

## Skill Dynamics, Global Capitalism, and Labour Process Theories of Work

by Steve Jaros  
Southern University

### Abstract

Since the publication of Braverman's (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, the role that changes in aggregate worker skills play in the development of capitalist employment relations has been controversial amongst labour process theorists in particular and critical theorists of work more generally. Contra "orthodox" Labour Process Theory perspectives (cf. Thompson, 1990) this paper argues that skills do play an important role in understanding global capitalist development and that an account of that role is critical to the usefulness of critical theories of work. To make this argument, the intellectual history of this line of inquiry within labour process theory is outlined, starting with the initial post-Braverman interest in explicating his de-skilling thesis, to latter work that cast serious doubt on its validity, and the consequent loss of interest in skills as a major driver of capitalist development. Then the recent revival of interest in skills (cf. Adler, 2004; Littler & Innes, 2003) is analyzed in conjunction with Thompson and Newsome's (2004) agnostic perspective on the importance of skill change to argue that skill change remains a significant motive force, one critical to understanding global economic change. The implications drawn are that researchers should focus on (a) understanding interactions amongst multiple levels of skills dynamics and (b) studying the barriers to concertive action amongst workers.

### Introduction

Traditionally, worker skills, and the changes they undergo within capitalist labour processes, were at the forefront of concern for labour process theorists. Braverman's (1974) seminal work, which tied a de-skilling thesis to his analysis of Taylorism, spawned a decades' worth of research analyzing and critiquing the notion that de-skilling is characteristic of advanced capitalism (Knights & Willmott, 1990). However, from c. 1990 until recently, skills left the front-burner of labour process theory (LPT) research in particular and left-oriented critiques of work more generally. More recently, with the alleged advent of the "knowledge economy", there has been a nascent revival in skills research (cf. Warhurst, Grugulis, & Keep, 2004), yet the importance of skills to global capitalist development remains controversial. This paper reviews and extends the intellectual history of the analysis of skills from Braverman forward, and argues that

skills analysis is indeed a necessary component of any critical-left theory of work relations. I begin with Braverman and early LPT, and explain the reasons for the decline of skills as a focal point of analysis of capitalist work relations. Following sections describe contemporary perspectives on the role of skills and make a case in support of the recent revival of interest in skills, and discuss implications of my analysis for going forward in this area

### Worker Skills and Capitalism: Development of Labour Process Theory Perspectives

*Braverman's de-skilling analysis* Braverman (1974) based his ideas on an analysis of Tayloristic work practices in modern capitalist societies, which he believed was characterized by a systematic trend towards de-skilling. Taylorism was characterized by what Braverman called the "separation of conception from execution", i.e., the denigration of traditional "craftwork", in which

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conception and execution of work tasks is combined in the physical body of the craftworker, and the emergence of division-of-labor modes of production in which conception becomes the province of management or other white-collar technical experts, whilst workers are saddled with the 'execution' aspect of work, merely fulfilling the commands and directives of managers and experts. In this sense, work has been "de-skilled", because whereas the craftworker must have both the mental skills needed to conceive the work process and the physical skills to execute the tasks, under a Tayloristic regime all a worker needs are the base physical skills associated with execution (cf. Warhurst, Grugulis, & Keep, 2004).

This analysis begs the question of why was it necessary, or at least beneficial, for capitalist producers to separate conception and execution, i.e., to de-skill? Braverman noted at least three advantages: First, it meant that decision making was concentrated in the hands of personnel that Taylor and his disciples believed were putatively more qualified to make them - managers and technicians who had been trained in decision making. Second, it facilitated a fall in real wages, since there's always a larger pool of available un-skilled or semi-skilled workers than of skilled workers, meaning that supply is likely to outstrip demand, pushing wage rates downward. But to Braverman, arguably the most important aspect of de-skilling was that it helped management address problems of labor conflict and unrest at a time when the fear of labor union organizing and socialistic tendencies amongst the workforce were paramount. A workforce that is ignorant about how production decisions are made lacks the basis for challenging those decisions, and a workforce that is easily replaceable by a 'reserve army' of unskilled and unemployed compatriots clamoring for work outside the factory gates is less likely to feel emboldened to oppose management programs and initiatives. Thus, to Braverman, Taylorism was a multifaceted approach to management, in that it involved not just

improving day-to-day production efficiencies and hence profitability, but was also a system of workplace control, a managerial weapon in the ongoing class-struggle. And at its heart was de-skilling.

### *Challenges to Braverman's (1974) de-skilling thesis*

During the rest of the 1970s, research into Braverman's thesis commanded much attention amongst critical theorists and labour-process researchers. But, beginning in the early 1980s and carrying forward through the 1990s, interest in skill dynamics declined markedly. Two factors contributed to this. First, Burawoy's (1979) work on compliance and consent in the labour process, and the post-modernist inspired challenges of that work (for a review, see Jaros, 2005) diverted attention to issues of power, gender, subjectivity, and resistance in the labour process; and to "de-constructing" the concept of skill and to gendering the concept of skill (cf. Knights & Willmott, 1990). Rather than looking 'outward' from the workplace at the impact of skill dynamics on global capitalism developments, these researchers chose an inward-focused reflexive path, one that led to a dismissal of skill and the de-skilling thesis as one of many untenable "dualisms" and "essentialisms" characteristic of Braverman-inspired LPT in particular and Marxian theory in general. Much attention was also paid to analyzing the gender-politics of these concepts, including the way that "men's work" has been traditionally regarded as more-skilled than work performed primarily by women, both at home and in the paid workplace. Thus, the post-modernist trend resulted in would-be skills analysts being "distracted" by seemingly more interesting/important topics, or rejecting the traditional concept of skill as either theoretically uninteresting or too hopelessly dualistic, patriarchal, essentialist, etc. to have much critical force.

A second reason for the decline of interest in skills research can be found in research investigating whether de-skilling is in-fact a

characteristic feature of capitalist production, work that struck at the theoretical core of this research programme on its own, Marxian-inspired terms. A key reason that an interest in the de-skilling thesis (and skills analysis in general) declined is because the evidence generated by both 'bourgeois' economists and labour process theorists was, at best, mixed (cf. Thompson, 1989). Analysis across many industrial sectors showed a convoluted picture of skills up-grading in some sectors whilst de-skilling proceeded in others. For example, Zimbalist (1979) noted that skills development tended to be cyclical in nature. He found that the same processes that tended to produce de-skilling in some areas or sectors produced up-skilling in others, or even within particular firms. He noted that in a putatively de-skilling organization, it's typically observed that not only are workers subject to separation of conception and execution, but that ultimately there is a tendency towards automation - the replacement of workers by machines and robots. But, introducing advanced technology into the workplace necessitates the employment of highly-skilled engineers and technicians to ensure the efficient maintenance and operation of these machines. Thus, even as some jobs are undergoing de-skilling, other jobs are being created that require advanced skills.

Furthermore, to the extent they existed, the up-skilling tendencies did not necessarily challenge management's "political" control of the workplace, since technicians and engineers were typically white-collar employees, highly paid, who tended to have an ideological perspective closer to management's than to that of the blue-collar worker. Lastly, researchers such as Burawoy (1985) noted that Tayloristic practices, alleged by Braverman to be a uniquely *capitalist* management strategy, were actually standard operating procedure in many of the east-bloc communist countries. The skills picture was, evidently, much more complex and convoluted than Braverman's analysis could account for, as was the "control" picture.

These findings led Thompson (1990) to re-conceptualize LPT's "core" so as to take an agnostic view on whether de-skilling or up-skilling was the dominant trend, and arguing that either way, the issue is not of fundamental import to a LPT analysis of capitalist labour processes. This point of view has persisted to today. As Thompson and Newsome (2004) state it, the logic of capital accumulation "has no determinate effects on any specific feature of the labour process (such as use of skills),...." (p.2). Thompson and Newsome argue that while early (1970s) Labour Process Theory is often characterized as revolving around Braverman's de-skilling thesis, this emphasis is misplaced. They argue that this notion is based on a mis-reading of Braverman and other early LPT research. To their point of view, Braverman discussed de-skilling not, as most critics and commentators believe, as an essential, ongoing feature of capitalist development, but as a historically-contingent one. They argue that while de-skilling is indeed prominently discussed in Braverman's work, it was presented as merely one of many strategies that management has used over the years in an effort to control the labour process. This implies that, like any strategy, it might be appropriate under some circumstances but not others.

For Thompson and Newsome, the critical issue for LPT, the one that is an enduring feature of capitalism, is the issue of control: who controls the work processes and therefore the value that is created by those work processes. A detailed analysis of skill trends might be interesting for some purposes, such as understanding the short-term dynamics of class struggle in particular industries at particular moments in time, but whatever those trends may be, not too much should be made of them in terms of drawing conclusions about the general arc of global capitalist development, nor drawing conclusions about the 'correctness' of Braverman's (1974) seminal concepts.

As a result of all of these factors, and perhaps ironically, interest in skills waned

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just as globalization processes were reaching an accelerated rate of development - the late 1980s/early 1990s - as a result of the expansion of free-trade and free-market ideologies amongst major western nations, and rapid improvements in computer networking technology. During this time, the import of skills dynamics in explaining changes in global capitalism seemed less apparent than ever.

### Contemporary Developments in Skills Research: Littler/Innes and Adler

However, recent developments have challenged Thompson's orthodox perspective on the (ir)relevance of skills in capitalist development. For some researchers, advances in information technology and WTO-abetted globalization processes, with concomitant managerialist claims that these dynamics have created a definite swing towards upskilled "knowledge work" (cf. Jacques, 2000), have put skills back on the agenda. Critical researchers interested in explaining the dynamics of global capitalism have begun to look to the role that skills may play in these processes (cf. Warhurst et al., 2004). This renewed interest in skills, and the alternate perspectives adopted, are exemplified by Littler and Innes's (2003) analysis of firm-level skills and Adler's (2004) self-described "paleo-marxian" perspective. The tension between these perspectives will be analyzed in this paper, so each will be discussed in turn.

#### *Littler and Innes (2003)*

Littler and Innes's (2003) analysis is noteworthy for a couple of features: First, unlike much LPT research, it relied on the quantitative analysis of large numbers of organizations, not qualitative, impressionistic case studies of a single organization. Littler and Innes surveyed over 4000 firms in the Austro-Pacific region. In analyzing firm-level skills developments (i.e, aggregate firm skills, the sum of all skills within an organization, not the skills built in to particular jobs), they challenged both the "flexible specialization" thesis which had emerged during the 1980s and early 1990s and the "discourse of

knowledge" thesis that had emerged during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Flexible specialization is a concept that developed from analyses of Japanese adaptations of Anglo-American mass-production methods. The key idea was that whereas American manufacturers had pursued a strategy of de-skilling (as per Braverman's analysis), the Japanese model involved bringing workers into the production decision making process in a manner that necessitated re-skilling or up-skilling. As the story goes, Japanese managers came to believe that improvements in efficiency and productivity require the active engagement of workers, a tapping of the "traditional" or "tacit" knowledge they possess, knowledge gained via work experience. In one sense, this notion of tapping traditional knowledge harkened back to Taylorism, since Taylor had also emphasized the need to capture the experience of workers. And "capture" being the correct word, since Taylor argued that only managers possess the decision-making skills and structural position to disseminate and implement the fruits of this knowledge company-wide. However, unlike in Taylorism, where the tacit knowledge gained from workers is "used against them" by building that knowledge into machines and work rules, thereby reducing the skills the worker personally must possess, the flexible specialization approach proposed that de-skilled workers would lose the capacity to generate tacit knowledge, and therefore their jobs should be continuously up-skilled, typically via advanced training programs, participation in Total Quality Management programs, and cross-training in multiple work areas.

In contrast, the "knowledge discourse" paradigm shifted, in a rhetorical sense, attention away from the concept of "skill" and towards the notion of "knowledge" or "learning". For example, Jacques (2000) argues that the Marxian conception of a "labour theory of value" should be replaced by what he calls a "knowledge theory of value" because whereas when Marx was

writing, wealth creation was indeed largely a function of the skills that manual laborers employed in factories, in today's global business environment wealth creation is largely a function of the efforts of "symbolic analysts" (Reich, 1991) - white collar workers such as marketing gurus, finance experts, information systems analysts, software engineers, and lawyers. In Jacques's view, workers have largely become commodities in the production process, while the value-added activities are carried out by these knowledge workers, whose skills must be continuously upgraded to keep pace with the dynamics of fast-changing global economic developments.

Both the "knowledge discourse" and "flexible specialization" approaches imply a net increase in firm-level skills. But, Littler and Innes (2003) showed that across many firms in several industrial sectors, down-sizing practices - prevalent in modern global capitalism - had resulted in a "de-knowledging of the firm", a hollowing-out of skills via outsourcing and a concomitant loss of "corporate memory", which they argued results in a serious loss of adaptive capacity - the capacity considered by many management experts to be most critical to global economic success. To be sure, Littler and Innes did find evidence that some firms, particularly in high-tech sectors such as insurance, banking, and software, were what they called "knowledge-intensive growers", firms characterized by upskilling tendencies. But the bulk of their findings were consistent with the "insecurity thesis" (Heery & Salmon, 2000), which posits that flexible specialization is, if anything, associated with de-skilling tendencies.

Heery and Salmon argued that one of the characteristics of flexible specialization - downsizing - harms skill formation in two ways. First, downsizing "hollows out" the skills of the firm over time, because downsizing results in the loss of tenure-related skills such as tacit skills and firm-specific skills. Even if the firm eventually expands its operations, newly-hired employees lack the tacit and firm-specific

skills that only accrue with experience. Second, the emergence of downsizing as a general business strategy creates an "insecure workforce", i.e., a workforce habituated to the fear of being downsized. Once this fear sets in, the mindset of the worker is to eschew becoming too firm-specific in their skill set, because that heightens their dependency on a single employer, one that can't be trusted to reciprocate with stable, secure employment. The incentive is to develop general skills, ones that are broadly applicable to many firms. Littler and Innes found that beneath media-capturing trend of up-skilling in some high-tech sectors, the dominant, underlying trend was in the direction of low-skill, low-wage work. Thus, they found little evidence to support the flexible specialization paradigm, insofar as that point of view posits a general upskilling trend. In effect, the tacit-knowledge creating aspects of flexible specialization - the emphasis on the generation and utilization of tacit knowledge via quality circles, TQM, etc. is undermined by the bottom-line ability to cut labor costs via downsizing, which is made possible by the utilization of tacit knowledge to increase productivity and efficiency.

Littler and Innes's (2003) arguments also share an affinity with with Ritzer's (2004) well-known McDonaldisation thesis, which proposes that globalization processes work in a hyper-rational, hyper-tayloristic manner to cheapen labor via the routinization of work and ultimately, the replacement of human labor with machine labor. Ritzer proposes that most economic sectors are characterized by management strategies that base profit accumulation on the achievement of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. The first and fourth of these are particularly salient here, because they imply the need to minimize labor costs, which in turn implies the need to de-skill, since higher skills = higher wages. Like Littler and Innes, Ritzer argues that beneath the veneer of high-tech up-skilling that is celebrated by management gurus and the business press, the predominant reality most workers face is

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one of lower skills and lower wages. And these processes apply not only to physical labor. Ritzer argues that the same rationalization processes that undermine the skills of blue-collar labor are inevitably employed against white-collar 'labor' as well. Wherever possible, managers are subjective to downsizing and de-layering, to replacement with computers and other high-technologies, thus undermining the "knowledge discourse" argument of high-tech upskilling. Ultimately, Ritzer presents McDonaldization as a kind of meta-human process, something akin to Weber's notion of the "iron cage", a social force that people created but, like some kind of Frankenstein, is now beyond our immediate control and may eventually come to ensnare everyone. Littler and Innes (2003) provide some support for this view.

### *Adler (2004): Up-skilling, not de-skilling*

In contrast to writers who have argued that globalization and advanced capitalism are characterized by de-skilling, Adler (2004) argues that the dominant trend over the past several decades, and across most economic sectors, has been in the direction of upskilling. Rather than focusing on skills-change within a particular firm, or even across several economic sectors, Adler takes an approach that examines skills change at the level of the nation-state. Adler (2004) analyzes macro-economic data from the USA and the UK to support his up-skilling contention. For example, commenting on changes in US occupation structure, Adler notes that for the US economy as a whole, and over the course of the entire 20th century:

"it is difficult not to see in this mutation of occupational structure an important upgrading (upskilling), notably in the massive contraction of the unskilled farm and non-farm labor category, the more recent contraction of the operative category, and the growth of the professional and technical category" (p. 243). Adler also bases his claim on educational data, noting that in the early 1900s, when

Tayloristic management concepts were first taking hold, only around 6% of US citizens were high school graduates. That percentage has risen dramatically over time, hitting 50% by mid-century and is above 80% today. College education has also risen consistently during this time, and most important, the "return on educational investment" has been positive (i.e., high school graduates earn more over a lifetime than non-high school graduates, and college graduates earn more over a lifetime than high school graduates), which supports the notion that, individual case exceptions notwithstanding, education does impart valuable skills. Adler concludes by tying this development specifically to changing capitalist work dynamics, arguing that "if the data do show a long-term, aggregate, up-grading trend, surely the more basic driving factor is industry's needs for skilled labour" (p. 245).

Adler's analysis does concede that this broad movement has been "halting and un-even" as a result of capitalist efforts to exploit workers: "As owner's agents, managers sometimes find it profitable, if only in the short term, to deskill work ... and use hierarchy for command and control" (p. 257). But that concession aside, Adler's main thrust is a call for a return to what he calls a "paleo-marxist" position on skills, one that emphasizes the dialectical development of the forces and relations of production as the motor of *global* capitalist workplace dynamics, as opposed to what he calls Braverman-era LPT's "neo-marxist" perspective, which focuses on class struggle as the motor of capitalist development, and emphasizes relentless de-skilling as a necessary weapon in the capitalist arsenal deployed against the working class. Echoing the "knowledge discourse" view, Adler argues that modern info-technology and the rapid expansion of truly global markets requires that workers both gain premium skills *and* that the nature of work becomes more socialized, setting the stage for collective resistance to capitalism. As the forces of production (technology and skills) advance forward, capitalist social relations (command and control at work)

become a fetter to their further development. Adler's conclusions are that (a) LPT's critics are correct in their assertion that, contra Braverman's expectations, skills have trended upwards, not downwards over time; but (b) concludes that this trend not only does not invalidate the fundamental Marxian analysis of capitalist employment relations, it is actually consistent with it.

*Summary: what's at stake for understanding global capitalist work relations?*

While differing in their conclusions about whether modern global capitalism is characterized by a general tendency towards de-skilling or up-skilling, one factor that the Adler and Littler/Innes/Ritzer analyses share is that each constitutes a challenge to the Thompson and Newsome (2004) formulation of "core" Labour Process Theory. Whereas the Thompson/Newsome formulation proposes that skills are of at-best peripheral concern to the goal of "explaining trends in work, employment, and industrial relations" (p. 1), the de-skilling and up-skilling analyses imply that skills dynamics should be regarded as of central concern to LPT and any other critical theory of work.

Both Adler and Littler/Innes consider skills development to be of critical import in mapping the development of capitalist work relations. Adler argues that skill development trends are at the core of the ongoing contradiction between the relations and forces of production, a contradiction that will drive the future development of global capitalism. As noted earlier, his paleo-marxian perspective argues that advances in information technology have both (a) required an up-skilling of labor (white collar and blue collar), and (b) has facilitated the development of the socialization of labor (note: by 'socialization of labour', Adler refers to a tendency for labour processes to embody capabilities, constraints, and strategies of the broader society, beyond local conditions - including the growing global interdependence of industries). According to Adler, the "overall effect" of these twin processes is "to create

a working class that is increasingly educated, sophisticated, and .... thus increasingly capable of taking on the task of radically transforming society" (p. 257). For Adler, skills development isn't a peripheral aspect of class struggle, a short-term strategy, it is an essential component.

Likewise, Littler and Innes posit the "insecurity thesis", supported by their data, as a 'coherent set of statements about the nature, causes, and effects, of recent changes in employment relations' (p. 76), with the bi-furcated development of skills (up-skilling in a few sectors, de-skilling in most) as part-and-parcel of global capitalist development. They suggest that it isn't possible to understand the development of global capitalism without an understanding of the skills trends that underlie and help shape them. Thus, contra Thompson et al., these perspectives propose that skill trends and dynamics represent a core process that drives capitalist employment relations and therefore merit central theoretical consideration in any critical analysis of work.

#### How Skills Matter in Understanding Global Capitalism

It is this theoretical issue - the *salience* of skills and skills dynamics in understanding global capitalist employment relations, and therefore its proper place in a radical theory of the organization of work which animates the last section of this paper. I critique the paleo-marxism underlying the Adler perspective, the insecurity thesis exemplified by Littler-Innes (2003), and the post-marxism exemplified by Thompson's "core LPT" formulation as a means to clarifying the role of skill is an analysis of global capitalist work relations.

#### *Thompson and Newsome: Discarding Valuable Skills?*

As we have seen, Thompson and Newsome (2003)'s approach to the issue of what role an analysis of skills dynamics should have within LPT is to simply drop the issue of out of

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the equation. At this point, it merits noting that the Thompson et al. position was/is animated not only by their claims that Braverman's work has been mis-read by later researchers, but also in part by a desire to distance radical organization theory from dependence on elements of Marxist theory, such as the "gravedigger thesis", that posit a mono-causal, inevitable, deterministic relationship between workplace dynamics such as skills-change and broader revolutionary societal transformation. For Thompson and Newsome (2004), this thesis is untenable, because it hasn't been borne out by historical developments. Likewise, conflicting empirical findings with regard to de-skilling and up-skilling are viewed as disconfirming not only the de-skilling thesis, but any Marxian implications (immiseration, etc.) that may be drawn from it. Thus, their perspective sees the de-skilling thesis as both empirically problematic and hopelessly tied to the whole discredited edifice of the immiseration/gravedigger thesis.

While in some respects laudable, particularly its recognition of the 'failure' of Marxian theory to successfully predict social transformation in Western countries, and courage (rare amongst some Marxian researchers) to therefore draw the conclusion that at least some of Marx's concepts and theories were wrong, this position's agnosticism on the issue of skills takes the point too far. It should be possible to disentangle the issue of skill development from the gravedigger thesis. On this point, Adler's distinction between Braverman-inspired labour process theory and his "paleo" Marxism is instructive. Adler correctly notes that up-skilling trends can only be viewed as a refutation of Marx's theory of capitalist development if one adopts the Braverman modifications that propose a linkage between de-skilling and immiseration. Apparently, Thompson and Newsome do just this. However, if one adopts the view that in Marxian terms, the gravedigger thesis depends on the social relations of production becoming hopelessly fettered by outmoded forces of production, than an upskilling trend represents no such refutation. It can be read,

as Adler reads it, as supporting Marxian theory. Thus, to jettison a theory of skills trends from core LPT is to throw the skills-baby out with the discredited Braverman-Marxian bathwater.

Likewise, regardless of whether the empirical evidence provided by Littler/Innes and Adler is more persuasive, each suggests that skill dynamics are at the core of contemporary global info-capitalism, and a "core theory" of work processes under globalization must incorporate this or lose explanatory power. By this I mean that if one of the purposes of LPT (or of critical theories of work more generally) is to provide a theory-based account for how worker-management relations at the point of production unfolds, and how what happens at work influences broader global phenomena, a neglect of skill trends hampers the achievement of this purpose, since:

(1) skill development trends impact the relative power that workers have vis-à-vis management (highly skilled workers tend to have more bargaining power, lower-skilled workers have less), which in turn drives struggles over wages and other conditions of employment, and

(2) because skill trends facilitate or hamper the formation of social-affinity ties amongst employees (like-skilled workers tend to identify with one another; see each other as having the same core interests), which facilitates concerted political action (cf. Jaros, 2005).

This rejection of skills-dynamics as a *fundamental* aspect of modern capitalism is one reason why core LPT currently seems "disconnected" (Jaros & Sells, 2004) from a broader global political economy. For all its flaws, the de-skilling thesis was a theoretical mechanism within Braverman-era LPT that could account for the development of the forces of production (and given their dialectical relationship, indirectly the social relations of production as well) beyond the bounds of a particular workplace. As the



story went, as de-skilling practices are adopted by some firms and lead to greater control over the workforce and hence profitability, competitive pressures would compel other firms to follow suit, and this pattern would replicate itself across industrial sectors and national borders. By rejecting the de-skilling thesis but not replacing it with anything else that could fill this theoretical role, Thompson et al. have left core LPT bereft of a means of explaining how struggles for control at particular workplaces develop into global trends, and in an era where explaining modern globalizations processes is near the top of the social science agenda, any critical theory of work relations that has this liability is crippled indeed.

*Limits to the relevance of Adler (2004) and Littler & Innes (2003)*

However, there are reasons to avoid a wholesale adoption of either Adler's or Littler and Innes's formulations as well. First, Adler (2004) addresses the problem of the empirical failure of Marxian theory to predict global social revolution by referencing "countervailing trends" that make social progress uneven or even halting or regressive, and that these countervailing trends can prevail indefinitely. Yet clearly, Marx himself believed that social revolution amongst advanced capitalist countries was on the immediate horizon and would have been surprised to find Western countries non-socialized more than 120 years after his death. This suggests some kind of theoretical flaw not only in the de-skilling "gravedigger" thesis that Braverman based his work on, but in Marx's analysis of the dialectical development of forces and relations of production that Adler hinges his upskilling theory on as well.

I propose that the central problem here is that the paleo-Marxian explanation fails to account for global labour markets and the relationship between skills-changes in developed and developing capitalist economies. Marx's analysis was confined to England, the most

advanced capitalist country in the world at the time he was writing. He clearly saw advanced capitalist countries as the ones that were farthest down the road towards socialism. But he spent little time analyzing the economic relationship between advanced capitalist countries and the "3rd world" countries they colonized, politically and/or economically. In short, Marx's analysis of the labour process (unlike his analysis of trade relations) didn't have the proper global reach, so it doesn't provide a lot of guidance re theorizing the relationship between global labour markets and global capital accumulation. It has difficulty explaining the development of "dark side" postmodernist organizations, eg, "virtual organizations" staffed by a high-paid managerial/technical core (usually located in a Western country) that oversees low-paid, low-skill sweatshop work in third world locales (cf. Boje, 2004).

Similarly, Adler (2004) bases his conclusions that link up-skilling with the progressive development of the forces and relations of production from occupational structure data drawn from the leading capitalist country of his day - within the USA (and also somewhat from the UK). Thus, his analysis is limited to skills-change in a couple of western countries at a time when globalization processes have led many firms to seek labour-cost advantages in multiple countries (Stiglitz, 2002). If low-skill jobs are being disproportionately "outsourced" from the USA to third-world countries (and from advanced European countries to low-wage African and Asian countries), this could explain the data that shows an up-skilling trend in the USA while masking what would be a general global trend towards de-skilling. This is an empirical issue that requires further study. Likewise, Littler and Innes (2003) claim that the Braverman-era deskilling hypothesis was definitively "sunk" during the 1980s, but the conclusions they draw from their data put them in pretty close proximity to it. The dominant trend, characteristic of global capitalism, is towards de-skilling. However, this latter conclusion is speculative, given the country-specific (Australia) nature of their

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data. As with Adler, what is needed is a global perspective (and empirical research) that draws global implications from global, not national, data.

To my view, this implies moving towards the development of a multi-level analysis of skills change. As noted, one problem that hampers Adler's and Littler/Innes's analyses is their tendency to draw conclusions about skills change at the global level by analyzing data at the firm and national levels. This easy slippage between and amongst levels of analysis is a common problem in other aspects of organizational and management research, but one that hasn't been hashed out in the area of skills research. As a starting point, we could posit skills change at three levels:

(1) *Job-level skills*: these are skills that are built in to the tools, technology and structure of a particular job; and concomitantly are characteristic skills requirements of the person who does the job (i.e., technical, conceptual, interpersonal, emotion-management skills - cf. Bolton, 2004).

(2) *Firm-level skills*: this refers to the "skills profile" of the firm as a whole. The combination of skills across all jobs and personnel in the firm, as per Littler and Innes (2003; 2004).

(3) *Global-level skills*: this refers to the skills profile of the global economy.

A multi-level analysis requires explication of the mechanisms that relate these levels to one another. For example, *how* do skills change at one level influences skills change at another level? Is the direction of influence one-way, or reciprocal? Do skills changes at lower levels have an additive or multiplicative effect on skills changes at higher levels? If the relationship of influence is one-way and additive, then higher-level skills profiles are merely additive sums of job-level skills. If it is reciprocal and say multiplicative, then the picture is much more complex. Explicating these relationships would allow us to

understand how *skills change* occurs throughout the global economy, which is a prerequisite for understanding how skills change impacts on other aspects of global capitalism.

Lastly, consider the political implications of skills change. Here, Adler's point about LPT's neo-Marxian neglect of the importance of the socialization of the forces of production seems well-taken, since it can help us explain how advances in information and computer-based technology in the workplace has led to the development of shared skills and shared knowledge amongst workers in some industrial settings (cf. Jacques, 2000), the shared ability to communicate (cf. Grieco & Bhopal, 2005) and possibly shared affinities - common feelings that tie workers across jobs and organizations together psychologically - as well. What isn't clear are the nature of the political ramifications. If it turns out that Braverman was right after all, that de-skilling remains the dominant global trend despite up-skilling in some countries and some sectors, revolutionary prospects appear dim on that basis, because there is simply no empirical evidence from any country to support the view that de-skilling leads to the causal chain (immiseration ...> revolt) posited by Braverman. One could posit that consumptionist trends (de-skilling cheapens the price of goods, making them less expensive to the mass consumer and thereby raising living standards- which has a contra effect on immiseration; upskilling means higher wages and greater purchasing power) need to be reckoned with when analyzing the political implications of de-skilling or upskilling. Though perhaps unintentionally, a focus on the importance of the role that affinity-ties play in creating the grounds for concertive action also implies the need for a more cultural/postmodernist analysis of skills development, one that recognizes the role of identity-formation and self-concept development in employee's perceptions of themselves as "skilled workers" (Jaros, 2005; Willmott, 2000) and consequent resistance and conflict at work. O'Doherty and Willmott's (2001) work is instructive. They note that

“(Braverman's) project did not allow him ... to understand some of the more complex and subtle interactions that take place between capitalist forces of production and social relations of production” (p. 113). Their analysis focuses on what they posit as everyone's psychological tendency to seek to achieve forms of “closure” that provide mental stability to out fragily constructed identities, and that this tendency is exacerbated precisely in the kinds of turbulent economic conditions that threaten the employee's job and their sense-of-self as “skilled”. In effect, concerns about securing a stable identity may mediate the social relations of work, acting as a blocking agent that makes it difficult for individuals to look beyond their own immediate situation and forge social relations with other employees and take collective action. Of course the paradox here is that it is precisely collective political action that could lead to substantive changes in the workplace that could provide the material basis for a genuinely more-secure personal identity.

Thus, the two points of view that seem most apart on the surface - paleo Marxism and post-structuralism - may share the same key concern, understanding the interplay between social relations and forces of production characteristic of global capitalism. It may be that from a critical-left perspective, the solution to the dilemma of fostering anti-capitalist politics may be to overcome the psychological tendency described by O'Doherty and Willmott, thereby unleashing the socialization forces, the development of affinity ties that are a prerequisite to concertive political action, explicated by Adler in his analysis of up-skilling.

In combination with a multi-level analysis of skills change, an explication of these and other barriers to concertive action (such as racial and religious differences across workers) would allow the critical-LPT researcher a basis for developing political recommendations that tie together and reflect an appreciation for how the social relations of production (as exemplified by political

processes) interact with the skills-related aspect of the forces of production (as exemplified by a multi-level analysis of skills dynamics) to influence the development of global capitalism.

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