

## **Dissent at Work and the Resistance Debate: Departures, Directions and Dead-Ends<sup>1</sup>**

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Resistance is a focal point of debate amongst radical scholars across a range of issues involving labour and social movements. The primary purpose of this paper is to review what has become known as ‘the resistance debate’ amongst labour process, organisation and management studies, and to extract from that theory and practice some assessment of dissenting behaviours at the workplace. Given the predominance of pessimistic readings of the prospects for labour agency, there is a temptation to look for and laud the peaks and analyse the troughs of struggles. Understandable though this is, it is arguably more important for social scientists and activists to be able to recognise, understand and appreciate the diversity of what we might call oppositional practices. On that basis we can make some more realistic assessment of the possibilities for mobilization and linkages between different types and spheres of action.

In my previous work with Stephen Ackroyd<sup>2</sup>, the emphasis was on excavating a category of practices that we called organisational misbehaviour – struggles around the appropriation of effort, product, time and identity – that were distinctive though overlapping phenomena in their own right. Despite some objections from orthodox Marxists<sup>3</sup>, the goal was to add to rather than subtract from collective, more formal action: ‘rather than trying to replace existing accounts, we have been trying to fill a gap, adding a dimension and vocabulary to get people to think differently about workplace behaviour’<sup>4</sup>.

There is a parallel to recent debates concerning the diversity of worker organisation. The erosion of unions and other traditional sources of labour voice in most countries is an inescapable fact, but there has been a tendency for much intellectual energy to be

expended on debates concerning union renewal. That is far from wasted, but does sometimes neglect the emergence of new phenomena and opportunities arising from the fragmentation of worker voice. Important developments are taking place with the growth of workers' centres and non-union worker groups, community unions and community campaigning in developed and developing economies. These new or hybrid forms are both a reflection of and stimulus to a wider variety of labour struggles.

Papers presented at the October 2014 McMaster Conference on Dissent and Resistance in the Workplace in the Context of Neoliberalism were similarly broad in scope. This is reflected in the two papers from that conference in this issue of Studies in Political Economy. Baines and Lewchuk and Dassinger add significantly to our understandings of labour agency, self-organisation and the boundaries between the formal and informal. The focus on two sectors – non-profit care work and workers seeking jobs through employment agencies – that encapsulate the challenges of understanding resistance and dissent in diverse and difficult circumstances. I will return to those specific contributions later, but listening to some of the conference papers, a familiar feeling hit me – why are these particular behaviours being spoken of as resistance? We need an analytical and practical vocabulary that matches the above diversity and that requires some boundary drawing. In this article, I will argue that amongst the many limitations of the debate is that too many things have been lumped and linked together under the resistance category. Interesting as the range of debates is, the focus of this article will be on oppositional practices within the workplace, trying to capture a parallel sense of diversity and direction. In order to do so, I need to retrace the basic features and dynamics of the debate, from the denial to the celebration of resistance, then back again. I will argue that a further weakness of that

debate has been a version of collapse of context. Possibly the most famous concept in LPT is Richard Edwards<sup>5</sup> contested terrain, the book encapsulating the control and resistance model. Yet contestation in such models requires the identification of specific empirical objects – the ‘terrain’ of managerial and accumulation regimes. Without this, resistance becomes an under-specified, over-generalised collection of practices. The latter stages of the article, therefore, set out the medium-term changes in workplace regimes that frame the possibilities for various kinds of oppositional practices. It is argued that whilst these changes have closed down the space for some traditional kinds of misbehaviour and resistance, they have opened up others.

### **The end of resistance?**

It may seem perverse to begin a discussion of the resistance debate at the ‘end’. But this refers to arguments concerning the end of the phenomena rather than the end of the debate. By the mid-1990s the view that labour recalcitrance at work was diminished or dead was pervasive. Such arguments were primarily directed towards labour process theory (LPT). Post-Braverman ‘second wave’ LPT was associated with a ‘control and resistance’ model. It is important to understand that what was discussed as resistance was primarily the kind of informal practices and organisation to be found in the contested terrain of work relations – effort bargaining, absenteeism, sabotage and the like rather than strikes and disputes.

Of course by the start of the 1990s, collective disputes were themselves in significant decline, reflected in broader discussion around ‘the forward march of labour halted’.

Advocates of the ‘end of resistance’ thesis made reference to the decline of broader labour power and struggles, but their claims were focused on the labour process. The argument

was that work was no longer a contested terrain and that workers' counter controls at work were 'effectively eliminated'. Subjectivity was no longer a significant source of resistance. The theoretical source material for such claims was Foucauldian. A raft of influential papers from mainly UK commentators claimed that various combinations of the disciplinary power of 'soft' cultural controls and panoptic or electronic surveillance was rendering employees willing, docile, and individuated or self-disciplining subjects.

Moreover, within the Foucauldian universe, resistance was seen as futile given that it is inseparable from power and 'discipline can grow stronger knowing where its next efforts must be directed' <sup>6</sup>. Similar influences can be seen in German debates on the 'subjectification of labour' <sup>7</sup>. The ideal person under new managerial regimes is an 'entreplooyee' who is always available and willing to self-control, self-commercialize and self-rationalize.

Though I developed the misbehaviour thesis<sup>8</sup> with Stephen Ackroyd for wider purposes, it was used to counter these arguments by challenging both the (often flimsy) empirical claims on the disappearance of contestation and the underpinning agency-removing concepts. It should be emphasised that the use of the term misbehaviour was in part ironic, with intent of subverting the conformist assumptions of mainstream accounts of organisational behaviour. However, the foundational concepts were drawn from a combination of industrial sociology and LPT, traditions that foreground labour agency and informal self-organisation. With that in mind, though some forms of collective action were declining did not mean the disappearance of all others. The thesis developed a framework for mapping and updating issues of time, work and product appropriation by workplace actors and added

in a new territory of contested identity practices that foreshadowed the potential for dissent from corporate cultures.

Taken together with internal doubts raised amongst Foucauldian and post-structuralist scholars, the misbehaviour thesis appeared to shift some of the terms of debate.<sup>9</sup> However it is worth noting that similar ‘end of resistance’ arguments emerged in parallel in other countries, drawing on different theoretical sources. Bélanger and Thuderoz<sup>10</sup> outline and critique French neo-Marxist arguments on a mixture of factors – lean production, financialization, delegated responsibilities (dubbed ‘responsibilization’) – claimed to produce new disciplinary tools, a form of ‘voluntary servitude’ and an ‘invisible chain’ that ties the employee to capitalism and production norms. Of course, capital is always developing new disciplinary tools and control practices. The issue is how widespread and effective they are. Overestimation of both tends to derive from taking managerial rhetoric at face value and under-estimating both the operational obstacles to implementation and the vulnerabilities that enable workers to exploit opportunities to assert interests and identity.

It is possible to add more evidence and examples about the persistence of such practices, but the notable point for this chapter is that the ‘resistance debate’, in its main form at least, went through a major shift in the opposite direction.

### **Resistance is everywhere and everything**

The practices that might constitute resistance in this new turn are remarkably broad. Take for example, the Critical Management Studies<sup>11</sup> (CMS) Conference Stream call ‘Food for thought? Opening up entirely new vistas on food, subjectivity and resistance’:

Food practices do not just normalize power. They also subvert it. Employees may overeat or spend time on food related events to subvert the production/discipline ideology and they may even refuse to eat altogether to resist organizational attempts to make employees more productive, reward them or invite them to socialize and develop informal relations.

More broadly what happened during this phase of the debate was a reworking of the Foucauldian framework away from panopticons and surveillance in favour of an emphasis on communicative conflicts and a micro politics of resistance. This is summarized effectively in the oft-cited Thomas and Davies definition of resistance as:

a constant process of adaptation, subversion and reinscription of dominant discourses which takes place as individuals confront, and reflect on, their own identity performance, recognizing contradictions and tensions and, in so doing, pervert and subtly shift meanings and understandings<sup>12</sup>.

As Mumby observes in a sympathetic commentary on this body of research, the rejection of interest-based, employment relations oriented generative mechanisms, resistance is conceptualised as a form of identity work through which actors form 'subject positions' that engage with organisational discourses – 'self-formation becomes the primary impetus for resistance'.<sup>13</sup>

Research on what Mumby calls 'discursive tropes'<sup>14</sup> is not without value. It enabled examination of the rise of irony, ambivalence, bitching, gossip and cynicism as covert or hidden forms of resistance. These are considered in part as responses to identity-based controls that can 'nourish communal vocabularies of critique'<sup>15</sup>. In principle, some of these

themes fit nicely into our concern with dissent. However, it is often not clear what the discursive positioning is dissenting from. Take the paper on 'secretarial bitching' from Sotirin and Gottfried. Observation of the conversational interactions of four key informants reveals five 'bitching instances', marked by informal, personal complaints about small infractions that express anger and moral indignation...'<sup>16</sup>. Despite heroic attempts to invoke their emancipatory possibilities, such instances struggle to escape the impression that they are describing everyday horizontal interactions with colleagues and sometimes bosses. I think this is what the authors mean in referring to 'micro-accommodative impulses' or resistance that 'unreflectively legitimate organizationally-preferred identities that reproduce their subservience..'<sup>17</sup>

Discursively-based micro practices have been increasingly used to reframe traditional 'resistance to change' frameworks as resistance *for* change, or as Thomas, Sargent and Hardy put it, 'how particular communicative practices can lead to generative dialogue, in which resistance plays a facilitative role..'<sup>18</sup>. These conclusions are drawn from observation of a three hour managerial workshop in a telecoms company as part of a culture change program. This dialogue enabled the negotiation of meaning amongst senior and middle management participants in which a mutual willingness to be influenced led to the 'emergence of a common sensibility around a commercial focus'<sup>19</sup>. A similar argument on the merits of 'productive resistance' is put forward by Courpasson, Dany and Clegg. The authors are also keen to avoid anything that smacks of an 'adversarial perspective' and oppositional structures of action, and draw on 'cases' that demonstrate how middle managers can influence their superiors through skilful, creative 'resisting work' during which they 'temporarily displace normal power relations'<sup>20</sup>. It is clear from both papers that this

version of 'resistance' is basically (re)describing normal intra-managerial manoeuvrings. In fact such practices of 'challenge, diagnosis and recommendations' could only be carried out by managerial agents. Courpasson *et al* state, without apparent irony that 'An interesting feature of resisting work that deserves further attention in future research is its similarity to managerial work'<sup>21</sup>.

The paradoxical outcome of restoring a focus on resistance as everywhere, everybody and everything is that it is emptied of any substantive content. This has led to a further twist in the resistance tale as the more radical elements of the Critical Management Studies camp have mounted a strong critique of their post-structuralist colleagues.

### **Back to zero?**

Mumby articulates the limits of discourse-based approaches to the study of resistance effectively:

risks neglecting how the disciplinary practices of organisational life have very real material consequences for organization members.. It seems a very hollow victory to celebrate the ability of social actors to engage in parody, mimicry, and so on, while neglecting the extent to which the lives of organization members are becoming more oppressive, surveilled ...and insecure.<sup>22</sup>

Nor need the problem be confined to the discursive. Cynicism, irony and other everyday interactions can seem to be mired in the micro<sup>23</sup>, with relatively trivial and self-centred agential practices that receive prominence at the expense of broader, collective threats and struggles inside and outside the workplace. Such resistance, according to Contu<sup>24</sup> is 'de-caf' as its lack of strength 'threatens and hurts nobody'. So far, so plausible. But some of the

same critics have taken the argument further by attempting to identify resistance that is immune to incorporation: 'What is now being labelled resistance is advocated in the latest management rhetoric and practice... the real question is what kinds of resistance could not be incorporated...'.<sup>25</sup>

Even if it were the real question, the incorporation thesis requires difficult answers. In principle, short of social revolution any struggle or act of resistance can be incorporated<sup>26</sup>. The kind of criteria applied in the incorporation thesis would rule out almost all the larger, collective labour struggles of the past 100 years. Never one to duck a challenge Contu elaborates on this theme. 'Real acts of resistance, 'present themselves as outrageous breaks with all that seems reasonable and acceptable in our liberal postmodern world'<sup>27</sup> and 'a real act that suspends the constellation of power relations';<sup>28</sup> or 'an act that changes the sociosymbolic network in which we and our way of life make sense'.<sup>29</sup> One searches in vain in the paper for an actual example, so it is of little surprise that resistance is ultimately defined as 'an impossible act'<sup>30</sup>.

Shorn of the rhetorical excesses, part of the problem for the incorporation thesis is that its categories exist largely in a vacuum. As indicated earlier, we can only evaluate the content and effectiveness of oppositional practices with reference to the empirical object – the managerial policy, the available power resources present in the context) and to the subjective motives and rationales of the oppositional actor/s. It is easy to be dismissive of some of the discursive interactions described above, but Contu is equally sceptical of the kinds of 'transgressive actions' and misbehaviours highlighted by Ackroyd and Thompson. Yet informal, small scale collective actions can result in real gains in rewards, effort, autonomy, time or dignity, as well as providing bridgeheads to broader mobilizations.

To the extent that the incorporation thesis has a context, it is manifestly misleading. References to the latest managerial rhetoric and the postmodern liberal workplace indicate that the authors have been reading too many academic texts. It is bizarre that Contu's examples of 'liberal workplaces' – call centres, car factories and insurance companies – are not normally experienced as such by employees<sup>31</sup>. No doubt it will keep workers awake at night knowing that their struggles for unions or against zero hours contracts can be incorporated into the bourgeois humanist fantasy of the autonomous subject. The thesis is also Western-centric. Workers in Indian call centres or those in Apple suppliers in the Chinese factories of 'late capitalism' would be surprised to hear that their transgressive acts have no costs to them or their employers.

### **Some reflections on the debate that ate itself**

The 'resistance' debate has taken us back to where we started. Resistance is everywhere is ultimately the reverse side of a resistance is nowhere coin. As indicated above, a key problem is that resistance is treated as a generic category without an empirical object or context beyond the endless inter-penetration of power and resistance. There is a revealing admission at the end of the previously-discussed paper by Thomas *et al*, who admit that 'Nor were we able to examine the backdrop of organizational restructuring and job losses. As well as a downturn in the industry, which form part of the wider organizational and socioeconomic power resistance relations within which the workshop was located..'32. Reference to not being able to is somewhat disingenuous, as post-structuralist researchers generally see no need to contextualise their observations

Radicals such as Fleming and Spicer<sup>33</sup> rightly criticise some of the limits of this kind of research, but have their own version in which 'struggle' of any kind is a multidimensional

dynamic that animates the interface between power and resistance between any actors. We get little idea why one form of struggle arises in particular times or places. As Mumby observes, 'in doing so "struggle" seems without motive or direction and I am not sure where the "difference" arises that creates the struggle'<sup>34</sup>.

Both 'wings' also share a common rejection of the inferences drawn from the particular context that (post) Marxist and labour process scholars base their analyses on. Fleming and Spicer reject the 'capital-labour dichotomy', whilst Thomas and Davies reject the 'negative paradigm' of LPT that 'conceptualises resistance as the outcome of structural relations of antagonism between capital and labour'<sup>35</sup>. Setting aside any specific conceptual or empirical claims, the problem with 'multi-modal theories of resistance' is that they obscure the specific dynamics that shape oppositional practices. It is entirely legitimate to study resistance strategies pursued by social movements in civil society, but the actors, contexts and mechanisms are very different. Add together a preference for generic categories and a profound pessimism about or lack of interest in effort bargain struggles and the result is that any focus on labour and the employment relationship is removed or marginalised.

To offer a corrective, we can produce a better conceptualisation of the boundaries within the repertoire of oppositional practices at work, can be redefined, but the key requirement is to put context back in the picture. The next section offers an attempt to do that, focusing largely on the misbehaviour categories outlined earlier, but adding in a more detailed discussion of dissent.

### **The re-configuration of workplace regimes**

The context in which both resistance and misbehaviour take place is continually changing, but the recent decades have seen a more decisive shift that has modified or diminished many of the traditional forms of misbehaviour that have preoccupied managers in the post war period. Some of these changes are the result of long term trends such as the shift away from traditional manufacturing or industrial sectors where worker self-organisation has been strong (e.g. motors, engineering mining). These have coincided with strategic choices made by corporate and state actors that have weakened employment protection and reduced union density.

Elsewhere, I have set out a number of key changes in overlapping accumulation, corporate and employment regimes<sup>36</sup>. Under financialized accumulation the source of profits is increasingly through the active management of corporate assets, for example through downsizing and divestment. Both the corporation and labour are disposable, with the burden of risk being transferred to labour and other stakeholders. In terms of corporate regimes, larger, often conglomerate, firms disaggregate structures (for example into profit centres), whilst retaining significant power and strategic capacity at the centre, using sophisticated IT systems to coordinate complex activities and financial controls, surveillance and management of performance at plant level. Externalization in the labour market and fragmentation in employment systems increases precarious or insecure work and employment in many sectors. The combination of perpetual restructuring and transfers of risk inside and outside work, plus weakened labour market protection help to account for multi-dimensional and rising subjective fears of insecurity<sup>37</sup>.

In such circumstances controls rest largely on market discipline and performance management despite the appearance or formal existence of 'employee engagement' in the

form of commitment-seeking practices<sup>38</sup>. Its characteristic form is a cascading down of target setting for cost savings and performance metrics such as key performance indicators (KPIs), aided in many cases by electronic monitoring and tighter work flow<sup>39</sup>. In professional work settings, particularly in the public sector, enhanced audit and accountability practices perform parallel functions. As a consequence, compliance is more likely than commitment, with constrained rather than discretionary effort<sup>40</sup>. Versions of high performance and commitment-seeking remain in the mix of some managerial regimes. Though often framed in the language of values, managerial attention is focused on conduct and behavioural descriptors manifested in performance<sup>41</sup>. In other words, change is focused on performance behaviours rather than culture and identity. These include task-based scripts that standardise emotional and aesthetic labour requirements in interactive services; bureaucratised behavioural metrics in performance review.; and the extension of regulation of employee conduct into areas that were previously private or partly protected This includes codes of conduct concerning harassment, dress and appearance, health, use of social media<sup>42</sup>. Precariousness, as Lewchuk *et al* demonstrate in this issue, also tends to exacerbate inside-outsider tensions, with temporary or agency workers seen as competitors for work rather than potential allies for change.

### **New spaces for innovative misbehaviour**

There can be little doubt that the consequences of performance cultures, with enhanced surveillance and monitoring are greater work intensity and less opportunity for previous forms of effort bargain 'fiddles and 'time wasting' in many, though not all, workplaces. As (Paul) Edwards and Bélanger observe:

...the ability to claim 'special effort' has in many jobs fallen. The electronic monitoring of work in low and medium skilled manufacturing jobs and in call centres is now taken for granted. Allied to this, production processes are much more predictable than they were, so that space for [effort] bargaining has been reduced. Many of the fiddles described in the classic studies turned on variation in the product or the process, which gave workers space to bargain about how much they were paid for non-standard work, or what would happen if they could not work because the machinery was broken.<sup>43</sup>

In some sectors work intensification is associated with the spread of leaner working and performance metrics. This, in turn, is reducing some of the scope for absenteeism – one of the traditional forms of employee misbehaviour. However, the crackdown on sickness and absence is in itself creating a 'big area of contestation' (UK Civil Service union rep quoted in Carter *et al*<sup>44</sup> and taking up a considerable amount of lay union representative time and attention<sup>45</sup>.

Tighter work flow and management of performance is not universal, especially in some office settings. As Paulsen<sup>46</sup> has charted in his recent but already oft-cited study, there are still workplaces in which various forms of 'empty labour' – skiving, work avoidance and 'private activities at work' – are feasible. This is an important corrective to the assumption of universal intensification, but many of the cases outlined are the result of untypical workplaces where there is not enough work to fill the day or where profits are still being made through minimal effort, but high value outputs. However, what F.W. Taylor called soldiering or restriction of output still persists as resistance to meaningless work. Paulsen also includes examples where new forms of ICT – from workplace computers to social media

on smartphones – can be used by employees for ‘cyberloafing’ or pursuing private activities in work time social media in work time leading employers to complain of theft, misconduct, or an abuse of resources. This is confirmed in my own recent survey-based research<sup>47</sup>, where almost all employees engaged in online activities in work time, though most for short periods of time.

Some of the most interesting developments in reconfigured terrains are being contested in new ways and in new and mostly service settings. Edwards and Bélanger<sup>48</sup> summarise a number of recent service sector studies that show that the growth of low skill service work enhances the opportunity for some forms of misbehaviour such as pilferage and sabotage as employees search for dignity and means of defence against work pressures. Such evidence is consistent with findings from call centres, where despite fears of an ‘electronic panopticon’, there is considerable evidence of employees exploiting spaces in surveillance systems to modify work or evade work norms<sup>49</sup>. One facet of such trends is that workers subject to emotional labour use the multi-faceted nature of the practices necessary to demonstrate emotions to deflect or depart from employer demands, including using emotions as a ‘gift’ to clients and customers<sup>50</sup>. As demonstrated elsewhere in this Issue by Donna Baines<sup>51</sup>, this is particularly the case for employees in the voluntary or third sector who can draw on values-based traditions and ways of working to bolster their own autonomy and client advocacy. However, it is worth noting that resistance and misbehaviour is inevitably caught up within the complex dynamics of the ‘service triangle’. In other words, as employees seek to appropriate time or effort resources constrained by employer choices, clients and customers may pay the costs in terms of poor service. This speaks to a wider issue that is beyond the scope of this article, but again which is worth

noting. That is the rise of dysfunctional behaviours such as presenteeism (staying at work for longer than is formally required) and bullying that arise in the gap between increased work pressures and tighter controls and the restricted opportunities for defence of interests and identity.

### **Disengagement and Dissent**

Clearly compliance is a common and understandable response to market and organisational discipline. But it is not the only potential outcome. There is compelling evidence that *disengagement* from corporate values and practices is a systemic feature of new managerial regimes. The choice of this term is deliberate given that employee engagement is the fashionable term used in HR and corporate circles to describe the various policies to secure commitment and then to measure their effectiveness. Except that they aren't effective, as their own sources indicate:

- A range of UK sources, including the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, UK Task Force and academic papers chart a persistently low and sometimes falling level of engagement in the recent period ranging from 19% to 38% depending on the methodology<sup>52</sup>.
- The Harvard Business Review reports survey results that 'a mere 13% of employees worldwide are engaged with their work, with twice as many disengaged or hostile'.<sup>53</sup>
- Two large scale studies<sup>54</sup> by the Gallop Organization in 2003 and Towers Perrin in 2005 reported high levels of disengagement. In the latter ratios of engaged (loyal, productive and with satisfying work) to 'actively disengaged' was 21/16 (United States), 12/23 UK, 15/15 Germany, 9/23 France and 2/41 (Japan)!

- An international poll of 9000 workers in 52 countries produced a global average of workers who think their bosses are completely incompetent of 33 per cent. British workers were the most critical with 41 per cent rating their bosses in this way and 70% feeling that they could do better<sup>55</sup>.

The two main forms of disengagement are cynicism and dissent. Both are forms of misbehaviour framed by the distancing from organisational commitment. Though cynicism is compatible with high performance (under insecure conditions), it may also be linked to employee appropriation of time and effort. Naus *et al* outline a model of organisational cynicism that links negative attitudes to ‘tendencies to disparaging and critical behaviour towards the organisation’<sup>56</sup>. Whilst useful, it may be more accurate to differentiate cynicism from *dissent*, with the latter a more conscious and oppositional voice that can underpin active resistance.

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Avatar - an illustrative case of disengagement

Evidence from ethnographic research<sup>57</sup> on a large IT firm in Ireland shows how top management and HR at Avatar expressed the strategic importance of having a normatively aligned workforce that was ‘committed’ to the organisation and happily ‘engaged’ in their work.

Employees picked up on the contradiction between values espoused in the ‘Employment Deal’ and actual employment practices:

It’s very hard to swallow, extremely hard, they’re telling you one day how important you are to them and the next day they’re making more

redundant...[...]...It's just hypocrisy after hypocrisy; they don't eat their own dog food basically.<sup>58</sup>

Employees also engaged in more overt forms of work related misbehaviour.

Employee performance was measured against service level agreements and knowledge of how such workflow systems operated meant they could manipulate the reports in their favour.

'The statistics are taken from the trouble ticketing system. But you can put in any criteria you like, it's the same technology. You'd pick out the best ones and they're the ones you use. We would clear high priority faults within a couple of hours whereas all the normal ones would take weeks and weeks and they wouldn't show up on any end of year results anyway. It's all a game, seriously.<sup>59</sup>

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### *Dissent and on-line communities*

Though traditional industrial sub-cultures that have underpinned workplace recalcitrance have been in long-term decline, there is some evidence that new forms of social media can facilitate not just cyberloafing, but cyber dissent. Recent survey research<sup>60</sup> in the UK and Australia indicated that 15% of employees had engaged in posting critical comments about their employer or manager at least sometimes and that 47% had witnessed such actions. Of course, this may be predominantly individualistic, but there is some evidence that web-mediated on-line communities are emerging that can give voice to dissent and foster occupational or other solidarities<sup>61</sup>. This can take a number of forms and initially the focus

has been on work blogs. Richards and Kosmala examine none such blogs ranging from a bus driver to a hospital consultant. They argue against the kind of CMS incorporation thesis discussed earlier that views cynicism as ultimately reproducing power relations., They argue that cynicism or post-cynicism can act as a group empowerment process: 'What emerges is a rich picture of how cynicism can lead to employees developing a deeply held sense of detachment from corporate culture initiatives and a closer connection within their own occupational or professional community'<sup>62</sup>.

However, to stimulate and sustain dissent on-line forums and blogs have to go beyond individual commentary to potentially act as a focal point for collective discussion and action with respect to work, organisations and careers. Richards and Kosmala<sup>63</sup> argue that such potential is present as critical commentary migrates to more collective forums such as Twitter and Facebook. There is also evidence that some blog spots meet such requirements. An example is provided by blog forums amongst film industry workers involved in VFX/special effects<sup>64</sup>. Individual rumbling of discontent about worsening conditions is linked to union perspectives and actions. Such developments do not take place in isolation from corporate power. Their potential challenge to employers can be measured by the extent which organisations frame disparaging blogs as a threat to their interests and take disciplinary action in terms of 'bringing the organisation into disrepute' and develop social media codes of practice that attempt to 'chill' employee voice<sup>65</sup>.

In pioneering work on e-activism, Moore and Taylor<sup>66</sup> show internet-based communications played a vital and positive role in the 2009-11 dispute between British Airways (BA) and the union, BASSA representing cabin crews, particularly in circumstances of a geographically dispersed workforce. There were 2 sister forums, BASSA and Crew. The latter was

developed in part response to surveillance and legal constraints and though open to all, was pro-union. It allowed individual and collective expressions of dissent that enabled participants to express anger, raise fears, ask questions, seek clarification; evoke empathy; share experiences. As a Cabin Crew Employee observed:

That's where the Bassa forum became good, that's marvellous, 20 years ago that would never have happened, it would have been impossible ... because instantaneously they could read what's happening, what's going on, what stories have happened, how we were treated, how unfair things were. And in fact that's changed trade unionism I would have thought, massively in order to get things out straightaway. And especially in our job, if you're on a factory floor then it wouldn't matter because you would be there every day, but because we're all over the world, they would type in BASSA and then read what's going on.<sup>67</sup>

The innovative and surveillance-aware nature of worker engagement with the forum is clear from Moore and Taylor's extracts from real-time postings. Participants were careful to use playful pseudonyms and avatars that often blurred gender, ethnic and sexual identities that allowed for the fullest expression of feelings and ideas.<sup>68</sup>

**Chief Wiggum** 'FU\*K YOU, BA!! Just when we thought things were actually getting better, you go and dig yourselves a hole big enough to hide all our lost luggage in'.

**DNS1** 'I have just read the email and am pretty much speechless, except for one word. F U C K. (sorry to bypass the swear filter admin but I really needed that)'

**Lisarupe** 'If this is right then this puts away to all good feeling, it's time to walk the cheeky feckers!!!'

As the authors note, whatever the distinctiveness of the communicative space provided by the forum, the virtual and the real were not separate spheres. The picket lines and other physical actions were also vital and vibrant. Nor should we lose sight of the broader point on dissent – that new forms of collectivism rooted in the labour process and informal organisation are far from dead in ‘new’ workplaces with aggressive employers<sup>69</sup>. The link between dissent and mobilization need not be virtual. Elsewhere in this issue, Baines argues that amongst not-for-profit workers, dissent is nourished by moral projects linked to social justice values. These discursive interactions can sometimes do lead to broader and collective action. Though the circumstances of this sector are highly distinctive, the account from Baines has similarities with Taylor and Moore’s<sup>70</sup> use of the term ‘micro mobilizations’ to describe how everyday self-organisation in the labour process can still play a foundational role.

### **Concluding comments**

This article has two main purposes. First, to counter the pessimism and excessive burden of expectation that has arisen from the increasingly misnamed resistance debate. For many commentators influenced by post-structuralist perspectives, in the ‘decollectivizing workplace’ and ‘glass cage’<sup>71</sup>, only whistleblowing and individual acts of cynicism and exit are seen to offer occasional alternatives. In such formulations the shrunken prospects for labour agency are underpinned by persistent and profound misunderstanding of the changed context and conditions. Beyond the confines of academic texts, employees remain knowledgeable about management intentions and outcomes and retain the resources to resist, misbehave or disengage. It is less about labour scholars ‘celebrating’ labour agency or concentrating on the ‘heydays’<sup>72</sup>, than making practical and conceptual connections

between different types and levels of struggle without losing sight of the distinctiveness and legitimacy of each. This links to the second purpose of the article – to contribute towards the re-making the conceptual boundaries within and between ‘repertoires of opposition’ at work<sup>73</sup>. Why any or much of the kinds of micro behaviours discussed in earlier sections of this article are labelled resistance is never entirely clear, though it is not helped by the view that resisting need not be conscious or active<sup>74</sup>. As Bélanger and Thuderoz argue<sup>75</sup>, it is important to go beyond forms of action and their contexts to meanings and actor rationales.

Given the welcome emphasis on purposeful labour agency, the conscious/active criteria is not a problem in analysing the behaviours of employees in the valuable contributions from Baines and Lewchuk and Dassinger. However, I do have some issues with the tendency to wrap up very varied oppositional practices under the heading of ‘resistance strategies’<sup>76</sup>.

Lewchuk and Dassinger are right that precarious employment and the role of labour intermediaries require us to rethink some traditional categories. It is also pertinent to argue that such employment may weaken bonds of attachment and open up potential for certain kinds of dissent and misbehaviour (around work effort). However, it is difficult to see why working harder or paying for your own training is a ‘resistance strategy’. What may be being confused, I suspect, is asserting greater autonomy as labour market actors (in accessing employment) and autonomy in the effort bargain at work. We are back to my earlier point that we need to be clear about the empirical object that resistance is being directed at.

Something of the same problem arises in the Baines’ study. She is very successful in revealing the complex and overlapping forms of resistance, misbehaviour and dissent amongst not-for-profit employees. However, despite the intent to treat these as ‘a package of overlapping but separable activities’, misbehaviour largely disappears and too many

things that workers do and think are placed under the resistance label. A particularly contentious claim is the designation of unpaid labour and bringing resources into work as ‘compromise resistance’ or ‘gift solidarity’. These are innovative terms, but may confuse rather than clarify. Compromise is inherent to unequal and/or uneven power resources, but nomatter how well-intentioned<sup>77</sup> or linked to future dissent, these actions subsidise shifts of risk and resources from the state and employers to employees and clients, making it less likely that they be acted against. Baines invokes an interesting parallel with research on call centres and gift solidarity. The comparison is telling for a different reason. When customer service representatives find ways of talking to older or vulnerable customers they are misbehaving by evading emotional labour scripts and managerial targets on time and performance<sup>78</sup>.

With these observations in mind, we share the view that workplace resistance should be considered as an intentional, active, upwardly-directed response to managerial controls and appropriation of material and symbolic resources<sup>79</sup>. It then becomes part of a continuum of oppositional practices in which misbehaviour denotes a broader category of things you are not supposed to do, think or be. Dissent – the emergent focus of this article – becomes more significant both because of increased managerial attempts to dictate what we think and because of the massive gap between those efforts and the destructive engagement-sapping corporate practices dominating the work and employment spheres.

There is a third imperative arising from a review of these debates – that of elaborating ideas for and means of connection between different levels of oppositional practices. This has been raised but not resolved or even adequately discussed in this article. There are conceptual means available, notably Kelly’s mobilization theory<sup>80</sup>, which outlines the key

dimensions – interests, organisation, mobilisation, opportunity and forms of action – that might ‘traverse the space between experience at the point of production and formal means of dispute and action’<sup>81</sup> Whatever the theory building challenges that remain to link some of the traditional territories of LPT and radical industrial relations, the more difficult obstacles are practical. In the Fordist era, traditional forms of everyday resistance and misbehaviour such as output restriction and sabotage underpinned a parallel form of informal worker self-organisation, first of the workgroup, then of the shop steward (or equivalent) structure. In turn, such self-organisation was frequently the backbone of collective action through strikes and the like<sup>82</sup>. That ‘transmission belt’ has been damaged or broken through the changes in workplace regimes described earlier. It is becoming more difficult for oppositional practices in the workplace to translate into broader labour mobilization under conditions of market discipline, labour market fragmentation and decline of traditional forms of voice and organisation.

Unions of course still try to escalate or build from everyday grievances, for example, around bullying and punitive performance practices, but change in power resources and pressures on employees makes it more difficult, at least for the time being<sup>83</sup>. However, establishing such connections can and does and does happen, as Baines demonstrates. The social justice orientations of non-profit employees facilitate oppositional narratives that can sustain both unionisation and social movement initiatives. Admittedly these circumstances are distinctive if not highly unusual. However, fragmented employment systems and greater diversity of interests, identities and forms of organisation pose significant problems for labour scholars and activists, but there is little option other to embrace that challenge and ensure that our forms of understanding match that diversity.



## References and Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an expanded version of a keynote address given at the Conference 'Dissent and Resistance in the Workplace in the Context of Neo-Liberalism', McMaster University 3rd October 2014. It draws on collaboration with Stephen Ackroyd for a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Organization Misbehaviour*.

<sup>2</sup> Ackroyd and Thompson, *Organisational Misbehaviour*.

<sup>3</sup> Martinez-Lucio and Stewart, 'The Paradox of Contemporary Labour Process Theory: the Rediscovery of Labour and the Disappearance of Collectivism'.

<sup>4</sup> Ackroyd and Thompson, *Organizational Misbehaviour*, 165.

<sup>5</sup> Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of Industry in the Twentieth Century*.

<sup>6</sup> Burrell, "Modernism, Postmodernism and Organizational Analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Pongratz and Voß, "From Employee to 'Entreployee'".

<sup>8</sup> Thompson and Ackroyd, "All Quiet On The Workplace Front?"; Ackroyd and Thompson, *Organizational Misbehaviour*.

<sup>9</sup> See May, "From Banana Time to Just-in-Time: Power and Resistance at Work", Fleming and Spicer, *Contesting the Corporation*.

<sup>10</sup> Bélanger and Thuderoz, "The Repertoire of Employee Opposition".

<sup>11</sup> Critical Management Studies is a network for radical scholars in management and organisation studies, with its own conference and interest group in the American Academy of Management. Though claiming to be theoretically pluralist, it is largely a home for varieties of post-modernism and shows little interest in labour issues.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas and Davies, "Theorizing the Micro-politics of Resistance", 687.

<sup>13</sup> Mumby, "Theorizing Resistance, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ashcraft, "Resistance through Consent?". 4.

<sup>16</sup> Sotirin and Gottfried, "The Ambivalent Dynamics of Secretarial 'Bitching', 65.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas et al, "Managing Organizational Change", 23.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Courpasson et al, "Resisters at Work", 816.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 816-17.

<sup>22</sup> Mumby, "Theorizing Resistance", 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> See Fleming and Spicer, "Working at a Cynical Distance".

<sup>24</sup> Contu, "Decaf resistance".

<sup>25</sup> Fleming and Spicer, *Contesting the Corporation*, 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> Paulsen, "Empty Labour", 274.

<sup>27</sup> Contu, "De-caf Resistance", 14.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 4

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas and Davies, "Theorizing the Micro-politics of Resistance", 36.

<sup>33</sup> Fleming and Spicer, *Contesting the Corporation*.

<sup>34</sup> Mumby, "Theorizing Resistance", 3.

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<sup>35</sup> Fleming and Spicer, *Contesting the Corporation*; Thomas and Davies, "Theorizing the Micro-politics of Resistance", 685.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, "Financialization and the Workplace".

<sup>37</sup> Burchell et al, *Job Insecurity and Work Intensification*.

<sup>38</sup> See Thompson, "The Trouble with HRM".

<sup>39</sup> See Edwards and Bélanger, "Illicit Practices and 'Fiddles". Taylor, "Performance Management and the New Workplace Tyranny: A Report for the Scottish Trade Union Congress", 2013, Glasgow: University of Strathclyde.

<sup>40</sup> See P. McGovern, S. Hill, C. Mills and M. White, *Market, Class and Employment*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Taylor, "Performance Management...", 46-47.

<sup>42</sup> McDonald and Thompson, "Social Media(tion)".

<sup>43</sup> Edwards and Bélanger, "Illicit Practices and Fiddles...", 16.

<sup>44</sup> Carter et al, "Stressed out of my box", 17.

<sup>45</sup> Main, and Taylor, "A War on Sickies".

<sup>46</sup> Paulsen, *Empty Labour*, and see McDonald and Thompson, "Social Media(tion)".

<sup>47</sup> Thompson and McDonald, "Employer and Employee Uses of Social Media at work". The surveys were of 1000 employees in Australia and the same number in the UK.

<sup>48</sup> Edwards and Bélanger, "Illicit Practices and Fiddles...".

<sup>49</sup> Bain and Taylor, "Entrapped by the 'electronic panopticon'? Callaghan and Thompson, "We Recruit Attitude".

<sup>50</sup> Bolton, *Emotion Management*, Bolton and Boyd, "Trolley Dolly or Skilled Emotion Manager"?

<sup>51</sup> See also Baines, "Resistance as Emotional Labour".

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<sup>52</sup> See Rayton et al, "The Evidence: Employee Engagement"; McCann, "Disconnected Amid the Networks and Chains.

<sup>53</sup> Reported in Caulkin, "Liberating Incentives".

<sup>54</sup> Reported in Naus et al, "Organizational cynicism".

<sup>55</sup> Newman, "British Employees".

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 689.

<sup>57</sup> See Cushen and Thompson, "Doing the right thing?"; Cushen and Cullinane, "Neo-Normative Control...".

<sup>58</sup> Employee quoted in Cushen and Thompson, "Doing the Right Thing".

<sup>59</sup> Employee quoted in Cushen and Cullinane, "Neo-Normative Control...".

<sup>60</sup> Thompson and McDonald, "Employer and Employee Uses of Social Media at work".

<sup>61</sup> Schoneboom, "Workblogging in a Facebook age".

<sup>62</sup> Richards and Kosmala, "In the end..".

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> See <http://vfxsolidarity.org/> ; <http://vfx tippingpoint.blogspot.co.uk/>.

<sup>65</sup> See McDonald and Thompson, "Social Media(tion)"; Thornthwaite, "Chilling Times".

<sup>66</sup> Moore and Taylor, "Organising in the Air"; Moore and Taylor (2013) "Cabin Crew Confidential".

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Moore and Taylor, "Cabin Crew Confidential", 34.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, various pages.

<sup>69</sup> Taylor and Moore, "Cabin Crew Collectivism".

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Gabriel, "The Unmanaged Organization".

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<sup>72</sup> Coe and Jordhus-Lier, “Constrained Agency”?, 213 and 220. The authors are discussing the ‘discovery’ of resistance by labour geographers.

<sup>73</sup> Bélanger and Thuderoz, *The Repertoire of Employee Opposition*.

<sup>74</sup> An argument put forward by numerous authors including P. Dick, “Resistance, gender and Bourdieu’s Notion of Field”.

<sup>75</sup> Bélanger and Thuderoz, *The Repertoire of Employee Opposition*.

<sup>76</sup> Though both a papers use the framework set out by myself and Stephen Ackroyd, there is a tendency to neglect the distinctive characteristics of misbehaviour. When Lewchuck and Dassinger state that ‘Ackroyd refers to workers resistance as “Anything you do at work that you are not supposed to do”,’ that definition is actually of misbehaviour.

<sup>77</sup> Intent does matter and in this case makes accusations of ‘false consciousness’ (rightly disputed by Baines) even more redundant than usual.

<sup>78</sup> This is illustrated in my own work, Callaghan and Thompson, “We Recruit Attitude”.

<sup>79</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Karlsson, *Organisational Misbehaviour*. In an extensive and perceptive discussion of the boundaries between different practices, Karlsson argues that misbehaviour is the overriding concept and resistance is a sub-set.

<sup>80</sup> Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Kirk, “Grievance Expression and Formation”.

<sup>82</sup> The classic UK account of such informal and formal connections was Beynon’s *Working for Ford*.

<sup>83</sup> See case studies in Kirk, “Grievance Expression and Formation”.

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