

Reconstitution of Labor Process Analysis for Algorithmic Management and Platform Work

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Abstract: This brief narrative review traces the evolution of labor process analysis from its industrial inception to its current reinvigorated application to algorithmic management and platform work in the gig economy. Core assumptions and postulates of Labor Process Theory (LPT) as a long-standing critical framework to analyze work and employment are reviewed. A previously introduced taxonomy of distinct waves of LPT research is extended with regard to the growing number of studies on algorithmic management. Exemplary contributions to this emerging body of literature are reviewed. Relevant theoretical frameworks and approaches are suggested to complement the perspective of LPT. Declared outdated or obsolete at various points, LPT has proven resilient, reconstituting itself as a central framework to analyze new regimes of work in terms of hybridized techno-economic despotism and hegemonic biopolitical governance. In a reflexive socio-historical perspective, LPT reveals a dialectic process with fractals of labor control and valorization reappearing in different configurations. Transcending other approaches, the immanent critique of LPT provides a comprehensive picture of the dynamics and dysfunctions of the capitalist mode of production over time and possibly in the future.

Keywords: labor process theory, critical structuralism, algorithmic management, platform work, techno-economic despotism, biopolitical governance, resistance

Introduction

Labor Process Theory (LPT) is an established critical framework in research on employed work and organizations, originally articulated roughly five decades ago with reference to the classic Marxist critique of the production and appropriation of value in the political economy (Braverman, 1974; Smith & Thompson, 2024). Since then, LPT has seen a number of turns and transformations, partly reflecting the dynamics of the historical developments of the capitalist labor process that it set out to study, but partly also rooted in academic debates and changing epistemological and ontological paradigms, specifically, the rise of poststructuralist, postmodern, and subjectivist perspectives (Gartman, 1983; O'Doherty & Willmott, 2001; Knights, 2000; Tinker, 2002). Consequently, the cumulative literature on LPT is vast and partly contradictory, influenced by different traditions and schools of thought (Adler, 2007; Parker, 1999; Thompson & Smith, 2000). However, while LPT, at different points in time, has been declared outdated and obsolete, it has proven resilient, resurging in different waves and reconfigurations (Omidi et al., 2023; Thompson & Smith, 2009). While these distinguished waves of LPT research will be outlined below, followed by core assumptions of the theoretical framework, the focus of the present contribution is the latest surge of applications of LPT to algorithmic management and platform work (Gandini, 2019; Kellogg et al., 2020; Purcell & Brook, 2022; Schaupp, 2022; Vallas et al., 2022). Instead of providing a systematic or comprehensive review of this emerging body of literature, which is a recommended task for subsequent studies, but is beyond this limited article, a brief overview is offered and selected exemplary contributions are highlighted as a basis for future research. In this vein, the last section deals with possible extensions and applicable frameworks to be included or emphasized in ongoing LPT research on algorithmic management regimes (Hornung & Höge, 2021). First, however, to gain a better understanding of the context of LPT, it makes sense to briefly turn to theorizing on different ideological frames of reference for understanding employment relationships (Budd & Bhawe, 2008). Research in industrial and labor relations has long suggested that the heterogeneity of interpretations of work and employment is rooted in different ontological frames (Barry & Wilkinson, 2021), which can be labeled egoist (self-interested actors), unitarist (convergence of interest), pluralist (negotiated order) and radical

or critical (structural antagonism). These different frameworks for understanding employment relationships are summarized in Table 1. LPT is the main theoretical contribution of the critical frame, based on radical structuralism or Marxism (Gartman, 1983; Tinker, 2002). As such, it is fundamentally incompatible with mainstream egoist and unitarist approaches, rooted in economic theory and conventional human resource management (Greenwood & Van Buren, 2017; Hornung & Höge, 2024). Nonetheless, in a recent systematic review of applications of LPT for the emerging field of critical human resource management, Omid et al. (2023) have shown that publications on LPT are not declining but actually surging. This boost is partly attributable to LPT reconstituting itself as a major framework for analyzing new regimes of algorithmic management and platform work. As outlined below, this resurgence of an essentially Marxist theory of work is remarkable and deserves more scholarly attention, to which this brief article seeks to contribute.

Table 1. Frames for Understanding Employment Relationships

Frames	Approaches	Description
Egoist	Neo-classical or neoliberal economics	Free individuals and enterprises acting as rational utility-maximizers are coordinated through market transactions, yielding optimal outcomes for all
Unitarist	Human resource management	Convergence of interest between employees and employers achieved through corporate policies and practices established by responsible management
Pluralist	Industrial and labor relations	Balance between employee and employer interests can be achieved in systems of negotiated order involving unions, political actors, and legal regulation
Critical	Marxism and radical structuralism	Political dominance of capital and antagonistic class interests of workers manifest in struggle for power and control over the labor process and societal institutions

Source: Own elaboration, drawing on Budd and Bhawe (2008)

The Evolution of Labor Process Research

As indicated above, LPT is the most long-standing critical framework for the study of work and employment relationships with roots in the analysis of the labor process by Karl Marx (1982/1867). Initially formulated by Harry Braverman (1974) in his highly influential book “Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century”, research on LPT has witnessed significant transformations, partly reflecting changes in the organization of work over time and partly also reflecting changes in the scientific paradigms to study work (Thompson & Smith, 2000, 2009, 2024). In an attempt to synthesize these transformations, Thompson and Newsome (2004) have distinguished four waves of research on LPT (see also Omid et al., 2023). Building on this taxonomy, the present contributions proposes that the emerging widespread and increasingly sophisticated application of LPT to algorithmic management, platform work, and the gig economy should be regarded as constituting a distinct fifth wave. The resulting suggested five waves are described in Table 2, including labels or major themes, description of the analyzed prototypical workplace regimes, and indicative publications. Based on Braverman’s (1974) analysis, the first wave has dealt predominantly with the degradation of work in the despotic workplace regimes of Taylorism. A few years later, in a second wave, Michael Burawoy (1982, 1983) emphasized the managerial “manufacturing” of worker consent and cooptation through hegemonic social and ideological control in industrial paternalism and collaborationist shopfloor culture. The subsequent third wave critically analyzed new workplace regimes of Post-Fordism and Toyotism, including lean production, just-in-time logistics, and so-called high-performance work systems (Dohse et al., 1985; Harley et al., 2010; Ramsay et al., 2000; Vidal, 2007, 2020). Offering critical evaluations of managerial strategies to

instrumentalize employee involvement, motivational work design, and group work to achieve cost reductions and work intensification, this third wave focuses on forms of participatory rationalization (or pseudo-participation) and is labeled here as “manufacturing empowerment” after an exemplary publication by Vidal (2007). The fourth wave was heavily influenced by the “disconnected capitalism” thesis (Thompson, 2003, 2013), problematizing how globalization, financialization, and the ideology of shareholder value have led corporations to disengage from the social employment contract, systematically offloading costs, risks, and responsibilities to workers and society. As Omid et al. (2023) point out, these insights have led to reconnecting LPT to broader developments in the economy, namely, the neoliberal restructuring and degradation of the welfare state. The fifth and latest wave reflects these ongoing trajectories, coupled with accelerated digitalization and virtualization, resulting in the focal phenomena of algorithmic management and platform work. Taken together, these trends manifest in what Schaupp (2022) termed “cybernetic proletarianization” of the workforce through digital Taylorism and exploitation of low-skilled labor in the form of marginalized and displaced populations excluded from the regular labor market (Lata et al., 2023; Morales & Stecher, 2023; Vallas et al., 2022). Overall, the socio-historical perspective of LPT and its “accompanying research” of the labor process across several decades reveals a dialectic movement with fractals of labor control and valorization reappearing in different technological forms and configurations.

Table 2. Waves of Labor Process Research

Waves	Major Themes	Prototypical Workplace Regimes	Indicative Studies
First Wave	Degradation of Work	Taylorism, Fordism, standardization, specialization and deskilling, technological and personal control	Braverman (1974)
Second Wave	Manufacturing Consent	Industrial paternalism, bureaucracy, internal career paths, individual incentives, gamification, shopfloor culture, social and ideological control	Burawoy (1982, 1983), Dohse et al. (1985)
Third Wave	Manufacturing Empowerment	Post-Fordism, Toyotism, lean production, just-in-time, flexible specialization, high-performance work systems, employee involvement	Vidal (2007, 2020), Ramsay et al. (2000), Harley et al. (2010)
Fourth Wave	Disconnected Capitalism	Financialization, shareholder value, strategic human resource management, downsizing, outsourcing, casualization, shifting risks from employers to workers	Thompson (2003, 2013), Ezzamel et al. (2008)
Fifth Wave	Cybernetic Proletarianization	Algorithmic management, platform work, techno-economic despotism, neo-normative control, biopolitical neoliberal governance, precariousness	Gandini (2019), Schaupp (2022), Kellogg et al. (2020)

Source: Own elaboration, drawing on Thompson and Newsome (2004) and Omid et al. (2023)

Core Assumptions of Labor Process Theory

With the evolution of LPT mimicking historical transformations of the organization and design of employed work, there has been some debate regarding what constitutes the enduring assumptions and concepts of the theoretical framework. For instance, following Braverman (1974), some LPT scholars have generalized the Taylorist tendency of “deskilling”, based on highly repetitive, short-cyclical and fragmented tasks, as a universal feature of the capitalist labor process. Subsequent analyses, however, have shown that deskilling is just one strategy to reduce costs and increase management control, and is not incompatible with parallel tendencies of “upskilling” to fit

different circumstances, i.e., where such a strategy proves to be more cost-efficient (e.g., more complex tasks and knowledge work) and control can be established otherwise (e.g., social and ideological control). Accordingly, LPT scholars, notably Thompson and Smith (2024), have worked to establish a “core theory”, which specifies basic assumptions in a general way and without universalizing characteristics of specific workplace regimes. While there seems to be some confusion or disagreement regarding exactly what components of LPT precisely constitute this “core theory”, Table 3 provides a provisional synthesis of different categorizations (Jaros, 2005). Assumptions of LPT are summarized in terms of the primacy of the production process as a site for the social analysis of class struggle and oppression, inherent dynamics associated with the logic of capital accumulation, the indeterminacy of labor and the associated transformation problem, as well as the managerial control imperative and the structural antagonism characterizing employment relationships according to the underlying critical paradigm.

Table 3. Core Assumptions of Labor Process Theory

Core Assumptions	Description
Primacy of production	The labor process is the most important focus of social analysis as it is the primary domain for the production and appropriation of value and reproduction of the material basis of society; it is where societal power structures manifest in the relations of production.
Logic of accumulation	Inherent dynamic connected to the perpetual need to increase productivity and profits, stemming from the competition of capital in maximizing returns on investments, resulting in the need for continuous rationalization and reorganization of the labor process.
Indeterminacy of labor	The profits or surplus value that can be extracted from human labor as a commodity are undefined and uncertain; abstract labor potential needs to be converted into concrete profitable performance, also referred to as the transformation problem.
Control imperative	Central ingredient to solving the transformation problem and maximizing extraction of value is the control of human labor as a managerial function through different regimes of economic, technological, bureaucratic, social, and mental modes of control.
Structured antagonism	Reflecting dynamics of control and value extraction, the relationship between capital (owners, investors, management) and labor (workers) is one of structurally conflicting interests, manifesting in struggle, resistance, submission, and collaboration.

Source: Own elaboration, drawing on Thompson and Smith (2024)

Labor Process Theory and Algorithmic Management

Evidenced by a sizable and growing number of theoretical and empirical articles, LPT has proven a particularly useful framework for analyzing new forms of work and technological control, specifically, algorithmic management and platform work, constituting, as suggested above, a distinct fifth wave of LPT research. While a comprehensive review of this emerging body of research is beyond this piece, notable contributions are, for instance, the initial conceptual application of LPT to the gig economy by Gandini (2019), the study of neo-normative forms of control through autonomy and appeals to neoliberal societal logics of entrepreneurship by Morales and Stecher (2023), and the empirical analysis of processes of “cybernetic proletarianization” through digital Taylorism and exploitative integration of marginalized populations into algorithmic valorization by Schaupp (2022). A remarkable and influential review and theory-building article was contributed by Kellogg and colleagues (2020), drawing on LPT in framing algorithmic management as a new and contested terrain of control. These authors have

analyzed the new quality of algorithmic control beyond previous modes of technological and bureaucratic control in terms of being comprehensive, instantaneous, interactive, and opaque. An adaptation of this taxonomy is provided in Table 4, extended through the dimension of an impersonal, quasi-objective and unchallengeable appearance, emphasized by Walker et al. (2021). Accordingly, the resulting “5 Is” of algorithmic control can be specified in terms of integratedness, instantaneity, interactiveness, intransparency, and incontestability, as described in the table below.

Table 4. Features of Algorithmic Control

Features (5 Is)	Description
Integratedness	Collecting encompassing data from a wide range of devices and sources
Instantaneity	Immediate response, incorporating information into system in real time
Interactiveness	Real time integration of exchanges from interfaces with multiple parties
Intransparency	Technical details of algorithms undisclosed, opacity of machine learning
Incontestability	Unchallengeable due to impersonal, abstract, quasi-objective appearance

Source: Own elaboration, drawing on Kellogg et al. (2020)

An important contribution by Kellogg et al. (2020) is the model of the “6 Rs” of algorithmic management, which is summarized in Table 5. This model draws on the three managerial control functions of directing (e.g., assigning tasks and providing instructions), evaluating (e.g., assessing and appraising performance), and disciplining (e.g., sanctioning and reinforcing behavior), allocating two algorithmic mechanisms to each, and specifying associated psychological consequences experienced by workers. Accordingly, algorithms work through recommending certain courses of action (e.g., tasks or routes) and restricting alternatives (e.g., rendering information unavailable), leading to perceptions of manipulation and feelings of disempowerment among workers. Recording various performance indicators (e.g., response time) and rating workers (e.g., performance tiers) result in experiences of constant observation and surveillance as well as discrimination and injustice. Finally disciplining workers by rewarding desired behavior (e.g., customer ratings) and automatically replacing or removing them from the labor process (e.g., blocking accounts) is bound to be connected to experiences of frustration, stress, insecurity, and precariousness. First steps towards the operationalization and empirical testing of this theoretical model have been presented by Alizadeh et al. (2023). Notably, the model focuses more on coercive and technocratic forms of algorithmic control (Vallas et al., 2022), rather than subtle forms of manipulation and subjectification through illusions of autonomy and fantasies of quasi-entrepreneurial self-determination (Morales & Stecher, 2023; Purcell & Brook, 2022; Walker et al., 2021), opening opportunities to extend and complexify the underlying conception of control.

Table 5. Model of Algorithmic Control and Worker Experiences

Control Mechanisms	Algorithmic Functions (6 Rs)	Worker Experiences
Direction	Recommending preferred courses of action, decisions, and behaviors	Perceived manipulation
	Restricting access to alternative information or behavioral options	Felt disempowerment
Evaluation	Recording a wide range of behavioral and other indicators	Perceived surveillance
	Rating and ranking of behaviors, performance, and workers	Discrimination and injustice
Discipline	Rewarding desired behavior immediately and interactively	Frustration and distress
	Replacing or removing relatively underperforming workers	Insecurity and precariousness

Source: Own elaboration, based on Kellogg et al. (2020)

Extensions and Future of Labor Process Theory

Conceptual and empirical contributions of LPT to the study of new algorithmic and platform-based work regimes can hardly be overestimated (Mengay, 2020; Schaupp, 2022; Kellogg et al., 2020). Nonetheless, there seem to be a number of interrelated issues that could benefit from more systematic and theory-based investigation. In the following, three suggestions are made on how to expand and elaborate LPT research. First, although unlike any other theoretical framework LPT emphasizes interconnections between the broader economic system, the production process, and worker subjectivity (Omid et al., 2023), these different foci of analysis are not consistently and systematically integrated (Hornung & Höge, 2021). Addressing this issue, suggested is a multi-level conception of the societal macro-level (e.g., labor laws and institutions), organizational meso-level (e.g., work regimes and policies), and psychological micro-level (e.g., behaviors and mentalities) dimensions of the labor process, including their interdependencies and reciprocal determination (Fuchs & Hofkirchner, 2005; Hornung et al., 2025). Second, although different manifestations of the managerial control imperative of labor are at the core of LPT, the underlying conception of control is still fragmentary (Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Hornung, 2024; Mengay, 2020). To study regimes of algorithmic control, structuralist analyses of despotic coercion and ideological hegemony are often eclectically combined poststructuralist (Foucauldian) notions of neoliberal governmentality and biopolitical organization (Morales & Stecher, 2023; Purcell & Brook, 2022; Vallas et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2021). Instead of continuing to reiterate the underlying arguments, different forms of managerial power and control should be theoretically integrated by expanding the framework of formal and real subsumption in Marxist theory to include normative and formative manifestations as well as associated bases of power and mechanisms of control (Fumagalli, 2015; Vercellone, 2007). A suitable socio-historically grounded framework of power and control in organizations has been suggested by Hornung and Höge (2021) and is summarized in Table 6. Third, and related, is the need for a more systematic conceptualization of different forms of resistance and struggle (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020), matching the suggested taxonomy of subsumption, power, and control (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). Notably, there exists an insightful literature on individual and collective, hidden and open, localized and expansive forms of resistance, which, at present, seems largely compartmentalized from core LPT scholarship (Mumby et al., 2017; Spicer & Böhm, 2007). Integrating these three suggested elements, i.e., multi-level framework of the labor process, comprehensive taxonomy of power and control, and matching conception of worker resistance, would further advance LPT research, particularly, with regard to algorithmic management and platform work. Among others, the combination of these elements would provide a theoretical basis for further refining the insightful analyses of techno-economic despotic, socio-ideological hegemonic, and governmental biopolitical algorithmic control and corresponding forms of resistance, for instance, by Morales and Stecher (2023), Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020), and Vallas et al. (2022). Moreover, it would also allow to adopt a broader perspective on the labor process by integrating LPT with the power resources approach used to analyze organized workers resistance in the platform economy (Mrozowicki & Pilch, 2025; Schmalz et al., 2023). An extended version of LPT could also more systematically assimilate the neo-Gramscian approach proposed by Palpacuer and Seignour (2020), describing cascading effects of worker struggle from individual and sporadic to organized collective resistance at the organizational level spreading towards the state and across civil society. Returning to the roots of revolutionary Marxism and drawing on theorizing on “real utopias” (Wright, 2013), LPT can be developed into a framework for social transformation, emanating from the relations of production to the stratified class structure of capitalist society (Burawoy & Wright, 2001). Addressing the current socio-ecological crisis, LPT needs to rediscover and reclaim its common ground with ecological Marxism (Foster, 2000; Saito, 2017) to devise and facilitate environmentally and socially sustainable alternatives of subsistence, sufficiency, and degrowth to challenge the destructive productivist and growthist capitalist paradigm at its very roots, that is, in the domain of work.

Table 6. Forms of Subsumption, Power, and Control in the Labor Process

Subsumption	Basis of Managerial Power	Forms of Control
Formal	Economic, legal	Contract, commodification
Real	Bureaucratic, technological	Coercion, compulsion
Normative	Social, ideological	Cooptation, commitment
Formative	Governmental, biopolitical	Conception, character formation

Source: Own elaboration, based on Hornung and Höge (2021)

Conclusions

Core postulates of LPT as a long-standing critical framework to analyze work and employment have been reviewed with a focus on the growing body of applications to algorithmic management and platform work. Defying allegations of being outdated, LPT has reconstituted itself as a theoretical basis to analyze new regimes of work in terms of hybridized techno-economic despotism, ideological hegemony, and biopolitical governance. The socio-historical perspective of LPT exposes the capitalist mode of production as an increasingly intrusive and opportunistically exploitative dialectic process with fractals of managerial labor control and valorization reappearing in various technological forms and configurations. The immanent critique of LPT provides a comprehensive picture of the dynamics and dysfunctions of the capitalist mode of production over time and in the future. Theoretical expansions have been suggested to reinforce the analytical and practical utility and rigor of LPT in supporting worker resistance and struggle against algorithmic enslavement in a financially and digitally radicalized neoliberal economy.

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