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The Sociology of Work:
From Industrial Sociology to Work, Employment and the Economy

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Abstract:

The paper reviews the progress of the sociology of work in Britain since 1945. It identifies two long-standing influences, Marxism and Weberian analysis, and a third more recent approach shaped by post-modernism. It disputes claims associated with the last, that the field suffers from fragmentation and lack of integration in mainstream sociology. It demonstrates, by contrast, a continuing ability to address the changing nature of work, reflected in constructive debate between the first two approaches. The definition of the field has also broadened considerably. Future challenges include the analysis of developments at the top of the class structure, that is a sociology of managers and of capital, and those at the bottom, notably the effects of migration on work and employment.

Key words: economic sociology**,** sociology of work, work and employment

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The history of the sociology of work in Britain up to about 1990 could have been written as a reasonably straightforward narrative of successive themes and analytical improvement, albeit characterized by debate between broadly Weberian and Marxian approaches. Such a story has been increasingly contested since that time, reflecting the rise of the third main analytical approach, that shaped by post-modernism. I therefore begin at the end, outlining the nature of the dispute and then reviewing the historical record in light of it.

The dispute is captured in a special issue of *Sociology* on 're-thinking sociologies of work'. The guest editors' main point was that the 'study of work' had 'become disembedded from wider social theory' (Halford and Strangleman, 2009: 812). They recognized and indeed stressed that the study of work and organization thrives in other places but they reiterated a lack of connection with mainstream sociology. There are two arguments here which need to be kept firmly separate. The first is that there is a gap between the sociology of work and the mainstream. This is widely accepted, even by those who dispute the second argument (Thompson and Smith, 2009: 913). This second argument is that the sociology of work has itself become weakened and 'fragmented', and that it needs to be 'revived' (Halford and Strangleman, 2009: 819, 824).

The basis of this second argument, expressed in clearly post-modern language, is that we need to strengthen connections to 'an ever-evolving sociological canon' that addresses 'culture, the body, subjectivity, power, space, time, the economy/economic, gender, race, [and] class' (p. 820). Is such an integrated sociology even conceivable, and, if it is, does it not set some impossibly high standards against which we can only fail? As to what it might entail, the authors offer half a page on themes that can be drawn from five exemplary studies (p. 823). These themes include the following.

- 'Control, identity and orientation to work', with links between work and 'non-workspaces'.
- The moral economy and class, linking individual experiences and 'neo-liberalism'.
- Industrial change, capital mobility and the meaning of work.
- New social movements and their embeddedness in communities.

This list implies that previous studies had nothing to say on these matters, or that what it said failed to connect with core sociological themes. In my view, it did say something of wider import, though it is true that wider connections can always be stronger.

I proceed by first defining the field and identifying an overall theme running through British work. I then consider its development in three broad phases before drawing conclusions.

Subject matter and focus

Richard Brown (1992: 3) analysed in detail ‘British research and writing’ in the field up to the late 1980s. ‘[I]ndustrial sociology as such did not exist in Britain before the end of the Second World War’ (p. 5). The historical focus is thus the period since the late 1940s. The quantity of research was also relatively small during the first half of the period, so that more space will be given to later developments.

In terms of analytical focus, Brown followed others in ‘defin[ing] “industrial sociology” . . . pragmatically as a somewhat disparate and unintegrated collection of topics and questions centred on social relations in work organisations’ (p. 4). One immediate issue arises. The term ‘work organizations’ implies those that employ people for a wage, and ‘industry’ further has connotations of large-scale manufacturing. Is this limitation acceptable for a broad sociology of work? Brown’s own answer was to recognize other forms of work but to argue for a sociology of employment which took the idea of the employment relationship as its theoretical core. In doing so, he drew on early and influential analyses of the effort bargain within employment which stressed the indeterminacy and negotiability of the concept of effort (Baldamus, 1961).

I return to the validity of the argument in the conclusion. For the present, we can simply note that the delimitation certainly described the practice of the field in Britain up to the mid-1970s. We can also trace efforts to broaden the field’s scope. There were certainly studies of work outside employment, but they were relatively few, and the main development was sensitivity to the linkages between paid work and other spheres, rather than detailed attention to those spheres directly.

The overall theme mentioned above is a scepticism about grand evolutionary schemes and a preference for close empirical inquiry. I mention only three such schemas. In the 1950s, American scholars perceived common trends across industrial societies that were felt to lead to improvements in the quality of work (Kerr et al., 1960). In the 1970s, a contrasting trend toward deskilling was identified (Braverman, 1974), though the thesis was more subtle than that of industrialism and it was richer than it has come to be caricatured. In the 2000s, some European scholars spoke of growing polarization of jobs and worsening conditions at the bottom of the labour market (Beck, 2000), while there were much wider debates about the claimed decay of large bureaucratic organizations and the possible emergence of 'post-bureaucracy'. British sociologists of work have generally eschewed such grand narratives, while certainly using them to identify questions for empirical inquiry.

The particular shape of the sociology of work reflected two main influences. The first was the kind of debates just mentioned. The second was trends in the workplace itself. For example, during the 1980s there was major interest in white-collar work, reflecting the decline of manufacturing and changes in the work itself in light of computerization and also the prevalence of performance management systems. Did this mean that, as Braverman would have it, white-collar work was being 'proletarianized?' From about this time, there was also growing interest in distinctiveness of Britain as compared to other countries. Were developments here, under neo-liberal political regimes, mirrored elsewhere? Tracing out the connections with the changing British workplace is not my primary goal, but it is important to underline that the work discussed below was shaped by its social context.

1950-1975: technical change, occupational structure, and orientations to work

The most significant early programme of research in Britain was at the Department of Social Science in the University of Liverpool. A core empirical focus was the impact of technical change, with studies being conducted on the docks and in coal mining (University of Liverpool, 1954; Scott et al., 1956; Scott et al., 1963).[1] The central theoretical idea was that of an occupational structure, which institutionalized a social division of labour on the basis of skill and function. This structure led to major differences in rewards and status. Alongside this formal structure was an informal one of face-to-face relationships. These researchers, along with several others, traced out the effects of changes in the first on the second. In the study of the docks, for example, it was argued that the then new National Dock Labour Scheme, which was supposed to modernize the industry and improve productivity, undermined traditional informal job hierarchies and contributed to continuing poor morale. Considering the strike-prone nature of the docks at the time, the researchers explained the strikes in sociological terms. Strikes were not the result of ‘agitators’. Nor were they to be attributed to greedy workers exploiting their bargaining power. They reflected, instead, concerns for fairness that arose from the informal system and that the formal system was unable to handle; they were thus embedded in a social structure in ways that psychological or economists’ theories of bargaining could not grasp.

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[1] The team involved in these studies included several people who played a major role in sociology subsequently, including among the named authors Joe Banks, A. H. (Chelly) Halsey, Tom Lupton and Enid Mumford. The 'planning and execution' of the first was also attributed to 'Miss Joan Woodward', discussed below, and others.

Broadly similar ideas about work groups as complex social systems were developed by researchers at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations through their concept of the socio-technical system (e.g. Trist and Bamforth [1951]). The central idea was of systems in which the social and the technical divisions of labour interact with each other and in which workers play an active role; this interaction also occurs in an ‘open’ relationship with the environment. There was some explicit usage of general systems theory, together with clear parallels with functionalist sociology; at this time, one could reasonably draw a direct linkage between ‘industrial sociology’ and the wider sociological project.

This approach was concerned with a worker’s point of view, and it sought to grasp the workplace as a social space where workers’ interests had to be respected and understood. It also saw these interests, not simply in terms of maximizing income or resisting managerial control, but as also embracing a concern for production. Trist and Bamforth’s coal miners, for example, practised what was termed ‘relative autonomy’: their informal social relations established independence from management and defined how work was to be performed. The Liverpool study of dock workers concluded with the observation that

> changes in the structure of an industrial community . . . do little to improve social relationships unless they are in harmony with the purposes and attitudes of those involved. . . . [T]hose who initiate such changes must exercise a responsible concern for the needs and feelings of the individual men and women whose ideas and ways of life will inevitably be affected. In times of social change, imaginative insight into the demands of personal living combined with informed reflection on the problems which they raise is the necessary support and accompaniment to all schemes for administrative reform (University of Liverpool, 1954: 225-6).

The idea that work organizations are contingent things, infused with uncertainty and political choices, informed two other leading studies of the period, those of Burns and Stalker (1961) and Woodward (1965). This conclusion may seem surprising, for both studies tend to be associated with determinism. Woodward indeed argued that the technical organization of production (summarized in terms of small batch, large batch and continuous process methods) did much to explain the structure of organizations and also levels of commitment among workers. Burns and Stalker argued that stable market conditions promoted 'mechanistic' organizational structures while unstable ones promoted more flexible and 'organic' systems. Yet both teams struggled with how organizations functioned in practice. As well as undermining one-best-way approaches then popular in management studies, they suggested more sociological ways of considering how organizational structures are defined and negotiated (Brown, 1992: 103). The strength and weakness here, particularly in Woodward's work, was that conceptualization and operationalization of measures was less than clear: this weakened the status of the conclusions but also allowed the messiness of organizational life to peep through.

These approaches were subjected to severe criticism (Kelly, 1978; Brown, 1992: 55-77, 97-104). There were two main lines. The first argued that workers were seen as products of the division of labour, with little attention being paid to their own active choices. This view later informed the 'orientations to work' debate. The second line, taken up below in relation to labour process analysis, argued that socio-technical approaches tended to look for equilibration between sub-systems rather than accepting that there might be no equilibrium and that conflict was built into the employment relationship. This weakness was connected to a bland view of the external environment, with now-familiar issues of re-structuring and demands for productivity improvements being either down-played or taken as inevitable.

These studies began from questions of workplace organization and focused on manual workers. The other major study of the 1950s was more theoretically oriented, and it looked at white-collar workers. This was Lockwood's (1958) study of clerical workers, informed by the Marxian question of why these propertyless and thus 'proletarian' workers did not display working-class consciousness. The Weberian answer was that the 'market' (income, job security, and career mobility) and 'work' (relationship to authority) situations of clerical and manual workers differed widely; these differences were overlaid by 'status' differentiation.

This study set a framework for many later debates on class and the work relations which are discussed below. It led most directly into one of the most celebrated studies in UK work sociology, the *Affluent Worker* project. The purpose was to test out the idea that the working class was experiencing *embourgeoisement* and it selected the town of Luton as a critical test case where the process was most likely to occur. Its analysis of specifically workplace behaviour was explained as something of a by-product and a surprise (Goldthorpe et al., 1968). The surprise was that the workers' views of their jobs and their employers did not reflect the technical division of labour in the ways analysed in the studies reviewed above. The explanation lay, rather, in the orientations that workers brought with them, with work being treated as simply an instrumental means to make a living.

Critical commentary has focused on the team's analysis of class, but some key points about the workplace also emerged (Devine, 1992). First, the study was not about *behaviour* in any exact sense of what workers actually did. Second, the Luton sample was a highly self-selected one in that workers had chosen to move there; it could not be taken as representative. Third, the emphasis on orientations reversed previous technology-driven explanations in a way not consistent with the data. Orientations are certainly important, but they are much less free-floating than was implied.

There followed further debate about the nature and antecedents of workers' attitudes to their jobs, represented in a volume that can be seen as marking the end of this particular debate, (Bulmer, 1975).[2] A series of studies, mainly of male semi-skilled workers, concluded that these attitudes were not inscribed in workers as a result of some, unanalysed, process through which orientations were established. Instead, attitudes were indeed shaped in part by the distinct occupational communities in which workers were located so that, for example, shipbuilding workers had clearly different world views (and behaviour) from agricultural workers (Brown and Brannen, 1970; Newby, 1977). Attitudes were also shifting and to a substantial degree composed of different aspects that might come to the fore at different times.

A final comment on this tradition is that remarkably little was said about the managements of the firms in which workers laboured. Few studies said anything about the ways in which managements structured work, which they might reasonably have been expected to do. In retrospect, it is also notable that the ownership of the firm and its location in an international division of labour received no comment. The Luton studies involved the plants of three large multinational firms, but at the time this was not seen as even a salient basic fact, let alone as something to investigate for its implications for the organization of work.

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[2] Some related themes re-emerged in the 1990s and 2000s in the different context of women's labour market choices. The argument was advanced that women who chose not to participate in the labour market did so freely, an argument that neglected the social influences on the making of apparently free choices – whether by women or anyone else.

A study standing slightly to one side of this tradition looked at manual workers in six occupations in one town (Blackburn and Mann, 1979). It was, and is, significant in addressing through observational and other techniques the specific skills that workers deployed, the headline result being that more skill was involved in driving to work than in the workplace itself. This approach anticipated later studies of skill, but was arguably more exact and through in its measurements than many of them.

1975-90: deepening and broadening the focus

After 1975, two broad strands of work can be identified. The first may be called ‘deepening’ in that it looked at work in a comparative way and related the workplace to the context of managerial strategies and the economic context. The second was a broadening of the meaning of work.

Going deeper than the workplace

Within a deepening agenda, there were two developments. The first clearly built on the foregoing tradition, while the second departed from it, and indeed often based itself in critique of it. They interwove in complex ways. I thus outline two exemplars of the first before turning to the second and then some counter-critiques from the first.

The first strand is most clearly illustrated by the work of Duncan Gallie. His first major work was a comparative study of four oil refineries, two in Britain and two in France, owned by the same company (Gallie, 1977). The theoretical focus was whether technology could explain workers’ attitudes, in ways expected by several writers in the USA and Europe. The answer was that it could not: despite virtually identical technologies and a common context of the company, there were major differences in attitudes to jobs, the company, trade unions, and class. Gallie sought the answer in differences between France and Britain in the organization of management and the structure and role of trade unions. He was thus led to look in much more detail than his predecessors at specifics such as pay and disciplinary procedures and wider issues of the style and philosophy of management. This work took a broadly Weberian approach and it enlarged significantly on the themes of earlier industrial sociology, notably in its comparative dimension; it also connected with core sociological themes of class and political order (Gallie, 1983).

The second exemplar was also an exercise in ‘comparative sociology’ (Dore, 1973: 9). It compared manufacturing firms in Britain and Japan, charting, like Gallie, marked differences in the organization of work despite similar technologies. Dore distinguished a market-oriented form of work organization, based on paying workers in relation to what they could earn on the open labour market and a low-trust contractual exchange, and an organization-oriented form, based on long-term relationships and high trust and commitment. Britain exemplified the first and Japan the second. Similar ideas, distinguishing approaches via the external and the internal labour market, or contract and status (Streeck, 1987), emerged around the same time. The distinctive feature of Dore was that he identified a shift towards the organization-oriented form (Dore, 1990). This turned out to be inaccurate empirically, with ‘marketization’ being a dominant development from the 1980s. But analytically it was key in relating workplaces to wider issues of the structuring of work; much later research on ‘varieties of capitalism’ followed this lead. It was also important in hinting at an idea that was developed later: market- and organization-oriented forms of work organization are not necessarily opposites, for companies commonly try to combine aspects of both.

The second strand of work drew its inspiration from Marx rather than Weber, seeing the workplace as a site of class struggle and aiming to understand both the possibilities of and limits to working class action. Central here is the work of Beynon (1973) on the Ford factory on Merseyside and Nichols and Beynon (1977) on an ICI plant near Bristol. The preferred method was observation and informal interviewing, rather than the questionnaire-led approach of many more orthodox scholars, the aim being to understand concrete action rather than to reduce such action to ‘orientations’. Despite some later claims, they did not reduce workplace relations to class struggle. Beynon famously characterized Ford workers as having a ‘factory’ rather than a class consciousness, and much of the burden of Nichols and Beynon was an explanation of the ways in which class struggle was attenuated through the ‘incorporation’ of opposition and the ways in which workers tolerated jobs that were both demanding and boring.

This strand was powerfully reinvigorated through the development of Labour Process Analysis (LPA). The debates and language were inspired by the popularization of the work of Braverman (1974) and other American scholars, and some of the earlier British work, in particular its subtle account of workplace conflict and accommodation, tended to be neglected. LPA refocused debate on the linked questions of skill and managerial strategies of labour control. These questions were timely, in that they arose when computer technologies were being widely introduced and when managements were beginning to institute new, and often very assertive, labour policies. A focus of debate was the International Labour Process Conference, which has met annually since 1983 and produced a series of more than 25 books. Several major conclusions emerged (see Thompson, 1989; Thompson and Smith, 2009). Many of these were directed against what was perceived as a grand de-skilling narrative. Thus it was found that the apparent potential of new technology to induce a tighter regulation of labour was often not implemented in practice. Similarly, management strategy tended to be emergent and *ad hoc* as well as highly variable over time.

Two major British efforts were made to follow American scholars in looking at the historical evolution of patterns of labour control. Littler (1982) studied some particular experiments and underlined their contingent and uncertain nature, later providing a critique of ‘Bravermania’ and stressing that managerial strategies were directed at profits and not labour control (Littler and Salaman, 1982). Friedman (1977) took a more Marxian view, seeing labour control strategies as part of the ways in which surplus value was produced. These results were important in demonstrating, in line with work going back to the 1950s, that work organizations are complex social systems and that neither ‘class struggle’ nor ‘successful management strategies’ is likely to exist in pristine form. Friedman identified two kinds of management strategy, labelled direct control and responsible autonomy, and charted their historical trajectories.

Developments from these debates took two main directions. The first retained an ‘orthodox’ focus on the relations between manager and worker around the effort bargain, and sought to deepen the analysis. Friedman could be taken to imply that such strategies exist in clear-cut forms and that managements can simply choose between them. But a more cogent reading distinguishes levels of analysis: the strategies are the overall objectives of firms and can be seen as an analytical construct, and practical policies will reflect a mix of different elements together with historical accident and chance (Hyman, 1987; Friedman, 2004). Direct control and responsible autonomy, moreover, can be combined, as where a company deploys team working within a policy of hard performance targets and close monitoring of those targets (Edwards, 2005). A 'core' of LPA was identified and synthesized (Thompson and Smith, 2009).

The second, broadly post-modern, approach argued that this orthodoxy tended to reduce workplace issues to class struggle and gave insufficient attention to the subjectivity of workers and to the multiple sources of identity that they developed (Knights and Willmott, 1989). This line of argument marks the beginning of the themes mentioned at the start of this chapter, of the centrality of culture and subjectivity. To quote the source used by Halford and Strangleman (2009: 817), 'few of the major concerns that workers bring to their jobs – security, conviviality, tradition, and opportunity, to say nothing of pay – are given much room in the models of labor process theorists' (Epstein, 1990: 90). Subsequent work pursued this argument repeatedly (e.g. Thomas and Davies, 2005).

Debate between these approaches persisted for at least twenty years without, and in contrast to the orientations to work debate, reaching a clear conclusion. But several observations can be made. First, the post-modernists reduced LPA to caricature; and, in the context of an historical review, their lack of attention to previous studies in industrial sociology was particularly remarkable. For example, the first two of the four bullet points listed at the start of this chapter featured extensively in the works discussed above (Edwards, 2010). Second, the post-modern interest in meaning and subjectivity was none the less valuable in maintaining an interest in concrete work experience. Third, however, this interest could become very micro-level in nature, a point to which I return in the conclusion.

If we turn back to non-LPA scholars, one of the major research projects in the UK on work was the Social Change and Economic Life Initiative, of 1986-7, co-ordinated by Duncan Gallie. This entailed detailed study in six contrasting labour markets, with teams of researchers carrying out some co-ordinated projects, so as to produce reasonably representative data for the economy as a whole, together with a series of more independent projects (e.g. Gallie et al., 1993). It also acted as the benchmark for a series of later studies, so that for the first time longitudinal and representative data on jobs and the labour market were generated. Its key findings included those mentioned above, such as the variable and shifting nature of management ‘strategy’. It also demonstrated that skill was a multi-dimensional feature of work and that ‘de-skilling’ was often not the best lens through which to view changes in the nature of work and jobs.

Related debates, here between Marxian and Weberian positions, returned to the nature of white-collar work: trends in the organization of this form of work suggested the possibility of proletarianization. Some Marxian views argued that de-skilling was in train, primarily because of the rationalization and Taylorization of work tasks, that is changes in the work situation. The most detailed studies in this vein, however, also pointed to continuing differences from manual workers in terms of market situation and they contained detailed data that suggested that jobs were more varied than de-skilling might imply (Crompton and Jones, 1984). Reviewing all this evidence, Lockwood (1989: 246) pointed out that the types of organization included in these studies were probably not representative of clerical work; overall, degradation was very limited though this did not deny that much of the work was ‘humdrum’, a fact that his earlier studied had in fact stressed. Not all Marxian writers adopted a proletarianization view. Studying factory supervisors, Armstrong (1983) elegantly argued that they remained separate from manual workers because of the managerial and control functions that they carried out.

Some of the assessments around 1990 that stressed only limited effects of technical change may have been, in retrospect, a little complacent. Later research showed a substantial rise in the monitoring of work electronically and in other bureaucratic control systems, across all occupations (McGovern et al., 2007). The directness of the links with class position, let alone class consciousness, in some Marxian writing may have been excessive, but changes in the regulation of work that were becoming evident in the 1980s also continued and possibly accelerated subsequently.

Broadening the focus

From the mid-1970s, the sociology of work, like other sub-fields, was profoundly shaped by the rise of feminism. Studies of paid work argued that the tradition discussed above was ‘gender-blind’ in two respects: empirically, it concentrated on male workers; and analytically it did not consider whether gender was a component in workers’ approaches to their work, though some, in industries such as shipbuilding, certainly painted a picture of group solidarity in which male norms were key. Part of a gender-sensitive analysis entailed studies of female workers in the kinds of semi-skilled factory jobs addressed in earlier studies (e.g. Pollert, 1981; Cavendish, 1982).[3] These underlined the extent to which ‘skill’ reflected gender as well as objective features of the work task and connections between paid work and domestic labour. Subsequent studies broadened this agenda by considering the ways in which job hierarchies were defined in gender terms. The study of white-collar work discussed above showed that men’s career progression depended on the continued restriction of women to lower-level jobs; this situation reflected assumptions about jobs suitable for women while also reinforcing a restricted view of the career opportunities and aspirations of women (Crompton and Jones, 1984). Cockburn (1983, 1985) showed that job hierarchies were themselves gendered. Related work took these ideas further by looking at households and the links between the gender division of labour inside and outside paid employment, demonstrating that many issues such as patterns of pay reflected gendered divisions outside employment (Dex, 1988).

A related development was Pahl’s (1984) studies on the Isle of Sheppey, investigating self-provisioning (e.g. DIY) and other forms of work outside formal employment relationships (e.g. working through bartering and informal exchange). These encouraged a series of later studies of the informal economy (Williams and Nadin, 2012) and in the 1980s the growing phenomenon of self-employment (Macdonald, 1994). It was popularly thought that these forms of economic activity might be alternatives to formal paid employment. The central finding of all of these studies, however, was that this activity was deeply connected to and shaped by the formal economy. Thus Pahl found that self-provisioning was more, and not less, common among the (formally) employed than among the unemployed. Macdonald showed that self-employment was often the result of the loss of a job in the formal economy and that the kinds of work involved tended to be low-paid and insecure. Self-employment was a by-product of and closely connected to formal employment, and not an alternative.

Conclusions

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[3] Ruth Cavendish was a pseudonym adopted by Miriam Glucksmann to disguise the factory that was the focus of this study.

Reviewing the overall development of the field at this period, Gallie (1988: 26-7) reached two conclusions. First, the subject had broadened to become a sociology of employment which recognized that work itself was shaped by labour market and community and household structures and the wider organization of firms. Second, research was uncovering the role of choice and the 'internal logics' of firms; rather than there being a single law driven by the capitalist division of labour, there was remarkable diversity of practice. The establishment in 1987, largely by Richard Brown, of a new journal, *Work, Employment and Society*, reflected these developments. This journal became to focus of the field, and it consciously set out to relate work to its social and economic context.

1990 onwards: service work, longitudinal and comparative analysis and work-life balance

Developments since 1990 offer further illustration of Gallie's two points. An even wider range of linkages between work and the wider society has been identified. And choice and diversity have been underlined. Four influential sets of ideas illustrate these developments. The first is the concept of the 'total social organization of labour' (Glucksmann, 1995, 2000). This aims to grasp connections between different kinds of work in different locales and points in the production process. A simple example is the call centre, which as discussed below became a central focus of empirical attention. The growth of call centres affects jobs elsewhere, for example their number and nature in such fields as logistics and warehousing (Glucksmann, 2004: 800). The call centre is not an isolated phenomenon, and nor is it a closed 'industry'. The second set of ideas relates to global value chains. It connects the sociology of work to economic geography and other fields by addressing the division of labour along the whole of a value chain (Ramirez and Rainbird, 2010). Third, the concept of intersectionality, meaning the connections between class, gender, and ethnicity, came into use; it featured in four papers in *Work, Employment and Society*, in the period 2008-12, and none previously. This concept addresses the multiple and linked identities that workers bring to work, and argues against the privileging of any one.

These three sets of ideas were relatively specific, in addressing a concrete question. The fourth was more pervasive. It developed in post-modern analysis, inspired in particular by the work of Michel Foucault.[4] Techniques such as discourse analysis, generally embedded in a social constructionist ontology, were widely deployed. Fleming and Spicer (2007) for example address many ways in which workers can ‘resist’ corporate control. These include a ‘cynical’ distancing from corporate rhetorics, but attention is also given to such things as the creation of a sexual identity in the workplace. Other scholars address such issues as the impact of new managerial techniques on workers. Examples include Business Process Re-engineering and the extent to which it intensifies work effort (Knights and Willmott, 2000).

These new approaches also saw a widening of the empirical scope of the field. The service sector, and within it the call centre, received particular attention. Early work echoed some of the initial labour process writing in discerning a particularly intensive regime of managerial control, often labelled, with deliberate reference to Foucault’s image of the panopticon, the ‘electronic panopticon’. Yet research soon found, first, a very great variety of call centres and, second, even in the more extreme cases, a regime in which workers could to a degree negotiate the terms of the effort bargain. Part of this negotiation entailed relations with the customer. It was, for example, possible to exploit the ambivalence of managerial requirements: to meet performance targets while also fulfilling customer expectations, which could mean ignoring or manipulating those targets. Korczynski (2002, 2005) developed the concept of a customer-oriented bureaucracy to capture this ambivalence. Along with many other writers, he also stressed that new organizational forms entailed, not an end to bureaucracy, but its re-formulation.

A major support to this empirical project was the ESRC Future of Work Programme which ran from 1998 until 2005. It supported a total of 27 projects including several surveys which permitted systematic comparisons over time together with a set of more micro-level inquiries. Among the latter, Baldry et al. (2007) studied four call centres and five software houses, looking more directly than the previous studies at specific work tasks and the experience of work. They illustrate how a gendered analysis in the field had developed. Whereas earlier studies simply contrasted men and women, they were able to develop a more integrated approach, addressing the interactions between domestic circumstances, organizational conditions, and workers’ own preferences; they thus stressed that some male occupational communities had a distinct masculine component. Their study was designed to test out the nature of jobs in the new economy – looking, somewhat like the *Affluent Worker* study, for prototypical examples. But it found remarkable 'similarities with studies done 40 years ago' (Baldry et al., 2007: 236), with very limited commitment to the organization, though this was tempered by 'sociability and collegiality' with work colleagues.

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[4] An irony here is that Foucault received very little attention in the French sociology of work.

Many of the studies just discussed, whether of a broadly labour process or post-modern kind, adopted a relatively micro-level focus of the individual workplace or a small number of workplaces. Alongside such studies, analysis of jobs at the level of the economy continued to flourish. A first development was the Employment in Britain (EiB) Survey of 1992, led by Duncan Gallie and Michael White (Gallie et al., 1998). It was based on two representative samples of the employed population and the unemployed. It permitted comparison with the SCELI results and also other surveys going back to 1980. The picture of change in employment regimes was subtle. Skill in the sense of qualifications and training was rising. But, as some labour process writers would argue, Braverman saw skill as embracing control of the work process. The survey also found increased use of performance measurement systems and no evidence of rising commitment or involvement. Control was in many ways becoming more, not less, pervasive. The survey also showed changes in the gender division of labour: greater integration of women into the work force and convergence of skills profiles between men and women, but less employers showed less trust in, and gave less responsibility to, women, who also suffered more mental and physical fatigue than men.

This study was followed by the three Skills Surveys of 1997, 2001 and 2006. Each was based on a representative sample of the working population. They permitted analysis of trends over time, showing for example that task discretion fell (with similar trends for men and women) and that use of the more advanced kinds of team work also declined (Gallie et al., 2004, 2009).

As for broader sociological questions, the EiB study considered whether employment was becoming more 'marketized' in the sense of a reduction in long-term employment relationships and, more subtly, a decline in the structuring of relationships by class and other factors and their replacement with a pure market model. The evidence pointed to great continuity, and 'the terms of employment remained fundamentally differentiated by class' (Gallie et al., 1998: 316). Products of the Future of Work Programme extended this analysis. Using the EiB results and a similar survey of 2000-1 (the Working in Britain survey), McGovern et al. (2007) interrogated the marketization thesis further, and found it largely incorrect; they also underlined the value of a class-based analysis in understanding continuing differences in pay and rewards across the working population.

Marchington et al. (2005) turned to another aspect of organizational change, which they termed the blurring of organizational boundaries and 'disordering hierarchies': sub-contracting and out- and in-sourcing blurred the definition of an employer, and traditional hierarchies could alter as a result. Deploying a set of eight organizational case studies, they placed more emphasis than McGovern et al. on outsourcing, the use of agency labour, and insecurity. One might reconcile the results by arguing that the study deliberately sought out cases where blurring was occurring, while McGovern et al. measure the overall picture: change occurs, but within limits. But there is a deeper consistency. Marchington et al. (2005: 268) underline the 'centrality of power relations' in inter-organizational relationships; the market is not a neutral force, and its effects are shaped by institutions.

Alongside a growing sophistication of surveys in the UK, the increasing availability of internationally comparative data sets permitted attention to large comparative questions. A good illustration is the work led by Gallie (2007), for it takes us back to grand narratives. This study considered two such narratives: universal trends, of an up-skilling or de-skilling kind; and polarization. It found specific pieces of evidence consistent with the narratives but overall found them unconvincing. An alternative to a universal story is the identification of distinct production regimes, in particular the idea of varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Gallie and colleagues also found this approach wanting: it amalgamated quite distinct national instutional forms into two types of capitalism. An 'employment regimes' approach, that gave attention to the complex ways in which workers were integrated into the workplace and the labour market, was to be preferred. This line of argument is also consistent with wider (UK) critiques of production regime theory: firms and countries combine modes of employment regulation in shifting and variable ways (Crouch, 2005).

Research into specific aspects of international comparison developed this idea. For example, the extent and nature of women's labour market participation in different European countries reflected complex and interlocking links between welfare regimes, national labour market policy, and employer strategies (Fagan and Rubery, 1996). Crompton et al. (2005), in a study not directly about paid employment at all, addressed the domestic division of labour and changing attitudes to gender roles in three countries.

Further widening embraced an interest in ethnicity. This topic had certainly featured previously (notably Jenkins, 1986), but it took on a new salience for two reasons. First, black and Asian people were asserting their rights in society, including in the workplace, more forcefully. Second, the developments in the field described above made researchers more conscious of the construction of identity and the linkages between the workplace and the total social organization of labour. Ram (1994) for example studied small Asian-owned firms and analysed the racial processes that pushed owners and workers into marginal and low-profit enterprises and that also constrained the business opportunities open to the firms.

Institutional developments are relevant here. From the 1980s, the sociology of work was increasingly practised in business schools. This reflects two trends. The first was a decline in interest in work and employment in sociology departments. The lists of modules offered at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in four leading departments (Essex, LSE, Manchester and Warwick) either have work and employment as an option or mention it alongside a wealth of other choices.

The second trend was growth of business schools, many of which have groups addressing organizational behaviour, human resource management, and cognate subjects. Generally, these areas are sociologically informed, as illustrated by major texts (Thompson ad McHugh, 2002). An explanation of this growth may lie in two developments: a supply of sociologically minded scholars who could no longer find a home in sociology departments, or who were attracted by the expansion of business schools and the financial rewards that they offered; and the shape of business school activity in such areas of Organizational Behaviour, where the topics were less rigidly defined than in America and hence where there was space for a more sociological treatment. *WES* had editors from business schools as well as sociology departments, and other journals, such as *Organization* (founded 1994), the *Human Resource Management Journal* and the *International Journal of Human Resource Management* (both 1990), were all based in business schools. The International Labour Process Conference and its publications also remained a largely business school activity.

Such institutional trends may reinforce the intellectual ones, and the trends together might sustain an argument for fragmentation of the field. An alternative view would welcome the penetration of sociology into business schools and see the emergence of specialist journals as an indicator of the maturation of a sub-field.

Conclusions

The sociology of work in Britain has continued to address broad themes around industrialization, skills, and the quality of work. It has generally done so through empirical inquiry and distrust of grand narratives. The idea of fragmentation misses this continuity and also tends to downplay the much wider range of topics addressed now compared to the 1950s. A more subtle charge would be that the only overall narrative has been that there can be no such narrative. It is true that much research has been directed against large overall schemas. Research has shown, for example, that managerial strategies are shifting and variable, so that it cannot be said that a given overall strategy will have a given effect. And the reasons for variability are often highly specific. This in itself, however, is an important finding for the ways in which work organizations operate. It bears emphasis in that some management research of the 1950s believed in one-best-way approaches, with Woodward’s destruction of them being seen as controversial. Yet by the 2000s newer approaches were seeking clear-cut links between employment practice and organizational performance and were often driven by a top-down view of the ‘management of change’; sociological results going back to the 1950s demonstrate that organizations do not work in this way, and the conclusions of the study of dockers quoted above continues to have resonance. Some conditions affecting variation in practice have also been identified. Something approaching a framework may even be emerging. Thus researchers into variations in job quality internationally have identified universal forces and those operating at the level of the nation state. Other research has looked at more micro level influences such as the sector of the economy and, within that, managerial and worker strategies (Bélanger and Edwards, 2007).

There remain important differences, reflecting continuing debates between broadly post-modern, Weberian and Marxian approaches. In many ways, the latter two are allied against the first. They take a much less socially constructionist view of the world and they treat relationships such as those of class as structured into society. There are also differences of method. The post-modern approach tends to favour the in-depth inquiry, often in a single location. This can reveal a great deal about the social meanings of work, but there is then, the opponents argue, either no attempt to generalize the results or a leap to the implication that the results are of universal application.

The disputes between Weberians and Marxians are captured in at least two specific debates. The first relates to the concept of the total social organization of labour, and by extension to other efforts to draw out in a Weberian way the many connections between work and society. The Marxian response was that different kinds of work were reduced to the technical aspects of the job, with the embeddedness of these in a mode of production being neglected. The 'specific capitalist political economy' in which call centre operators for example 'contribute to the realization of surplus value' was down-played (Taylor and Bain, 2007: 359): the Marxian language of totality masked the emphasis on contingency and complexity. Similar critiques could be in other areas.

I would add that an undisciplined search for 'intersectionality' can lead to a mere listing of the many features of any society without analysis of their relative weight or the processes through which they are connected. Had Lockwood (1958) pursued an 'intersectional view' of the class situation of clerical workers, he would no doubt have described interesting things. But the strength of the analysis was to identify distinct categories of market, work, and status situation, to investigate their effects at a concrete level (for example, the issue of rationalization), and to assess their relative importance. Such a Weberian view, and its development in terms of the theorization of the employment relationship (Brown, 1992), continues to inform debate in constructive ways.

The second debate started from a practical rather than a theoretical question: why do managers find it hard to keep their promises in relation to such things as job quality and job security? Thompson (2003) argued that the reasons lay in the structuring of capitalist firms and pressures for accumulation. He also argued that sociology needed to strengthen the links between its levels of analysis so as, we might say, to generate a better account in terms of totality. Subsequent work began to pursue this idea, looking for example at emergent capitalist business models and their effects on employment relations (Clark, 2009). Weberian and Marxian analyses have differences of interpretation, with the latter stressing the need to address capitalism as a mode of production together with analytical focus on the labour process, and the former questioning tendencies to determinism and asking what the intellectual added value of the point is. But they share a view that the employment relationship has distinctive features that continue to shape the meaning of work and that this focus should not be dissolved through a pursuit of subjectivity or intersectionality. Studies of ethnicity and work, for example, demonstrate that there are certainly specific contingencies affecting given ethnic groups, for example the ways in which family and kin relationships can blur divisions between employer and worker; but the studies also insist that these are variations on the theme of the negotiation of the effort bargain and that seeking some inherent ethnic component is an error (Jones and Ram, 2011).

This brings us to the validity of a conceptual boundary around paid work. We can draw four conclusions. First, early research often took the boundary for granted but none the less generated work of value. Second, research in the labour process tradition interrogated the nature of the employment relationship and thus established a sociological grounding for ideas such as conflict and consent. Third, research was also sensitive to growth in the importance of paid work, as in studies of marketization (a process that made paid employment more salient, as with the delivery of social care or growing employment of domestic labour) and of work-life spillovers (which make paid employment more important in the sense of its social salience). Fourth, research also considered shifting boundaries between paid and unpaid labour, and between formal and informal, work, as in studies of housework and of the informal economy.

Despite major developments in the field, some topics have been lightly addressed. One key one is a sociology of capital. It is true that recent studies of financialization have addressed the organization of capitalism as a system. And managers have not been wholly neglected (Sofer, 1970; Scase and Goffee, 1989; Watson, 2001; Hales, 2005). Some notable conclusions have emerged. Middle managers have not, contrary to several predictions, disappeared. They are neither wholly committed to the ideologies of their firms nor utterly distanced and cynical; rather, they negotiate their way through competing demands and make the best of the situation as they find it. Watson for example highlighted middle managers' sense of distance from, and powerlessness in the face of, the corporate hierarchy but also their lack of empathy with shop floor workers. Wajcman (1998) dissected the ways in which being a manager rested on gendered assumptions both within organizations and in the wider society.

Yet studies looking at emerging models of capitalism have addressed the system and not the people who control it, while studies of managers have mainly been of middle-range managers, A few studies (notably Sklair, 2001) have also looked at higher levels of managers and the extent to which a transnational class might be emerging. Earlier work, notably that of Scott (1985), addressed interlocking directorships and the social ties among the business elite. Studies such as those cited might well be developed. One line of inquiry is to study those at the top of the occupational structure. Economists have begun to devote attention to the reasons for the widening of the income distribution at the top. Sociologists could add a great deal in terms of the extent and nature of an occupational community and the ways in which high earnings are generated and justified. A second issue is the ‘global manager’. Sklair’s work was preliminary, and it could be read as a hypothesis rather than a set of findings. The degree to which managers operate globally is one question; another is the extent to which any such global activity leads them to become a class in the sense of a group with a shared identity and world views.

Many other lines of inquiry can be suggested, for example the social division of labour associated with new forms of migration, together with the linkages between work and family and community organization and the shifting boundaries of paid work. The sociology of work in Britain has been sufficiently flexible to address the major changes in patterns of work since the 1940s. If it does not become side-tracked into debates about its identity, if it maintains an analytical grip on the employment relationship, and if it continues to seek grounded explanations of patterns of workplace behaviour, it is well-placed to continue to address the ever-evolving world of work.

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