Towards a Core Theory

In renewing Marxist orthodoxy, Braverman inherited and reproduced many of its weaknesses in a different form. Notable examples include a failure to account for the effects of worker resistance on the development of production, the assumption of homogenisation of labour, and the underestimation of varieties of control. This created a context for a body of criticism and alternatives within labour process theory which have substantially modified the original framework. Such modifications have ranged from changes in how we view categories of skill, resistance or control, to highlighting neglected or missing areas such as consent and gender relations. As was noted in the Introduction, we must now start from the post-Braverman situation, rather than pretend that there is some kind of fixed orthodoxy that has remained unaltered since the mid-1970s. However, it would be dishonest to pretend that a starting point internal to the framework is uncontroversial, whatever the degree of common ground achieved in the debate.

What now constitutes LPT is under more serious attack from many who reject its basic assumptions. The critics range from fundamentalist Marxists to those trying to recover ground for older traditions of industrial social science. For a representative of the former camp, ‘Many of the arguments put forward in the post-Braverman labour process debate have had the effect of displacing the production process from the centre of Marxist analysis’ (Cohen, 1987: 34). Among the latter, it is the supposed inherent presence of the evils of
essentialism, determinism and functionalism within the theoretical structure that is the problem. This chapter therefore examines the range of challenges. It does so firstly by explaining and evaluating the major challenge on the terrain of work organisation — that of flexible specialisation, with its links to advanced manufacturing technology and Japanese management. Then we move to the other main sphere of contention, that of control. This range of issues differs in that the challenge has come through the attempted demolition of existing labour process ideas, rather than through an alternative general theory. On the basis of these two discussions, a case will be advanced for the relevance of a core theory of the labour process, with clear limits and boundaries.

New Forms of Work Organisation

The deskilling debate revisited
The explosion of publications on work organisation and skill continues apace, adding to the already considerable literature discussed in Chapter 4. One influence has been the intense interest in what is still called ‘new technology’, which at a popular level still receives ‘a blanket approval of progressiveness’ (Burnes et al., 1988: 2). Official sources still persist with a version of the upgrading thesis, Charles Burgess of the Manpower Services Commission referring to ‘the need imposed by new technology for skills extensions at all levels’ (1985: 402) — a view contradicted by evidence of that body’s own training schemes which assume fragmented skills (Finn 1986). Until recently only a small minority of academic studies confirm the ‘official’ view. Penn’s work, in particular, is directed specifically at refuting Braverman on deskilling, for which he claims no evidence can be found in his data. He asserts a compensatory theory in which levels of skilled work are held to be roughly constant, some categories rising and others falling.

Unfortunately the data are severely flawed. Some (Penn, 1986) are drawn exclusively from US census data, which are inevitably distorted by the social construction of skills by competing groups, and which he admits can tell us nothing about