

THE AUSTRALIAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT AND POST-FORDISM

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Over the past two years discussion and debate in Australia on the future of industry and work has centred on the need for 'micro-economic reform'. The Federal Labor government, employer organisations, and the trade union movement have all sought to translate their traditional concerns into the new language of reform and change at the level of the individual enterprise. This paper examines one aspect of the participation of parts of the trade union movement in this current discussion and debate: the appropriation of what can be called **post-Fordist theories** as a guide to strategic intervention.

Post-Fordist theories suggest that we stand at the threshold of a new era that promises - amongst other things - a reversal of the traditional 'Fordist' policies of labour control at the workplace in favour of a new policy of encouragement of the skill and initiative of workers. According to these theories the tide of change associated with restructuring in the advanced capitalist societies is shifting in a way that offers opportunities for the trade unions to realise some of their long-held objectives concerning the content of work. Understandably enough, parts of the trade union movement have readily seized on these theories and attempted to grasp these opportunities.

The following sections are intended to provide both an introduction to the use of post-Fordist theories within the current discussion in Australia and a start to a critique of their limitations. The first section makes two

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introductory points concerning the economic and political context. The second section outlines the appropriation of post-Fordist theories, focusing in particular on the writings of Laurie Carmichael and John Mathews. The third section uses these writings as a platform for advancing three points of criticism. The final section summarises the argument and hints at an alternative perspective.

The argument advanced here shares the post-Fordist starting point - that there are major changes taking place in the workplace. It also agrees that these present a challenge for the labour movement. Though the paper does not directly enter into the strategic debates it also agrees that the traditional defensive posture of the trade unions is inadequate and that a new approach that intervenes in the processes of restructuring in order to grasp opportunities and forestall dangers is urgently required. Where post-Fordist theories are seen as deficient is in the actual description and assessment of the changes that are taking place. They offer only a selective interpretation that misses the diversity of restructuring and that as a result exaggerates opportunities and neglects dangers.

Restructuring and Micro-Economic Reform

It is useful to begin by making two points about the general economic and political context for the present discussion in Australia on micro-economic reform:

Restructuring

The current conditions faced by enterprises in the advanced capitalist societies - embracing such elements as changes in the level and composition of demand, intensified competition in product markets, changes in the forms of organization of capital, changes in the regulatory environment, slack labour markets, and the availability of new technologies and new managerial techniques - have created both the incentive and the opportunity for changes at the micro-economic level of the enterprise. Many enterprises, both in Australia and elsewhere in the advanced capitalist world, are increasingly availing themselves of these opportunities in order to restructure their operations in fundamental ways.

The accurate description, analysis and evaluation of these changes is a crucial task for labour-oriented research. There is of course no *a priori* reason for assuming that such changes must possess an internal coherence. On the contrary, a cursory glance suggests that the forms of restructuring vary widely, ranging over all the dimensions of the operations of the firm, including such fundamentals as location, financial structure, and business strategies and extending to embrace accelerated innovation in product and process technologies, experimentation with new forms of work organization, new job design, and differentiation in employment practices. These changes in turn have a varied impact, direct or indirect, both on the workforce employed within these firms and on the structure of the economy as a whole.

Given the diversity of conditions faced by individual enterprises and the diversity of resources that they are able to deploy, such variation is not in principle surprising. But it is also possible to note that even enterprises in similar circumstances have adopted quite different forms of restructuring. Indeed this variability in response is one of the features that contributes to the novelty of the current period. It is appropriate to characterise the current period as one of widespread questioning of past approaches and of experimentation with new approaches in the field of work.

Micro-economic reform and award restructuring

In the past two years there has been a significant shift in policy focus within Australia, away from the broader macro-economic conditions of industrial development to the micro-economic conditions and constraints affecting economic performance at the level of the individual enterprise. This shift in focus has involved government, employers and the trade unions. In particular, micro-economic reform has become a major theme of government discussion and policy. The emergence of the theme can be traced through a number of key discussion documents (e.g. BIE, 1986; EPAC, 1988) and has already been expressed in a number of initiatives (e.g. the National Industry Extension Service).

The scope of the shift in policy focus towards the micro-economic level is wide and has also come to embrace an agenda for labour market reform (see DIR, 1988). While labour market reform can be pursued in a number of ways, one major focus has naturally been on the principles governing

wage determination. As a result much attention in the debate around micro-economic reform has come to be centred on the current initiatives to reorganise the patchwork of awards and to alter the principles of wage determination through the process of **award restructuring**. This in turn is an aspect that has a direct and immediate impact on labour and the trade unions.

The broad significance of award restructuring lies in the fact that it offers the prospect of the introduction of elements of decentralization into what has previously been a highly centralized system. An element of decentralization emerged first of all in the wake of the decision of the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission (ACAC) in March 1987. According to this decision, so-called 'second tier' wage rises to a ceiling of 4% were to be offset by productivity improvements at the enterprise level agreed to by employers and trade unions under a principle of 'restructuring and efficiency'. In manufacturing and in particular in the metals and engineering sector - where the negotiations on the second tier were most extensive - the results included measures such as the removal of certain restrictions on the spread of ordinary hours, on the allocation of rostered days off and overtime, and on the use of casual, part-time and sub-contract work (Rimmer and Zappala, 1988; Frenkel and Shaw, 1989; Reilly, 1989; cf McDonald and Rimmer, 1988). This was succeeded by the decision of the Commission in the August 1988 National Wage Case to introduce a similar 'structural efficiency' principle as the key element in a new system of wage fixation. Parties were encouraged to examine and restructure their awards with a view to introducing measures that would assist the development of a more highly skilled and flexible labour force (ACAC, 1988). Since that time efforts have been devoted to restructuring the relevant awards in accordance with the guidelines sketched out by the Commission.

Employers have long demanded a turn away from centralized wage-fixation towards a system that provides more scope for enterprise-level bargaining, where wages and other conditions can be adjusted to allow for 'local circumstances'. The lure of 'flexibility' is overlaid here by a widespread feeling that enterprise-level bargaining promises to shift the main terrain of negotiations to an area where management is strong and resourceful and where employees are subject to a more pressing and more immediate sense of community of interest with their employer. Employer demands for such a turn have acquired added urgency in the most recent

period, as management has cast around for new solutions to its difficulties and as the independent strength of the trade union movement has ebbed away. Although currently divided into a conservative and a radical-right faction according to how they see a more decentralized system emerging - whether within the framework of the present system or by a radical turn towards individual collective bargaining contracts on the U.S. model - employers take their starting point from a shared, long-standing agenda. This defines the problem in terms of labour costs and 'restrictive work practices'. They therefore approach the discussion on award restructuring with a set of demands that seeks to maximize the elements of decentralization and that includes the opportunity for more flexible deployment, more flexibility in working hours and an increased use of contract labour (see e.g. Evans, 1988; BCA, 1989).

What at first glance is more surprising is that the trade unions are also willing to accommodate the introduction of elements of decentralization. Although in the recent past the trade unions had vigorously defended the centralized system against the criticisms of the employers, much of the initial impetus towards award restructuring in fact came from the trade unions, in particular the left of the trade union movement grouped around the metal trades federation of trade unions. In addition the trade unions have been responsible for many of the specific suggestions concerning the content of the restructured awards and at least to some extent they continue to hold the initiative in the ensuing negotiations.

Part of the explanation for the trade union attitude can be found in the immediate benefits for members, including the change in pay rates and the prospect of an expanded training system. A key element of award restructuring from the point of view of the trade unions is the enhanced skill formation for their members (multi-skilling), to be pursued through a revamped training system and - at the level of the enterprise - the broad-banding of job classifications, a new career structure, and new consultative structures (which would in turn move on to consider the contribution of work organization and job design to skill formation).

But underlying this is also the way in which award restructuring is seen as an avenue for pursuing the long-standing trade union concern with industry policy. Since the early 1980s, and with particular emphasis in the early years of the federal Labor government, many trade unions have sought to address the broad needs of their members in manufacturing

industry by pressuring the federal government to implement positive assistance measures directed at encouraging the regeneration of manufacturing industry (e.g. MTU, 1984; see Ewer, Higgins and Stevens, 1987). Award restructuring has come to be seen as a lever for achieving conditions at the enterprise level that are necessary for such regeneration. It is seen as a lever for encouraging one form of restructuring from amongst the flurry of initiatives presently pursued by management. From this point of view the interest in award restructuring is part of a broader perspective identified with 'strategic' or 'political' unionism (see ACTU/TDC, 1987; Frenkel, 1988; Flew 1989). It can be judged on the one hand as an extension of the traditional left policy on investment agreements and on the other hand as a change of emphasis from the so-far relatively un-rewarding effort to affect government industry policy at the macro-economic level to the more promising and more familiar level of seeking to affect employers' practices within the enterprise.

The outcome of award restructuring is still uncertain and it is possible that the negotiations may yet be swamped by the general frustrations and concerns around the level of real wages. Even if this fails to eventuate, it is not yet clear to what extent the more valuable elements of the trade union claims, e.g. on training, will be realised. Moreover, whatever the extent of success in the negotiations, the specific result in the individual enterprises and industries is bound to be highly variable. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the approaches taken up by the negotiating parties seem set to remain an important part of the industrial relations scene and to have a continuing impact for years to come.²

2 Mention should also be made of the role of the Federal Labor government, which has lent its weight to the movement around award restructuring by endorsing the idea of enhanced skill formation in industry (ASTECC 1987; Dawkins and Holding, 1987) and by pushing forward discussion of new initiatives in industry training (Minister for Employment, Education and Training, 1987, 1988, 1989). The April 1989 Economic Statement provides an account of the government's approach to award restructuring (Treasury, 1989, 63-4, 27-31). Subsequent discussion has proceeded to examine the possibilities in the training area, including the proposal for a minimum training requirement (MTR) to be imposed on individual enterprises (see Employment and Skills Formation Council, 1989). What would happen with a change of government in the Federal sphere in 1990 remains an important, still open question.

Post-Fordist Theories

The swirl of activity in Australia around micro-economic restructuring, whether as simple managerial practice or as an item of negotiation and struggle within the processes of collective bargaining, has proceeded with very little academic scrutiny (although for metals and engineering see Frenkel, 1987a, 1987b; Bramble, 1988). But this does not mean that there is no theoretical content or significance in the efforts of the individuals involved with this activity. Employers have taken up some of the ideas and techniques of labour market flexibility that have arisen in the management-oriented literature from overseas. This literature has filtered into Australia, partly through the medium of the OECD (OECD, 1986), although a separate influence has also been the British literature on the 'flexible firm' (e.g. NEDO, 1986).

The trade unions and a number of commentators sympathetic to the labour movement have also taken up theoretical work in order to orient and justify their endeavours. There has been some influence from the management-oriented literature favoured by the employers, in particular through the forums where employers and trade unions are thrown together (NLCC, 1987, 1988; CAI-ACTU, 1988). But more important has been the somewhat distinct body of work from a left-liberal or socialist perspective that has propagated ideas of 'post-Fordism'. It is this major body of work that provides the focus for the remainder of the paper.

In their most popular and influential form post-Fordist theories argue that the advanced capitalist societies stand at the threshold of major changes in production work and, extending on from this, major changes in the regulation of labour and the general structure of the economy and the society. These changes are seen as marking a transition from a Fordist model of production to a new model of post-Fordism. Much of the focus of the argument is on the implications of these changes for labour. Spurred on by such factors as the alterations in product markets and the opportunities offered by new micro-electronic technologies, many firms are seen to be under pressure to adopt new policies towards their workforce and to introduce new forms of the organization of work. In contrast to the traditional labour policies, identified with Taylorism or Fordism, it is argued that there will need to be a new regard for the contribution of human labour in production and a new concern to enhance this contribu-

tion by upgrading skills and by devolving responsibility to the shop floor. Evidence for the beginnings of new labour policies is detected in some of the current restructuring initiatives and it is argued that these are likely to be more widely diffused as restructuring gathers further momentum. In short, post-Fordist theories offer an interpretation of current initiatives in restructuring that stresses their positive potential for shop floor workers³

The genealogy of these ideas within the current debates in the UK, the US, France and West Germany is relatively clear. A central axis in the discussion is provided by the work on Fordism and the crisis of Fordism from the French regulation school, although this work has filtered into the English-language debate only slowly and indirectly (Aglietta, 1979, Leborgne and Lipietz, 1988, Lipietz, 1986, Lokjine, 1986, Palloix, 1976, Coriat, 1980, Boyer ed., 1988). More directly influential has been the work of Michael Piore and Charles Sabel, who on the basis of a parallel analysis of the crisis of mass production postulate a crucial historical juncture that offers a choice between perpetuating the model of mass production and revitalising a form of craft production ('flexible specialization') centring on the production of specialized goods with general purpose machinery in small firms dominated by craft workers (1984). Piore and Sabel's argument pivots on alleged changes in the composition of demand but other work in English has heavily stressed the role of new technology. Important here has been the current work - itself partly influenced by the French regulation school - on technological paradigms and long waves of development, associated in particular with

3 This summarises the dominant current within the post-Fordist literature. Some writings are far less sanguine about the implications for labour of the new post-Fordist era and have pointed to trends towards polarization. Others with a similarly critical slant have hesitated to talk of post-Fordism and have preferred to designate the emerging new system as one of neo-Fordism. What remains common to the literature is the structure of the argument, based on a narrative that introduces Fordism, the crisis of Fordism, and then - at least in most cases - the new post-Fordist era.

the SPRU at the University of Sussex (e.g. Freeman, 1987; Perez, 1983, 1985; see Blackburn, Coombs and Green, 1985; Roobeek, 1987). Somewhat separate influences include the more traditional academic literature interested in the impact of technical change as well as the industry policy discussions of writers associated with the Harvard Business School. Also of significance has been the rich tradition of industrial research in West Germany, some of which can be seen as providing an important, parallel discussion of post-Fordism (Kern and Schumann 1984, 1987; Sorge and Streeck, 1988).⁴

The reception of post-Fordist ideas in Australia

Post-Fordist ideas would in any case be treated seriously and welcomed by trade unions, since they promise an extended area of overlap between the dynamic of capital and a number of long-standing union demands. For the Australian trade unions they proved particularly welcome, since these ideas could be easily grafted on to the pre-existing discussion of industry policy. Post-Fordist ideas seemed to provide a basis for extending to the micro-economic level the co-operation with employers that the trade unions pursued at the macro-economic level. They seemed to provide a congenial micro-economic recipe for the competitiveness that the unions were determined to introduce into industry, offering comfort that changes in the direction of increased competitiveness can be in the narrow as well as the broad interest of workers employed in industry. In particular they seemed to justify a major effort to upgrade the skills of the workforce in order to get a foot up onto the ladder leading to the new post-Fordist era.

The reception of these ideas can be traced back to the earlier work on industry policy, in particular as this extended to the micro-economic level

4 Again it is useful to signal the variation in this body of writings. For example, Piore and Sabel prefer to speak of 'mass production' rather than Fordism. Similarly the alternative they foreshadow is not referred to as post-Fordism but 'flexible specialization'. This reflects their contention that mass production and craft production are historically coterminous alternatives whose origins and competitive relations predate the twentieth century. Similarly, Sorge and Streeck distance themselves from the notion that new technology or new market conditions will bring into being a new system of production. Instead they prefer to speak of a 'loading' towards an alternative that has always been present ('diversified quality production').

in the efforts to develop specific agreements on work practices and training within the context of the heavy engineering package. These ideas appeared first of all in the work on the importance of skill formation (e.g. Ford, 1986; Curtain et al, eds., 1986; Curtain, 1987). More broadly they surfaced hesitantly in some of the earlier commentaries on industry policy (Ewer et al, 1987) and again hesitantly in the report of the ACTU/TDC mission to Europe (1987; cf MTIA/MTFU, 1988). But it is in the recent period that they have been presented most directly - in particular in the influential speeches and interviews of Laurie Carmichael (e.g. 1988, 1989) and in the extensive recent writings of John Mathews (Mathews, Hall and Smith, 1988; Mathews 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c; Badham and Mathews, 1989). The ideas played a prominent role in the initial impulse towards award restructuring and continue to exercise an important influence in the subsequent negotiations. From this point the ideas have spread well beyond the work of a number of individuals and they have come to inspire the efforts of a broad layer of activists involved with the work of government as well as trade unions.

The writings of Carmichael and Mathews deserve careful attention. Laurie Carmichael, one of the leading figures in the union impulse towards award restructuring, first from within the AMWU and then most recently from within the ACTU, has outlined his views in a recent interview and speech (1988, 1989). He situates the union initiatives around award restructuring within a broad theory of changes in production work since the turn of the century. He argues that present-day systems of production represent a particular stage of development that was inaugurated by the technological revolution of the turn of the century, marked on the one hand by the mastering of electrical processes and the development of the internal combustion engine and on the other hand by the theories of scientific management. He suggests that we are currently proceeding through a technological revolution of comparable magnitude and significance, marked first of all by the emergence of micro-electronic technologies. These technologies are seen as making possible greater flexibility in adapting to changing demand, greater speed in responding to orders, and improved product quality (1989, 26). Most importantly, he goes on to suggest that they make possible - or even require - a new approach from management to the workforce. In place of the traditional Taylorist system, based on a narrow detail division of labour, limited task autonomy, deskilling, and authoritarian control from management, a new system,

based on multi-skilling, increased responsibility and enhanced industrial democracy at the workplace, is now required. For Carmichael, it is the technological revolution that provides the impetus for the trade union initiatives.

Carmichael's argument is only fragmentary and does not gesture much beyond a conventional emphasis on the imperatives of technology. A more elaborated position and one more self-consciously within the tradition of post-Fordism has been advanced in the recent writings of John Mathews, in particular in *Tools of Change* (1989a), where he seeks to provide intellectual support for a positive trade union intervention, and in the more recent article co-authored with Richard Badham (Badham and Mathews, 1989), which offers an ambitious conceptual framework designed to help in clarifying some of the issues in the debate around post-Fordism.

The structure of Mathews' argument duplicates that of Piore and Sabel, though he dispenses with some of the more romantic touches, e.g. the paean to the opportunities for small firms and craft workers, and he places more emphasis on the impact of new technologies. He begins with the familiar argument that the present organization of work conforms to a model or paradigm of 'Fordism'. He suggests that external shocks together with the internal contradictions of the model have initiated a crisis of Fordism, whose effects are being felt today in the advanced capitalist societies. In response to the crisis, management is experimenting with new strategies. The classification and characterization of these strategies has shifted as Mathews has developed his argument in different texts. However, in general he suggests that they can be broadly divided into two groups: on the one hand a continuation of the old model in one form or another, which he discusses in terms of Fordism and neo-Fordism, and on the other hand a shift towards flexibility and an increased reliance on the input of highly skilled and motivated workers - the post-Fordist alternative. In both strategies the new technologies based on micro-electronics can play a role, either as a new set of opportunities to be pressed within the old mould of Taylorist approaches to labour (as 'Computer-Aided Taylorism') or as the basis for a comprehensive new post-Fordist model.

The main stress of Mathews' work is on this broad contrast between Fordism (including neo-Fordism) and post-Fordism. The focus is on the

prospect of a significant 'paradigm shift' towards post-Fordism and on the implications of this for labour. Flowing on from the suggestion of an increased reliance on skill and motivation, the post-Fordist alternative is presented as favourable to the interests of workers, offering the opportunity for the realization of the long-standing demand for industrial democracy. Mathews goes on to emphasise the need for the labour movement to intervene politically to ensure the triumph of this alternative. This in turn presents a challenge to the labour movement, which has become reliant on and habituated to an oppositional approach. The labour movement must appreciate that the pursuit of its aims no longer means 'swimming against the tide' (1989a, 34-5); it must shift from an oppositional approach to an interventionist, protagonistic approach that Mathews identifies with 'political unionism'.

Assessment of Post-Fordism

There is nothing substantively new as yet in the Australian contribution to the literature on post-Fordism. But there is a distinctive inflection in this contribution, by virtue of the way in which the literature on post-Fordism has been inserted into the existing debates on strategies for the labour movement.

How can we assess these ideas? Discussion and debate on post-Fordism has begun to emerge in the English-language literature, firstly around Piore and Sabel's work (Williams, Cutler, Williams and Haslam, 1987; Pollert, 1988; Hyman, 1988; Sayer, 1988; Wood, 1989; Jenson, 1989; cf Lane, 1988) and then more recently around the extension of the work of the French regulation school into a theme of flexible accumulation (e.g. Schoenberger, 1988; Scott, 1988; Moulaert and Swyngedouw, 1989, Hudson, 1989). A similar discussion can be traced in West Germany, sparked off by the work of Kern and Schumann (see Campbell, 1989). This discussion remains fragmentary and unfinished. At least some of the more critical writings are rather intemperate, coloured by a sensitivity to the political issues that are seen to lurk beneath the surface of the discussion. Nevertheless, the discussion has registered some advances. It has indicated both the weakness of the extravagant characterization of the previous period in terms of a model or paradigm of Fordism/mass production and the contentiousness of the related conception of a crisis of

Fordism/mass production (Williams et al, 1987; Sayer, 1988). Less successful has been the attempt to further discussion on the current period and the significance of the developments to which the post-Fordist writings draw attention.

I don't want to canvass all the points of debate. My remarks are confined to the Australian discussion and to a few general points concerning the assessment of contemporary changes at the workplace. In this way I want to sound a note of caution concerning any over-hasty appropriation of post-Fordist writings.

It is useful to begin by summarising the strengths of the post-Fordist writings. First, these writings introduce a new and promising note into research on the transformation of work. In contrast to theories of post-industrialism, they continue to assume the centrality of work to the social life of society and -moving on from this - continue to give a central place to the analysis of production work. On the other hand, they stand opposed to the thesis of a deskilling of production work that is associated with Braverman's research (1974), thereby opening up the prospect of a fruitful debate on the concrete processes affecting production work. At the most general level, these writings are also useful in the way in which they link concrete investigations of the organization of work and job design at the level of the enterprise to a consideration of general processes of restructuring. At least in principle they break away from a narrow focus on the labour process and gesture to a more sophisticated account of the link between the development of labour processes and the more general dynamic of capitalist accumulation. Most importantly, these writings are useful in drawing attention to the changes currently affecting the workplace. They quite rightly argue that there is something novel in the nature of the current period and in the changes at the workplace as a result of restructuring. They quite pertinently imply that the assessment of these changes is an urgent task for labour-oriented research. Finally, in the case of the Australian work under consideration here, it is also worth drawing attention to the value of work that is firmly anchored in an appreciation of the strategic position and needs of the trade union movement.

Nevertheless, these writings are vulnerable to criticism on a number of counts:

Selective evidence

In presenting evidence for the direction of changes at the workplace the argument is very selective; it considers only some of the changes taking place and excludes many others. The focus is on new approaches to labour. Even more narrowly, the emphasis is predominantly on new skill requirements, whether in the form of new skilled jobs or in the form of new skills for existing jobs. Such new skill requirements are discussed in terms of the development of problem-solving or diagnostic skills, and the fusion of new forms of theoretical knowledge with traditional practical know-how. But this is skill as it appears associated with the use of micro-electronic technologies in selected areas of manufacturing in selected countries. The industry focus is primarily on industries traditionally dominated by small-batch or even customised production such as the machine tool industry. The classic case is provided by the development of programming-at-the-machine in the context of the introduction of CNC equipment. More generally, there is a heavy reliance on allusions to the re-integration of maintenance and quality control with production work in a wider variety of industries including the car industry. More tangentially, there are also references to traditional experiments with alternative forms of work organization, most importantly team work but also forms of job enlargement and job enrichment.

There are a number of points that can be made here. Firstly these changes only concern a minority of (often already-skilled) workers in just a few industries. This would not matter so much if they were the only changes affecting labour and it was therefore possible to argue that they represented trends that could be expected to extend to encompass all or most workers. But in the case of other workers in the same enterprises, in other enterprises in the same industry, or in other industries it is often possible to point to quite different changes and quite different trends, including with respect to skill requirements as a result of changes in product technology. It is difficult to see why new skill requirements should be privileged and examples of developments such as casualisation, increased work burdens, and increased use of sub-contract labour should be neglected.

Secondly, even in the case of the changes that are used as evidence the effects of these changes on labour are approached too uncritically. The criticism is most pertinent in the case of Piore and Sabel, who use their

empirical examples as a platform for launching an implausible vision of a revitalised craft production. But even in the case of more qualified accounts such as that of Mathews, which acknowledges the distance between the traditional craft worker and the new skilled worker, the claims for new skill requirements are not thoroughly scrutinised to separate shadow from substance, temporary from likely permanent effects, and statistical illusions from real changes.

Thirdly, even in the case where the skill effects are substantial and permanent these skill effects are too readily isolated from changes in the other dimensions of jobs, e.g. task autonomy, work burdens and social interaction. It is too readily assumed that skill is the pivotal dimension of work and that an increase in skill requirements for particular jobs leads to an improvement in other dimensions of the job (and indeed working conditions in general). But it by no means follows, for example, that increased skill requirements necessarily imply increased task autonomy, increased social interaction and reduced work burdens. In the case of some skilled automation work such as that of 'monitoring and intervening' (e.g. in the chemical industry) it can be argued that the relationship tends to the reverse. In particular, it is not possible to bracket together skill and responsibility as if the two necessarily went hand-in-hand (Carmichael, 1989; Badham and Mathews, 1989).⁵ In the case of changes affecting jobs it is vitally important to develop a comprehensive view based on a consideration of the effects on all the dimensions of jobs as well as on working conditions in general.

Global models

Perhaps the crucial weakness concerns the way in which the argument illicitly leaps back and forth from the (selected) evidence of change at the

5 Badham and Mathews agree that an increase in what they call labour responsibility cannot be taken to imply an improvement in working conditions (1989, 201, 214). But they still bundle together skill and responsibility in their concept of labour responsibility as if these two dimensions were inseparable. The devolution of responsibility should be seen as a quite separate topic to that of skill. It is in fact an important phenomenon and may be far more widespread than changes directed to an upgrading of skills. It is often accompanied by management schemes designed to foster accommodation and an ideological identification with the enterprise

workplace to the discussion of a new global post-Fordist model (or 'paradigm'). Piore and Sabel refer to 'flexible specialization', others speak of 'flexible accumulation', and yet others have taken up the term 'post-Fordism'. In each case the new global model tends to be presented as the necessary sequel to the old global model of mass production/Fordism. The central argument is in fact often primarily situated at the abstract level of postulated transition between these global models, and the evidence of change at the workplace is brought in as simply illustrative examples of the overall trend. In some cases it is the elaborate theoretical superstructure that in turn serves to ratify the selectivity of this evidence, e.g. through the introduction of a distinction between 'post-Fordism' and 'neo-Fordism' (which acts to separate out from amongst the changes that are novel those that do and do not have benefits for labour). The assumptions built into the conceptual framework then operate to designate the former as examples of the trend and the latter as merely a (forlorn) attempt to perpetuate Fordism (Mathews, 1989a, 31-35; but cf Badham and Mathews, 1989, 208, 233).

The result of this focus on global models or paradigms is an 'overburdened dualism' that is unjustified and that inhibits a proper analysis of the current changes at the workplace. Part of the problem here undoubtedly stems from the way in which the previous period is itself conceptualised in terms of a model of Fordism/mass production. This ascribes a false homogeneity to the previous period and the forms of production encountered in this period (Williams et al, 1987; Sayer, 1988). As well as being historically dubious, such a conceptualisation can also be seen, most importantly, as encouraging an abbreviated and inadequate analysis of changes in the current period. Any development in the current period that seems to depart from the old model is assigned an often-spurious degree of novelty and significance. Moreover, insofar as the old is regarded as hostile to labour, there is a tendency to view new developments with an often-exaggerated degree of enthusiasm that overlooks their heterogeneity and internal contradictions. Finally, in line with the homogeneity ascribed to the previous period, there is a tendency to treat all developments that appear genuinely new in the current period as merely components of another homogenous model of production. In short, the appeal to a model of Fordism/mass production encourages a pre-judging of the novelty, significance, promise and cohesion of new developments. This is to rush over the very aspects that need to be carefully assessed.

Where does the notion of a succession of models in fact come from? It is difficult to find an explicit justification for this notion in the literature, although the implicit appeal - raised in the use of the term 'paradigm' - is to a parallel with the progress of research in natural science (or, more contentiously, to a parallel with the progress of technological invention). But this parallel is misleading, since it overlooks the basic fact that the practice of capitalist enterprise, in sharp contrast to the practice of science, is geared to the production of pre-determined results - an adequate rate of profit - and tends to be *ad hoc*, open and tolerant of diversity in its methods, so long as this end-result can be secured. The role of an intellectual framework - represented in this case by the managerial strategies - is relatively restricted and modest, oriented to organising the material conditions for valorization in appropriate quantities and then co-ordinating their combination. Though it is true that unreflected, shared cultural assumptions play a part in this process, to talk of paradigms is to exaggerate their role and to neglect the controls imposed by the material conditions themselves as well as the continuous test associated with the realization of value in the marketplace.

The problems of positing dominant models of production are reflected in the choice of the dimensions of the enterprise that are used to construct the models. In a somewhat similar fashion to the traditional labour process literature, the focus is primarily on the relations between management and the workforce. The models are conceptualised in terms of managerial strategies that are understood as pivoting around distinctive attitudes towards labour, whether hostile and suspicious of worker initiative or accomodating and receptive of worker initiative. But this is to ignore one of the central conclusions of the labour process debate: that it is not possible to treat the relationship with labour as the key to the analysis and categorisation of different managerial strategies, different forms of work organisation, or different enterprise structures.

The elaborate superstructure of models and paradigms used in much of the post-Fordist literature clouds the central issues and short-circuits the crucial tasks of analysis. It seems to me that the necessary discussion of contemporary developments at the workplace could proceed more fruitfully if we could strip away this superstructure. Interestingly enough, the recent article by Badham and Mathews does take some steps in this direction, first by introducing a useful distinction between production

process, production strategy and production paradigm, and then by suggesting that the current period should be seen as characterised by the emergence of a number of competing paradigms. Though this is useful the discussion does not proceed to a clear account of the number of paradigms and the basis for their differentiation. Indeed in the presentation and elaboration of their conceptual framework the discussion reverts to the familiar territory of a tripartite division between Fordism, neo-Fordism and post-Fordism. It remains unclear whether this division is seen as directly derived from the three dimensions used to construct the framework (one of which, characteristically, is labour responsibility) or whether it is seen as merely a convenient way of marking out the 'production space' defined by the framework. But in either case it remains vulnerable to the objection that such a division is arbitrary and of little use in clarifying the nature of the changes taking place in the current period.⁶

Political and social choices

The post-Fordist argument also fudges the issue of political and social choice. This problem runs through much of the post-Fordist literature, which tends to rely heavily on a long chain of causal connections linking background factors such as new technologies or new structures of final demand to strategies of enterprises and then to new forms of labour policy. This can take various forms, with some versions relying on a chain forged from different dimensions of 'flexibility'. At one extreme the literature shades off into a fairly open form of (technological) determinism (e.g. Adler, 1986), but even in cases where the intention is to clarify the causal connections in a non-deterministic way, there is ample evidence of

6 An indication of these problems can be found in the rather heavy weather made by Badham and Mathews of incorporating evidence of new developments counter to the more rosy predictions associated with post-Fordism. Features such as intensification are seen as compatible with (one form of) post-Fordism, but other features such as skills polarisation are, for reasons that are left a little unclear, assigned to neo-Fordism (1989, 224-5, 230-1; cf Mathews 1989a, 38). Badham and Mathews defend their use of these categories in a rather curious way. They stress that generalisations are crucial both to scientific investigation and to practical intervention (1989, 215-216, cf 225, 234). This is quite true. But it blurs the vital point that the generalisations must be apt and the interventions appropriate and effective. The critical argument advanced here suggests that the abstract categories are not apt and that the interventions they sponsor run the risk of being inappropriate and dangerous.

hesitations and ambiguities (e.g. Sorge and Streeck, 1988). In many cases there is a formal gesture to the possibility of choice, but the actual argument carries along with it all manner of deterministic assumptions.

Much of the problem here is often bound up with the use of an argument couched in terms of global models and paradigms, since this already pre-packages the alternatives into a form that compresses the actual causal relations and constricts the range and depth of the actual choices. Talk of a choice between two or three global models, even if seriously meant, cannot be sufficient to establish non-deterministic credentials, since such a choice does not in fact correspond to the social processes of action and the various points at which choices are made. The point has been made by Williams et al, when they suggest that the argument around flexible specialization virtually abolishes the role of enterprise calculation (1987, 436), but from a somewhat different perspective it is possible to suggest that it suppresses an appreciation of the way in which the dynamic of capital takes effect at the level of the individual enterprise. The result is a perspective that improperly simplifies the choices open both to management and trade unions and that exaggerates the prospects of collaboration between the two.

Similar difficulties are evident in the Australian discussion. Laurie Carmichael argues that the modern technological revolution demands a new approach to labour. He suggests that there is no automatic cause and effect relationship between the two and that human intervention is required in order to ensure that the positive potential of the technological revolution is realised (1989, 27). There is the hint of a choice here but it is one that is tightly constrained. The choice is between fulfilling the demands of the technological revolution and thereby bringing it to a successful culmination or resisting these demands and suffering dire consequences. A choice remains but it has shifted on its axis; it is not a true choice between alternative paths of development but an enfeebled semi-rhetorical choice between progress and stagnation.

A related tension can be detected in the work of John Mathews. Mathews stresses strongly the general issue of choice. He eloquently criticises (technological) determinism and much of his work is oriented to articulating political choices available to the labour movement. In connection with the issue of the future shape of work he stresses the possibility of choice between the two alternatives of Fordism and post-Fordism and he

goes on to argue that "the 1990s will provide the real-world 'laboratory' in which these 'competing paradigms' will be tested and refined" (1989b, 144). But already here we can see the way in which the alternatives have been pre-packaged and the range and nature of the actual choices compressed. Moreover, at the same time, even this restricted choice tends to be redefined in a fashion similar to Carmichael. Thus Mathews is concerned to stress the **optimality** of the second choice for management (e.g. 1989a, 34-35). He argues that productivity gains with new technology, e.g. flexible manufacturing systems, cannot be achieved by firms that introduce these along the old lines but can only really be achieved within the framework of the second strategy. The neo-Fordist path fails to appreciate the premium that is being placed on a highly skilled and motivated workforce. He suggests that a deskilling design philosophy is taking industry "down the road to oblivion", whereas firms which follow an upskilling strategy "are starting to reap the economic rewards" (1989a, 126, 127). For Mathews, a central point is that industrial democracy is now "a matter of economic survival" (1988, 20, 23). These flourishes undermine any notion of a true alternative between the two approaches; they reduce the choice once again to one between progress and stagnation, survival and death, success and failure.

There is one qualification that should be made. At least in some of his writings Mathews also gestures towards alternatives **within** the post-Fordist model. In *A Culture of Power* he refers casually to an alternative identified with the New Right, which entails a form of post-Fordism that by-passes the trade unions and is characterized by "a determined drive to involve workers individually" (1988, 23-24). This reappears in a more elaborated form in *Tools of Change*, where it is discussed first of all as a

7 There is more than a hint here of the old argument, characteristic of the heyday of the 'work humanization' initiatives, that management does not recognise its own true interests (which overlap with the interests of workers) because it is blinded by outdated ideology. This presents workers and their unions with the responsibility and opportunity to 'lead' the employers (cf Mathews, 1989a, 183). The main problem with this argument is not that it implies an effort to assess the implications of management initiatives for productivity and profitability and to explore the degree of overlap between the interests of management and workers. Such an effort is vital. The problem lies with the use of a binary opposition that scrambles the palette of choices open to both management and workers into a simple alternative of just two choices. A healthy regard for the capabilities of management and a healthy scepticism about the implications for the workforce of its initiatives are two ingredients of a much better approach.

'skills polarisation' strategy, seen as based on the abandonment of Taylorism for the few but the retention of unskilled work under conditions of casual employment for the many (1989a, 38, 3-4). This is again presented in tandem with the New Right and its strategy of "by-passing unions, resorting to common law to settle industrial disputes, promoting enterprise bargaining, and so on" (1989a, 161). For Badham and Mathews skills polarisation is pushed away into neo-Fordism, but a space is still left for alternatives within post-Fordism, dependent on whether or not the increased skill and responsibility that is delegated to workers is used as the basis for improved working conditions and increased 'worker autonomy' (1989, 214, 200-202).

Given that this is an alternative **within** post-Fordism then it does qualify as an issue of genuine choice. And indeed when Mathews poses this alternative he also gestures to the pressing need for union intervention in order to forestall the more management-oriented path to post-Fordism (e.g. 1989a, 38, 161). However, what is noteworthy is how shadowy this alternative remains, lacking any clear definition. It is poorly integrated into the argument and raises more questions than it answers. How does this alternative relate to the use of new technology? How does the trade union movement ensure that its strategic intervention doesn't help to consolidate such a path?

Conclusion

If we dispense with the post-Fordist conceptual framework of global models, with its over-simplified choices and dubious causal connections, we are left with the evidence in this literature of certain changes at the workplace, associated in particular with new skill requirements. This is undeniably useful and does pose important issues for trade union action. However we are left with the problem that this evidence is only selective and as the foundation for a comprehensive analysis of the current period and of the tasks facing the trade union movement it is far too fragile.

It seems to me that a more appropriate conceptual framework would need to be situated at a quite different level. What is novel about the current period is not so much that it reveals certain new types of labour policies - although it does reveal these - but rather that restructuring has a new, intensified character, marked by the number of firms engaged in some

form of restructuring and by the depth and variation in their responses to the conditions they face. What is involved can be aptly described as a cluster of restructuring initiatives. From this point of view the post-Fordist literature is deficient in that it grasps only one effect of the restructuring initiatives and falsely presents this as a (likely dominant) form of restructuring. It thereby misses both a number of important dimensions of restructuring, e.g. financial integration, and the variation in the forms of restructuring.

It remains true that labour-oriented research must be vitally interested in the current and likely future effects of restructuring initiatives on labour and in the prospects for intervention. Here it is not easy to point to an alternative analysis that captures the range of changes and the relative significance of the varied trends. Some useful research has been done at the general level of restructuring with respect to forms of corporate reorganization, sectoral shifts in employment, the decline of individual industries and the spatial redistribution of production. But this has largely concerned aggregate job loss (or job gain). Little attention has been given to forms of restructuring at the micro-economic level of the individual enterprise and their effects on labour. There have been partial accounts that have captured, in a similar way to the post-Fordist literature itself, particular aspects of the trends affecting labour but no comprehensive analysis.

The task for labour-oriented research must be to build such an analysis. As well as the trends singled out by the post-Fordist literature it will also be necessary to grapple with trends that have eluded attention and that run counter to the positive image of the future presented in this literature.

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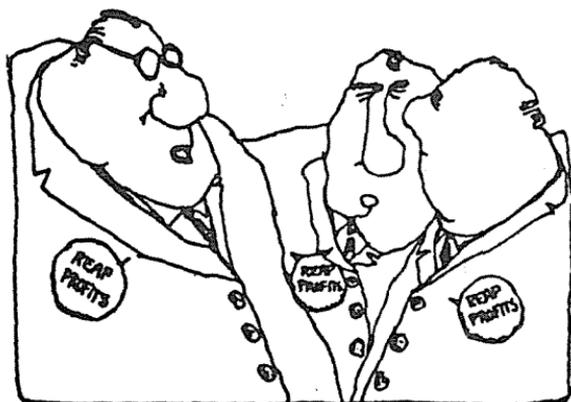
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