworking as part of the transformation of workplace organization (Martínez Lucio, 1995; Martínez Lucio et al., 2000). Some workplace activists felt that NMP were a precursor to privatization and the fragmentation of the Post Office into different businesses. In fact quality management programmes were training all postal workers on understanding the market and its ‘needs’. Given this, a similar dynamic emerged within the union in terms of the activist training being developed to ‘demythify’ NMP and make it palatable and ‘manageable’ from a trade union perspective. In fact this training in the mid to late 1990s drew on the relevant department of the TGWU, which in the mid-1990s had already begun quality management training for all postal workers.

In the case of the Communication Workers’ Union, the left used these debates as part of its repertoire of critiques of business unionism to make significant shifts in the
union’s politics. For this reason the NMP debate can once again be seen as more than just a technical debate on the labour process with a variety of actors and interests having engaged in loose coalitions and networks (see Gall, 2001).

It is not suggested that national union leaderships were straightforwardly successful in capturing this debate and developing a politics of incorporation into the ethos of lean production (Stewart et al., 2009). Rather, it is argued that a stream of academic debate embraced the rationale of NMP, legitimizing its de-politicization and this chimed with the acceptance of NMP by trade union leaderships. The hegemonic moment in the isolation of critical voices became obvious not when there was no longer any space for social and political opposition, for this never disappeared. The main factor pushing towards ideological and political marginalization was the way alternative voices within the labour movement were marginalized in later discussions as being impractical. This was illustrated graphically when the leadership of one union (the TGWU) argued there was ‘no alternative’. Nevertheless, experience showed people continued to question the discourse of ‘no alternative’, not just discursively, but materially in a range of sectors besides automotives that included postal services, food manufacturing, the civil service, secondary and tertiary education and the NHS.

During the time frame discussed here, the production of union activist literature together with various seminars concerned with the causes, motives, nature and implications of management strategies within the workplace environment had a very high profile. The extent of discussion and literature on management initiatives in the automotive industry (Stewart et al., 2009), food manufacturing, the civil service and postal services (Gall, 2001) should not be underestimated for it constitutes a formidable set of formal texts and seminar materials which have rarely if ever been acknowledged. This activity and material led to a growing network of activists, academics and independent bodies and freelance researchers who framed discussions around issues such as team working and quality management. These individuals worked in many cases in an individual capacity or as part of networks in and around local levels of the union movement. In some cases they were involved in aspects such as the teaching of local union representatives exposed to these changes in the nature of workplace organization. They worked inside formal branches or local union education bodies. The research by the authors on various projects unearthed significant interventions, material and courses developed by trade unionists to explain and challenge the development of new management practices. These communities and networks of activists are not uncommon (Sciacchitano, 2000) in the forging of internal union debates and democratic pressures. In the Ellesmere Port example above, representatives took on the task of setting up seminars and sessions for themselves and other local union representatives in the area. They also developed an international network around GM in Europe which held a series of seminars and workshops. While supported by the TGWU, it was led from below and would not have developed without this local input. Similar initiatives could be seen in Rover (now BMW) Cowley where local activists became involved with particular independent organizations and experts to develop insights into the more pernicious aspects of organizational change within the workplace. In the Royal Mail this debate was driven by activists who linked the debate about Total Quality Management to the agenda for privatization, seeing the former very much as a precursor of the latter. These individuals set up networks and seminars within the union and parts of the academy.
This type of activity grew out of work also developed by trade union tutors. Such tutors in the TGWU and Trade Union Congress (TUC), for example, had developed leaflets, booklets and courses on what new management practices were and on how to engage and critique them. Much grew from engagement through health and safety courses, which had begun to focus on issues of stress and fatigue at work. While positions on the extent of their critique varied, such tutors were an important link between the rank and file and union organization. They formed part of a network of individuals including trade unionists, independent bodies and academics who were concerned with such developments. To this extent these union activists and tutors formed a body of organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971) who pioneered the debate on NMP. Unlike traditional intellectuals working under the illusion that they are autonomous and therefore outside the political or power process, organic labour intellectuals saw themselves as committed to a counter-hegemonic agenda regarding NMP and the relation between management and labour.

They argued in terms of autonomy of representation in the face of its increasing control by management, the need to raise issues of control and work intensification within the union and society and the need to extend the debate towards broader issues of worker health and integrity (Stewart, 2006). They formed part of a web of individuals and bodies that criss-crossed and overcame boundaries between debates and institutions. To this extent the early debate on these subjects was propelled by local activists and union educators (and to a lesser degree sympathetic academics). What is more, the broad political dimension of local activist networks was also a factor (Darlington, 2002). However, the limited extent of official support received within these networks meant that while influencing agendas, they were unable to sustain a consistent critique within the labour movement. This was especially the case with the shift towards more conciliatory positions vis-a-vis NMP by many trade union leaderships.

**The changing parameters of the discussion on NMP: the declining role of collective worker voices**

It is clear that the debate on NMP has generated a variety of participating voices, but these have not always been registered. Regarding the changing nature of the debate on NMP and new forms of work organization, we can reflect on factors that have contributed variously to the way this has happened. Such reflection also includes an understanding as to why the inherent contradictions in the application of NMP may not lead to further conflict or tensions. The increasing contradictions in terms of health and safety with new forms of work organization are becoming increasingly apparent within the workplace, but they may not become generalized in part due to political-organizational dynamics.

The trade union debate on work and employment has if anything mushroomed since then on a range of issues, albeit framed in a less politically oriented way – that is to say with less concern about the motives of employers and the ambivalence of trade union politics and leadership. This can be recognized in three respects. Firstly, focus has shifted from production and operational processes, including their development. Specifically, the agenda is less concerned with issues of power and decision making in the labour process and more on access to employment, which is understandable given issues of social exclusion. Secondly, the question of motives and imperatives in terms of the nature
of work and its re-design – where it comes from, who controls it, cui bono and when -
appears to be less central to the trade union agenda. This is a bold statement and it is
likely that these changes reflect the pressures on employment as it is widened around
newer labour market and social agendas. Thirdly, the ‘politics’ of the discussion in terms
of how involvement is crafted and re-crafted around managerial, individual and pseudo-
collective agendas and identities has been less pronounced (Stewart, 2006).

In this regard, an important first point to note is that the social basis of the critical
networks we describe and their discussion forums has been in some measure materially
undermined. This has left an array of documentary material, including histories and
cases on the question of NMP, disconnected from an ongoing discussion regarding the
nature of the labour process within the labour movement. Additionally, there may have
been changes in the nature of the networks and their political profile. The importance of
political or ideological networks in framing activist networks is an important observation
made by Darlington (2002). More significantly, since many of the earlier debates were
gendered, the effects of new working practices, such as the impact of new shift patterns
on female workers, remained under-theorized and under-represented within both official
and oppositional accounts (see Jenkins et al., 2003).5

The second point to note, paralleling these developments, is the increasing empha-
ses on the outcomes of the labour process, not the social form or the constitution of it.
It is true that there is now a more sensitive and engaged debate within trade unions and
the academy on questions related to the quality and dignity of work, and the issue of
rights at work which have effectively democratized the discussions and moved them
from the closed constraints of traditional bargaining. Yet rather than focus on forms of
worker control and independent worker engagement in the production process, the
literature has in the main centred increasingly on the regulation and containment of
new management developments. In the Anglo-Saxon context this may be due to the
fact that collective voice mechanisms qua trade unions and collective bargaining are
considered to be increasingly less salient. This steady shift away from the 1990s con-
cern with workplace control and worker-led industrial democracy has given way to
questions concerning the changing nature of the balance of forces and the challenge of
new workplace issues (Martínez Lucio, 2010). The question of organizational context
and decision making does appear to be current in debates on corporate governance
(Deakin et al., 2005), but these are often removed from the issues of micro level
worker controls and trade union-led agendas of involvement-cum-decision making. In
effect, it is not uncommon for us to be mesmerized more by questions of impact than
of direction or cause.

There is a further dimension to this issue of outcomes. The current interest in the
question of performance and productivity within the study of HRM and industrial rela-
tions has developed in various directions. Increasingly the outcomes and performance of
an organization are discussed in terms of the ‘ingredients’ that influence performance
(Applebaum et al., 2000; Huselid, 1995; Purcell et al., 2003; Work Foundation, 2003).
The question of employee ‘voice’ and/or trade unions is inserted as a variable in the
analysis of the effects they have on improving organizational performance (Applebaum
et al., 2000), yet the impact on the workforce appears to be less salient as a research
item than do union debates and politics on the topic. The research questions form around
outcomes that are increasingly conceptualized in terms of economic or operational indicators and while much labour process debate has been and remains critical of such departures, one sees how this quantitative approach begins to shape the discussion around management strategy and practice in relation to workplace organization through the high performance workplace systems (HPWS) debate. Unless it is in the critical literature (Danford et al., 2004; Lewchuk and Robertson, 1996), discussion of worker health and social outcomes is increasingly marginal, if it exists at all in the HPWS genre. The debate is framed in terms of finding mutual gains or common points of interest between management and labour such that the performance agenda can be wedded to a social agenda. Broader questions of participation and social ownership are rarely conceded so that participation tends to be reduced to questions of joint or team working (unlike the earlier work on social regimes of production, as in Berggren, 1993).

Thirdly, this changing research agenda is seen in discussions of ownership and investment. The use of case study analysis in academia and in current trade union research tends to frame the experience of work with less than consistent references to questions of who owns the site, how they operate as a corporation and internationally and what are the driving motives and frameworks of control over time. While in the study of multinational corporations there is growing sensitivity to these issues (Almond and Ferner, 2006), in terms of the study of the labour process within the workplace they are not always present. Among the reasons for this absence it may be argued that we cannot assume certain characteristics in terms of the management of the labour process by simply cross-referencing with the firm’s capitalist character and profile. While that is valid, one does need to understand the economic pressures and financial regimes of any context and note how the question of work organization may be linked to the logic of restructuring. The early debate on NMP was more explicitly framed in terms of privatization agendas, the emergence of new forms of inward investment and the changing character of the firm in terms of its structure and strategy. It may have been that this was a moment of early ‘globalization’ and ‘commercialization’ that configured many of the concerns with the way competitive relations may have been developed in the workplace. The early debate on public sector change, new forms of Japanese inward investment (Elger and Smith, 1994) and the restructuring programmes of multinational corporations began to be a focus of many of the discussions in the labour process debates. These concerns with the context of change have continued, yet the pressures of the contemporary academic labour process to produce case studies of change have in many instances contributed to the de-contextualization of organizations from the context of political economy and ownership.

This requires a different analytical register and moreover one that recognizes that previous understanding of NMP emerged from the nature of workplace debates including union and activist interventions. This is something that is clearly not present in current discussions where worker voices are individualized, even when critical. Yet, we should remember this development is as much related to how these voices are represented, which is to link them to how social critique is framed politically in terms of resources, power and control. This, for sure, points to another dimension related to the way the questions of knowledge and research are increasingly approached and to which we now turn.
Politics, research and engagement in a marketized context

The polyphony of voices within trade unions, research networks, universities and colleges (including TUC colleges) were and are, as we have argued, vital for sustaining a debate on not just what was happening to work but why. That the language and terminology varied is not the issue. A range of organic intellectuals created a debate that responded to intellectual and material needs. Yet there are dynamics, in terms of the way knowledge is created and presented, which influence the evolution of discussion on new management. The paradox is that the very phenomenon that was studied has impacted on the way research is conducted within trade unions and universities. The intensification of work and the increasing use of performance management techniques have impacted more widely. The pressures to produce and to gather particular kinds of knowledge have led to a more technicist approach in some cases. This is seen in terms of the changing research culture in universities and trade unions. It is not necessarily the case that this is a major cause of the changing nature of labour process debate, but we cannot discount the role of an increasingly ‘productivist’ culture of research framing a more fragmented research agenda around particular, isolated moments in the employment relationship.

Furthermore, the imperatives of funding and research monies can frame the way the research agenda is set even if there is more store placed on having ‘practitioners’ involved. The notion of practitioner is curious in relation to this discussion – it is clearly becoming a central feature of many academic funding bodies. It appears to connect research into the questions of ‘end-users’ and those who may be subjected to the research itself. However, the debate in the 1980s and 1990s had a very strong input from workplace activists and individuals who were not part of the professional union apparatus. While one can be accused of romanticizing these developments, the reality is that the role of workplace and branch-based representatives and networks – linked as we saw previously to autonomous bodies and networks in Europe such as TIE – meant that there was an active dialogue between individuals ‘in the field’. Such individuals were, moreover, concerned with transformation rather than principally, or straightforwardly, reform (or dare we say accommodation). It was, in other words, potentially uncontrollable and dynamic because it was not clearly institutional in hierarchical terms. In many respects, one can cross-reference this development with the way feminists have argued for over two decades now about the need to break down the hierarchical barriers between researchers and researched, as these reflected an exploitative relationship in their own right between the former and the latter (Oakley, 1981).

The initial debates on NMP and unions had an active input from local trade unionists and independent networks of researchers and workers, leading to a range of alternative materials and literature. However, notions of elite ‘participants’ and ‘advisors’, as part of the new funding criteria of such bodies as the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK, implicitly suggest that the participants in research are and should be senior practitioners or known experts in the field, thus reducing the relevance or impact of involving the previously referred to type of local activists or organic intellectuals. This may create a less reflexive and perhaps more ‘professional’/‘uncontentious’ approach to research in terms of the concerns of the ‘subjects’ or ‘participants’ of the research environment. This could be considered among other factors to be one of a series of developments helping
with the mainstreaming of the NMP debate. Yet this set of concerns about the direction of debates, reflected by the type of research methods utilized and the ‘subject’ of research itself, entails the need for an understanding of the way the politics and perspectives of workplace activists develop across time. It is also why at a particular moment in the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a network of critically engaged activists producing literature and other material. As we saw, these debates were not the outcome of academic intervention, since they were driven in the first instance by the labour movement which included shop floor discourses of opposition to NMP.

This article argues that to understand the nature of these debates we need to renew our engagement with voices and practices from the shop floor. In addition to the tradition that has been described so far is the response by the team of academics, trade unionists and community activists to the ICL-Stockline disaster (Beck et al., 2007). To extend this type of engagement and scope for critique we need to consider anew what Lee (1995) describes as ‘dangerous fieldwork’, although it is actually also a question of dangerous research. Briefly, let us consider what this might mean for labour committed researchers of the labour process. As an exemplary note of caution for the realistic critic, one can draw attention to a famous dilemma posed by, and cheerfully resolved in, Donald Roy’s account of a participant’s ethical dilemma during a labour dispute (cited in Lee, 1995: 55):

I made my decision. Sweating freely – it was a warm night – I ran back and forth with the strikers, stooping and swaying and swinging my arms in a balletic imitation of a man throwing rocks ... With my companions I made a rapid but dignified dash for my own automobile. The cops did not show up. (Roy, 1970: 242; see Lee, 1995)

Roy holds up as a virtue his decision not to do the unacceptable thing and break the law. Thus he ensures his virtue as a good researcher who stood above the fray while dissembling to his striking comrades who could not or failed to notice his pretence of partially playing the conflict game. He wants to be an observer when it comes to understanding labour organizing strategies and he wants to participate-observe in some union actions. This is the classic role of the ‘objective’ researcher who can maintain the fiction of value neutrality because of a consensus on the place of the researcher in the micro context of the research setting. Yet, when it comes to something the researcher regards as law breaking, good ethical researchers can somehow abstract themselves from the process. Even if the value neutral gaze were plausible, which we question, by deciding to avoid some actions and not others which are somehow compromising of the notion of ethical neutrality, this confected action only tells part of the story. While it cannot undo everything that was achieved by the researcher, it may even so compromise the participant observer since the reason for its utilization is its reputed scope for lending deeper insight into the thinking and actions of the striker, the labour activist: the subject. Yet, arguably, it undermines the researcher’s claim to deepen understanding, for, once this judgment of non-engagement is made, the participant observer may become the voyeuristic outsider unfamiliar with the politics and narratives of the local context.

This example raises critical issues about what it is as labour process researchers we are trying to achieve. Moreover, while sensitive to the undoubted physical dangers
evident in a range of research encounters, it is not these that draw our attention so much as the supposed danger to our ‘professional integrity’ of ‘over-commitment’. The danger emerges as much in challenging the politically constructed boundaries between academics (observers) and workers (the observed). Moving in and out of others’ labour process without recognizing what it is doing to one’s own role and labour process is problematic. The labour process of research into others’ labour is arguably one of commitment, necessarily flowing from the fact of representation, and is no less ethically compromised when we seek to stand outside the struggles of others. This is a reasonable view from our perspective, because otherwise one might think it acceptable to study workers and participate with them only in their oppression, but not in their opposition both individually and collectively through acts and narratives. That is to say that it can be considered fine to participate covertly (or even non-covertly) in working on the line, but not participate with workers when they want to smash it up.

Conclusion

The introduction of ‘On the front line’ in this journal (Taylor et al., 2009) is an important departure in British sociology of work and employment and a commitment to engagement with labour raises critical issues about how to achieve this. First, we require recognition and the articulation of myriad dimensions of ‘voices from the front line’ including those perspectives relatively autonomous from ‘official’ voices. Second, it is important to recognize that until recently this was indeed a feature of some research agendas both within and outside the academy, sometimes in alliance with the organic intellectuals of the labour movement, including those in the workplace who have become less audible. Third, it is argued that being out of earshot is linked to a more widespread shift away from interest in the politics and texts of labour and its concerns, reflecting at one and the same time less curiosity within the academy and the official labour movement itself. Finally, since ‘independent voices’ of labour remain inexplicable within the realm of the latter, discouraging as it does a research agenda premised on an acceptance of oppositional voices and practices, commitment to these oppositional voices has to be an imperative if we are to capture the richness of workplace and worker debates and experiences.

Moreover, and arguably of greater salience, is the notion that if we can recognize the persistence of others’ agendas – individual and collective voices from the front line – then a critical research agenda must seek to uncover these and, sometimes, be in alliance with those promoting them in the workplace. Alliances with alternative and broader views is vital, and while not the preferred method of choice for all, recognition of the legitimacy of this approach is important if only because it allows for the airing of a range of perspectives and methodologies increasingly marginalized in ‘official’ research (Turner, 2007).

This implies sympathy with Ossewaarde’s description of the ‘new sociology’ as a ‘moral and emancipatory enterprise’ (2007: 800), concerned with expressing, in our critical sociological way, the active voices of the marginalized and their collective views. It is this ‘enterprise’ that for us leads to the possibility of a renewed research agenda in the sociology of work. This article suggests that reinvigorating the sociology of work requires not only reflecting the voices of labour and giving radical and grounded
accounts, but that reinvigoration also requires a new methodology of engagement. It requires a direct and more interactive form of working with those we are studying who, unlike management and employers, do not have the resources to have their views and positions represented. It also requires a genuinely democratic approach to issues of methodology, the recording of worker narratives and a more sensitive realization of collective interventions and not just the registering of individual concerns through brief dramatic statements sometimes taken out of context from the political and social realities of work.

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Notes
1 TIE, based in Amsterdam, is an independent body working with trade unions on transnational and corporate related issues.
2 6-11 December at Eastbourne.
3 See, inter alia, Lewchuk and Robertson (1996), Rinehart et al. (1997) and Brenner et al. (2004). The output of the CAW’s research department was vital with perhaps the crucial CAMI report, 1993, which was developed by the Rinehart team, being the most significant in terms of the international attention it garnered. In the UK, see the Karel Williams team at Manchester and Dan Coffey (2006) in Leeds.
4 The role of such networks varies across time. During the late 1990s and early 2000s the wave of enthusiasm did in fact wane in the light of new industrial relations agendas around learning, formal participation and other themes. The emergence of such networks as Critical Labour Studies or the BUIRA Marxist Group reflects a new wave of debates and organic intellectuals tied to workplace and labour market (e.g. migration) related issues.
5 The critical agendas may not have reflected the fact that there were ‘defensive’ and gendered orientations to male union activists’ critiques of the development of NMP (see Jenkins et al., 2003).
6 Specifically, leading research bodies have since the 1990s inserted the issue of performance and productivity as a major element if not a pre-requisite for funding.

References


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