Existential Struggle and Surplus Value: Hugh Willmott on Managerial Subjectivities

by

Peter Armstrong

Paper for Presentation at the Conference of Practical Criticism in the Managerial Social Sciences.

Leicester University Management School.

January 15\textsuperscript{th} - 17\textsuperscript{th}, 2008

p.armstrong@le.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper examines the ‘reconstructed’ labour process approach to the analysis of management which is set out in Willmott (1997). In that paper, Willmott takes the view that both the ‘bourgeois’ pluralist approach and that of ‘orthodox labour process analysis’ are deficient, the first because it neglects the primacy of the capitalist social relations of production and the second because it reduces the work of managers to an execution of the economic functions of capital. In their place he proposes a theorization in which the capitalist social relations of production are articulated through managerial subjectivities and in which those subjectivities, through a search for meaning and identity, react to the commodification of managerial labour in such a way as to incline managers against the prioritization of capital accumulation. The result, so he claims, is a theory which recognizes that the work of managers is conditioned by their position in the social relations of production but which avoids the tendency towards structural determinism which he finds in orthodox labour process analysis..

Despite his best efforts, Willmott’s trawls through some of the major workplace ethnographies produced by 20\textsuperscript{th} century social science reveal no evidence of the search for existential significance on which his theory hinges. Instead, and as if it were a substitute for such evidence, he repeatedly berates the authors of these studies for their failure to produce any. Beyond that, his depiction of managerial subjectivities depends on an implausible and empirically unsupported presumption that managers react to the surveillance and control of their work by rejecting the purpose behind those controls. This supposed mass disaffection of the managerial cadre is then represented as consequential for the capitalist social relations of production by the theoretical expedient of re-imagining these as nothing more than a contingent regularity of social interaction.
Most of the difficulties of this theory, and most of the misreadings of ethnographic research adduced in its support, stem from the logical impossibility of the position which Willmott attempts to take up. Between an indiscriminate pluralism which fails to recognise the primacy of the capitalist social relations of production and a Marxist/labour process approach which does, there is simply no intermediate position. Unwilling to recognise this, Willmott seeks to create one by constructing a parodied version of ‘labour process orthodoxy’ in which managers are depicted as doing nothing but perform the functions of capital. It is into this imagined space that he seeks to insert his own theory of a managerial contrariness driven by a proletarianisation of their conditions of employment. The ironic result is a labour process approach to management which neglects the role of managers in controlling the labour process.

The paper concludes with a brief suggestion that a better theory both of managerial practices and managerial subjectivities can be constructed by recognizing the contradiction between the roles which managers play within the labour process and the role which they play as the agents of capital in the extraction, realization and allocation of the surplus values created by that labour process. The one requires the establishment of co-operative relationships, in the ordinary way at least, whilst the other depends on the treatment of labour as a commodity. Many of the tensions and anxieties experienced by managers in the course of their work, it is suggested can be traced to this contradiction between co-operation and exploitation (or complicity in exploitation) rather than some universalized search for existential significance. Although by no means original, such a theory has at least the merit of accommodating the surely undeniable fact that most managers accede to the controls to which their work is subjected rather than rebel against them.

Subjectivities and the ‘Transformation’ of Capitalist Social Relations

As set out in Willmott (1997) – for reasons of space I will centre my comments on this fairly recent exposition of his position and refer to it simply by the relevant page numbers - his theory of managerial subjectivities is fairly simple. The exposition, however, is complicated by his concern to distance himself from what he calls ‘bourgeois forms of analysis’ on the one hand (p. 1340) and on the other from what he variously refers to as ‘Marxian theory’ (p. 1333) or ‘orthodox labour process analysis’ (p. 1351 footnote). Concerning bourgeois analysis, his objection is to an indiscriminate pluralism which fails to acknowledge the ultimate dominance of the capitalist social relations of production (p. 1333) and to an assumption that the consciousness of individuals stands outside the historical conditions of its formation (p. 1340). Concerning labour process orthodoxy, he seeks to avoid such theoretical misdemeanours as ‘treating human agents as personifications of economic categories’ (p. 1333, 1341) ‘reducing managerial work to the execution of capitalist functions’ (p. 1339) and a ‘tendency toward determinism and reductionism’ (p. 1351 footnote)1.

1 For reasons which are left unexplained, Willmott repeatedly refers to these methodological infelicities as ‘stratagems’, as if there were some intent to trick or deceive behind their adoption (e.g. pp. 1340-2).
How far these features are actually characteristic of the mainstream labour process tradition, insofar as one exists, is a question which will be taken up later.

For reasons which will appear presently, the paper is additionally complicated by a need to argue an ontology which equates the capitalist social relations of production to their local enactment (p. 1340) and by a tussle with ethnographic data which stubbornly resist the interpretations which he wishes to put upon them (pp. 1348-1353).

At the level of rhetoric, Willmott’s desire to distance himself from a conventional sociology of management is expressed in the aforementioned negative references to ‘bourgeois theory’ and ‘bourgeois analysis’ (e.g. pp. 1340, 1342), though it is not clear whether the implied other of ‘bourgeois’ is to be taken as ‘proletarian’, ‘radical’ or the more anodyne ‘critical’. At the level of theoretical substance, the representation of difference takes the form of a repeated insistence that any adequate analysis of managerial work must recognise the primacy of ‘capitalist social relations’. At first sight this appears to be convincing. Testifying to the antipathy which such forms of words arouse in the hearts of ‘bourgeois’ social scientists - and hence to his theoretical distance from their approach - Willmott quotes Whittington’s ringing denunciation of his own work, ‘Managerial authority need not rely upon capitalist resources; managerial action need not be directed towards capitalist ends.’ (Whittington, 1992), though the persuasive force of these sentiments is somewhat marred by the thought that they could have been uttered by any Marxist of a minimal sophistication.

When one looks more closely at the meaning which Willmott attaches to such phrases as ‘the social relations of production’, however, doubts begin to creep in. In essence, he depicts those social relations as the proximate outcome of social interaction with the happy implication for his preoccupation with managerial subjectivities that these become consequential for the social structures within which they are produced (e.g. p. 1340). For Willmott, it is important that ‘relations of production are accomplished through the existential media of human conduct’ and that they cannot, in consequence, be ‘deemed to exist independently of the individuals or agents whose conduct is the medium of their reproduction (and transformation)’ (p. 1344). For this

---

2 As a leading figure of the intellectual movement which describes itself as ‘Critical Management Studies’ (CMS), it could be argued that Willmott himself has been responsible for some of the leakage of meaning from the word ‘critical’. It is interesting that he protested so strongly when the reviewers for Organization Studies (Ferdinand, Muzio and O’Mahoney, 2004) assumed that his co-edited volume Studying Management Critically (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003) might be expected to exhibit some affinity with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Willmott, 2005). If there is any mistake, it is surely that of the CMS writers who have co-opted a word which once bore an unambiguous emancipatory meaning, and attached it to their writings as if it were nothing more than a fashion-statement. It is a move which has prompted one observer to wonder just what their work is supposed to be critical of (Thompson, 2005).

Some years before the invention of CMS, in fact, Willmott described his approach as ‘radical political economy’ (Willmott, 1984, e.g. p. 362, 364 ), thought the connotations of insurrection were somewhat at odds with his suggestion that it might usefully be taught to managers in order that they might ‘appease effectively the institutional conflict of interests between labour and capital’ (ibid, p. 364).
reason, ‘It is necessary but insufficient’ as he puts it, ‘to focus on the “objective”
conditions of action’ - insufficient unless it is also recognised that there are “micro”
processes of enactment through which the “macro” structures of capitalism are
*reproduced* (and transformed)’ (p. 1340, italics in original). But if the social structures
of capitalism are so pliable that they can be *transformed* by the micro processes of
interaction (my own italics this time - and the phrasing cannot be accidental because
Willmott repeats it), one’s first impulse is to question whether they are social
structures at all, and to wonder of what they might consist. Certainly Willmott cannot
be referring to the ownership by capital of the means of production nor to the
exchange of labour power against capital. Nor, by inference, can he be referring to the
consequences which follow as a matter of logic from such bedrock features of the
capitalist social formation, consequences both for the practice of management and for
the labour process as it is managed.

The ““objective” conditions of action’ mentioned by Willmott himself (the scare
quotes are his own) are labour’s real subordination to capital and the execution of
capitalist functions by management. The first of these is not a definitive structural
feature of capitalism because capitalist enterprises and indeed capitalist societies can
exist perfectly well in the absence of detailed controls of the labour process.
Concerning the second, it is certainly essential to the capitalist social formation that
someone - either the owners of capital themselves or their agents - must attend to the
economic functions of capital, most of the time at any rate. That does not mean,
however, that those functions, either taken together or separately, have to be
performed by managers, still less by particular managers and even when by particular
managers, not all the time. In the particular locales wherein the micro processes of
enactment are played out, both of Willmott’s “objective” conditions of action - the
precise degree to which labour is ‘really subsumed’ and the extent to which managers
are involved in the economic functions of capital - may well vary according to that
enactment, but neither, by the same token, are core structural features of capitalist
society and nor, within wide limits, need they impact against those core structures. In
Mouzelis’ terms (1995, e.g. p. 19 ff) what is lacking in Willmott’s schema is any
sense of how the micro and macro levels of analysis might articulate, in default of
which he simply conceptualises the social relations of production in terms which *are*
susceptible to the vagaries of local enactment.

Apart from a prioritization of those local social structures which he identifies as those
of capitalism, in fact, Willmott’s conception of the relationship between social action
and social structure is remarkably similar to that of Giddens (1984). In one respect
this comes as no surprise since he had earlier commended the approach as ‘a valuable
alternative conceptual framework for advancing critical empirical research into
managerial work’ (Willmott, 1987). If we go back a little further, however, it *is* a
surprise since he was also party to the identification of an ‘analytic void’ at the heart
of structuration theory which, so he and/or his co-author argued, renders it incapable
of connecting concrete manifestations of social conflict with the structural
contradiction between private appropriation and socialized production (Knights and
Willmott, 1985, p. 31). Such a connection, the 1985 co-authors claimed, could be
achieved through a consideration of the ‘strategies of securing self through social
identity’. How these strategies or indeed the identities which they are intended to
secure, might themselves connect with the structural contradiction in question remained a matter for conjecture.

The real problem with Willmott’s (and Giddens’) duality of structure, is not so much its lack of a social psychology but that it ignores those macro structures which are not directly instantiated at the local level, but which nevertheless underlie the contingently derived substructures which are the subject of instantiation. The ownership by capital of the means of production is a case in point. This is not re-enacted as such in most workplaces, not even at the level of rhetoric. What is routinely re-enacted is a particular version of the managerial prerogatives deriving from, but not determined by, the delegated powers attaching to ownership. Though these are certainly aspects of local social structure in the sense that they constitute rules and resources available to those involved (Giddens, 1984, p. 19-25), they are also susceptible to change either through the creep of custom-and-practice (Brown, 1972) or as a result of direct challenge. But - they can change without impacting on the basic social structure which underlies them.

The point in the end is a simple one: that the social structures which make up a given social formation exist at different levels of embeddedness. At the ‘surface’ level, there are those which exist through their enactment and can by the same token be changed through that enactment. It is structures of this kind which are recognised in the theory of structuration. Underlying these immediate and local structures, however, there are those which are more pervasive and persistent. These are missed by structuration theory because they are insulated from changes in any one of their particular manifestations, partly because they are anchored in so many others and partly because their articulation with their surface manifestations often allows for some degree of slack. Such is the case, to repeat the earlier example, with the ramified institution of private property as it exists in capitalist societies.

This means that Knights and Willmott (1985) are perfectly correct in their diagnosis of a void in structuration theory and, by implication, of a similar void in Willmott’s 1997 reiteration of it. As it stands, both versions of the theory do indeed fail to connect the routines of structuration with the possible development of pressures for change in core social institutions. The nature of the void, however, points towards the need for a theory of how the structures at various levels might articulate, rather than the social psychology of identity envisaged by Knights and Willmott. Such a theory

As Thompson (1989) points out, Giddens himself has recognised something of this, albeit as a difference in the levels of abstraction rather than embeddedness. Whilst the two certainly connect in that more deeply embedded structures are also more abstract in the sense that they are capable of articulation in many surface forms, the term abstraction, suggesting as it does, a difference only in the way these structures must be apprehended, fails to capture the idea that the more ‘abstract’ are also less susceptible to change. Layder (1994, pp. 138-9) has made substantially the same point, noting that Giddens’ conception of social structure as ‘rules and resources’ simply omits all those features of a social formation which are not articulated as vocabularies of motive.

Thompson also argues that Giddens has not so far explained how his theory of structuration might apply to the instantiation and reproduction of his more ‘abstract’ structures, a point not adequately dealt with in Giddens’ reply to his critics (1989). Whether something like the process described in the main text might do the trick is very much an open question of course.
might begin in a rough way by visualising core structures as setting limits to the variability of those through which they are articulated at the surfaces of social interaction. Through some custom-and-practice drift of the processes of enactment, these limits might become more frequently and more widely encountered and thereby become the objects of conscious reflection. Demands for the democratization of the workplace, for example, might progress by degrees from those which can be accommodated within the core property relationships of capitalist society to those which cannot, with the result that these structural elements become the subjects of explicit critique and political action where they had once formed the taken-for-granted basis behind the rules and resources of Giddens’ processes of structuration (c.f. Mouzelis, 1995, p. 119). This, of course, is just one possible mode of articulation between social structures at different levels of embedding, but to develop such conjectures further would take us too far from the matter in hand.

Willmott’s ideas on the change-through-enactment of capitalist social relations, meanwhile, can only properly apply to those which exist at the level of surface manifestation. His repeated references to them, however, always in the abstract and always in general terms, have the effect of blurring the important distinction between surface and deeper structures and doing so in ways which favour his belief in the consequentiality of managerial subjectivities. For if what is true of the immediate employment relationship – that it is susceptible to the reworkings of structuration – is also true of the deeper structures which underlie it, he can argue a version of managerialism in which the greater part of the capitalist social order is subtended by nothing more than the play of subjectivities at the level of middle and junior management. Pushed this far, the argument self-evidently auto-destructs on the rampages of private equity and other predations of finance capital. Possibly this is why Willmott, when he ceases his talk of the transformation of capitalist social relations, contents himself with the relatively modest claim that attention to the subjectivities of managers is necessary for a ‘more adequate’ understanding of the work which they perform.

Control and Resistance in Middle and Lower Management

But how far is he justified even in this? He obviously has right on his side to the extent that the states of mind of managers and everyone else involved in the capitalist social order are a legitimate object of interest in their own right. The more testing questions, however, concern the extent to which managerial subjectivities influence what managers actually do, and how far what managers actually do influences the lives and doings of the managed.

These are matters on which Willmott has opinions, if not always very definite ones. The subjectivities of most middle and lower managers, he maintains, do not just influence the manner in which they interpret their assigned roles in the processes of capital accumulation; they actually incline them against those aspects of their work. More, he also believes - most of the time at any rate - that these managers possess sufficient power and autonomy to act on these inclinations and that they actually do so to the extent that their recalcitrance is a ‘basic problem’ for senior management (pp. 1348-9). Elsewhere he is not so sure. On the one hand, he points out that management
control systems indicate the potential for ‘misbehaviour’ at the more junior levels (p. 1338, 1348), though he does not make it clear whether or not he thinks this potential survives the imposition of the controls in question. On the other hand, he notes that the same controls leave managers with ‘comparatively little “space” (or inclination it might be added) to pursue strategies which are overtly antagonistic to the “bottom line”’ (p. 1335). Even if the stress in this last quotation is on ‘overt’, with the implication that managerial resistance is mostly covert, there remain contradictions. How can there be even covert resistance to capital accumulation if managers are as enmeshed in performance controls as Willmott says? And how, if their resistance is covert to the point that it is undetected by these controls, can it be a problem for senior management?

According to Willmott, it is only a small minority of the most senior managers, abetted by a few accomplices, who are wholeheartedly committed to the goal of profitability (pp. 1335, 1348). The rest, he tells us, are preoccupied with ‘other concerns – such as career advancement and job security – which are not necessarily consonant with the reliable and effective stewardship of investors’ interests’. (p. 1338). In addition they may play games of ‘office politics’ which have little to do with profitability (p. 1339) or selfishly resist company policies which threaten to devalue their accumulated skills and knowledge (p. 1348 footnote).

The first two arguments confuse the question of commitment to a goal with that of whether actors have a motive (i.e. any motive) for acting in furtherance of that goal. To most lay observers, a concern with career advancement and job security would seem to provide highly effective levers through which middle and lower managers might be induced to take a keen, albeit purely instrumental, interest in profitability, whilst ‘office politics’ might work either way. That leaves only resistance to changes which might devalue their personal capital as a genuine reason why managers might resist the prioritization of profit; not an uncommon situation, but not one which is universally applicable either.

To what does Willmott attribute to this widespread disaffection? One observation that he offers is that only that few managers own substantial portions of their companies or have a direct material interest in its profitability (p. 1335). Theoretically speaking this is the good ol’ Rock ‘n Roll - a long way from the close attention to subjectivities which he recommends elsewhere. Substantively speaking, moreover, they are reasons why managers might be indifferent to capital accumulation, rather than hostile to it. Nor are they even convincing as reasons for indifference. The proportion of a company’s equity held by managers is no index of the proportion of their personal remuneration which is linked to its profitability, whilst the prevalence of indices of economic performance in the control systems of most modern companies, sometimes right down to the level of the business unit (Armstrong, Marginson, Edwards and Purcell, 1996), make it very doubtful indeed that there are many managers have no direct interest in profitability, at least that of their own patch.

These attributions of interests aside, the main thrust of Willmott’s argument concerns the employment relationship as it is now experienced by middle and lower managers. He quotes a number of authorities to the effect that middle and lower managers have experienced a proletarianisation of their conditions of employment. Although they
remain economically privileged as compared to the workers they manage, they have now come to ‘share in the subjugation and oppression that characterises the lives of productive workers’, a quotation from Braverman (1974, p. 418) which Willmott italicises as a key point in his argument (p. 1334). What these various authorities do not go on to say, however, and what Willmott does, is that the density of performance controls, pervasive accountability and relative lack of autonomy typically mean that middle and lower managers now feel little or no allegiance to their companies or to their profitability (p. 1335).

This is a key point in Willmott’s argument, and it hinges on a conceptual leap, and into the bargain an assumption about subjectivities, which is both logically unwarranted and, so far as the evidence goes, empirically falsified. It is unwarranted because a withdrawal of allegiance does not follow as a matter of logic from a loss of opportunities for self-expression. Elsewhere, in fact, Willmott has castigated other authors for the ‘essentialism’ of any assumption that the routinization of work even results in a sense of deprivation (Willmott, 1990). Even supposing that it does, Mills (1956, p. 243) has argued that the consequences may be the precise opposite of those claimed by Willmott: that routine white collar employees compensate for the fact that their work ‘offers little chance for external prestige claims and internal self-esteem’ by ‘borrowing’ prestige from the companies for which they work. Empirical evidence that routine work need not be associated with a lack of allegiance to the company was encountered during the ChemCo studies. There were, for example, the operatives who were described as ‘like a stick of rock; break them in half and you’d find “ChemCo” stamped through the centre’ (e.g. Harris, 1987, p. 93) and the cheers which rang out when one of the plants achieved a monthly production record, not in the plant itself, but amongst the clerks who had calculated the figures (1972 fieldwork, not previously reported).

Willmott’s thoughts on the proletarianising effects on middle and junior managers of organizational control systems are also at variance with a substantial literature on behavioural accounting. Most such systems nowadays take the form of targets against which performance is monitored, sometimes at intervals of as little as one week (Armstrong, Marginson, Edwards and Purcell, 1996). In the literature relating to such systems, the conventional wisdom is that, provided targets are set in consultation with those to whom they apply, and set at levels which are challenging yet attainable, far from provoking the resistance which Willmott assumes, they are actually internalised as personal goals (e.g. Caplan, 1971). To be fair, these are beliefs which are only patchily supported by empirical research. More persuasive is Hopwood’s classic study (1973) which found that the manner in which senior managers used accounting information in the evaluation of their subordinates was the crucial variable. Hopwood distinguished between a non-accounting style of evaluation in which the accounting information was largely ignored, a budget-constrained style in which it was treated as the only relevant index of performance and a profit-conscious style in which it was melded with other relevant information to produce a rounded picture of the contribution of the manager to company profitability. If Willmott’s picture of managerial reaction against organizational controls were correct, one would expect the non-accounting style to do the least damage to managerial motivation, the budget-constrained style to produce the antagonistic reaction of which he writes, with the
profit-conscious style somewhere in between. In fact Hopwood found the profit-conscious style of evaluation to be most effective - not an unexpected finding admittedly, but one which flatly contradicts Willmott’s crudely determinist picture of dysfunctional management controls.

The weight of evidence, then, is against Willmott’s supposition that the primary effect of organizational controls systems is to demotivate those managers to whom they are applied.

At points, Willmott argues that the potential for disarticulation between the requirements of capital accumulation and the practices of middle and junior managers arises not just from their conditions of employment but from influences external to the workplace altogether. In this vein, he argues that a reconstructed labour process theory ‘must incorporate an appreciation of how [managers’] work is coloured by diverse cultural and ideological influences in addition to being shaped by their career interests as sellers of valued skills’ (p. 1343, italics added). The mandatory incorporation of such extra-curricular influences might prove difficult, however, in view of the concurrent need to avoid the pitfalls of ‘bourgeois’ pluralism. As Willmott himself put it only ten pages earlier, ‘It can readily be acknowledged that many influences (e.g. familial, religious, professional) do inform the practical accomplishment of managerial work. But in advanced capitalist societies, these influences are more-or-less directly conditioned – promoted or suppressed – by politico-economic pressures to sustain or revitalize processes of capital accumulation’ (p. 1333).

What at first appears to be a straightforward contradiction in Willmott’s argument is actually a circularity, and it is one of some significance. By juxtaposing a conceptualization of social structure as enactment, a concept of enactment as the articulation of subjectivity, and a concept of subjectivity as achieved through the whole of an individual’s social being, Willmott has effectively re-imported elements of ‘bourgeois pluralism’ into the very concept of capitalist social relations. On the basis of this covert redefinition, he can then claim to recognise the primacy of these in shaping managerial work whilst simultaneously insisting on the crucial role of managerial subjectivities and agency in shaping the social relations by which these both are shaped. Underneath the complexities of the exposition, the proffered alternative to ‘bourgeois pluralism’ amounts to little more than a play on words.

It is on the basis of the foregoing arguments, nevertheless, that Willmott feels able to sum up the case thus:

‘In response [to ‘various sticks and carrots’], managers may mobilize other values, agendas and concerns to diffuse, resist, or circumvent pressures that are intended to make their agency more predictable and profitable [reference omitted]’ (1347, italics added).

Formally speaking, the logic of this is unassailable: it is indeed possible for managers to react in this way, although that requires an assumption that that those advisory staffs who design the relevant appraisal, reward and career progression schemes and those senior managers who operate them are ‘judgmental dopes’, a pejorative assumption which Willmott is quick to attack in connection with any suggestion that
managers ‘slavishly’ (as he puts it) perform the functions of capital (p. 1340). On that unlikely basis, nevertheless, he is still entitled to his claim that managers may resist the pressures on them. A page later, though, the ‘may’ has firmed up to the extent that it confronts senior management as an accomplished fact:

For (senior) managers and other committed agents of capital who elevate “the business objective of making a profit” above all else, a basic problem is the recalcitrance of managers whose allegiance to this objective is partial, ambivalent and not infrequently dramaturgical (p. 1348, italics added).

In sum, Willmott believes that the subjectivities of middle and lower managers are influenced against the prioritization of capital accumulation by the very controls intended to secure their commitment. How far he also believes that they are able to act on these inclinations is less clear, but the balance of his statements on the matter, not to mention his insistence that managerial practices possess the capacity to influence ‘capitalist social relations’, certainly suggest some degree of autonomy.

A Preliminary Evaluation

The first thing to note about the vision of the capitalist corporation behind this characterization of managerial subjectivities is the sheer implausibility of the theory of power which informs it. How is it, the question poses itself, that a tiny oligarchy of zealots is so consistently able to squeeze profit out of a largely disaffected mass? In effect we are asked to swallow what Foucault (1980, pp. 78-108) called a ‘juridical’ theory of power: that it flows downwards from the persons of a ruling élite. Against this, one of Foucault’s indisputable insights was that overarching systems of power can only be constructed out of the raw material of lower-level networks through which power already ‘circulates’ (ibid). In other words, all systems of power - even Willmott’s imagined dictatorship of the boardroom - can only function through webs of complicity. But managerial complicity is precisely what he is concerned to deny.

Also implausible is the contention that the primary effect of managerial control systems is rebellion. In a number of the foregoing quotations, Willmott seems to imagine the corporation as controlled by a tightly-knit web of bureaucratic sanctions (‘carrots and sticks’). Where this is the case, the response to the implicit low-trust employment relationship may well be disaffection, as Fox (1974) amongst others has argued, but disaffection can only become resistance in those interstices of the system which have not so far succumbed to advances in the techniques of monitoring. More usually, however, managerial control, especially at the more senior levels but to some degree at all levels, is achieved not through detailed performance controls but through the socio-cultural production of trust (Kanter, 1993), albeit backed up by procedures for the post-hoc evaluation of the discharge of fiduciary responsibilities. This means that a condition of access to those managerial positions characterised by high-trust employment relationships is an ongoing assurance to that the trust will not be abused, an assurance made and reaffirmed by a host of subtle signals given off in the course of daily practice and which are minutely scrutinised by colleagues and superiors in a normatively dense managerial culture (Whyte, 1960).
The fact that managers are already enmeshed in a culture with its ready-made significances and meanings also means that it is difficult to imagine that they routinely ‘struggle with the existential significance of the purposive quality of human consciousness’ as Willmott repeatedly contends (p. 1354). In Knights and Willmott (1985), this personal quest for meaning and identity is argued from an individualized re-working of Berger and Luckman’s concept of ‘world-openness’ (1967, p. 65 ff.). But world-openness in Berger and Luckman refers to the near-infinite possibilities for the social construction of meanings and practices, the aggregation of which comprises a culture. In no way does it imply that individuals within such cultures are routinely confronted with the ‘existential anxiety of experiencing the natural and social world as separate and uncertain’ (Knights and Willmott, 1985 pp. 26-7), and none of the alleged shortcomings which Knights and Willmott believe themselves to have discovered in Berger and Luckman (and, inter alia, in Goffman) make it plausible that the concept should be so revised. It is true that there are occasions on which individuals may ask questions of their culture, for example when circumstances of personal calamity expose its taken-for-granted meanings, or in settings expressly designated for the purpose, such as a Kierkegaard reading-group or an MBA seminar on business ethics. Most of the time, though, as Mintzberg (1980) convincingly observed of managers, we don’t have the time.

Finally, like many anti-structuralist thinkers (he would probably prefer ‘post-structuralist’) Willmott seems insensitive to the emergent properties of co-ordinated action: that outcomes may be accomplished perfectly well without a commitment to those outcomes on the part of all concerned – as Lockwood long ago recognised in his distinction between system integration and social integration (1964). As is realised by army commanders and was once realised by structural functionalists, a commitment to glory (or system goals) may be intensely gratifying to those whose business it is to personify these motivational abstractions, but it is normally enough that the division of labour is adequately designed and ‘the training kicks in’. In other words, there are many managers for whom a commitment to capital accumulation is no conscious part of their tacit notion of a job well done, a quasi-professional commitment to which may be sufficient to ensure their contribution to the extraction of surplus value. A ‘well-engineered’ production process, for example, would have the effect of reducing the porosity of the working day even if its designer thought of distributed profit as unmitigated parasitism.

In summary, Willmott’s scenario of widespread disaffection within the managerial hierarchies of corporate capitalism is implausible and even if it were not, it would still not follow that it would make a difference to management practice.

**Arguing the Case 1: Against ‘Labour Process Orthodoxy’**

It may be the very implausibility of this thesis of managerial contrariness which leads Willmott to concentrate so much of his fire on a stereotyped labour process orthodoxy which he describes as ‘reducing managerial work to the execution of capitalist functions’ (p. 1333). Most often, as Edwards (2007) has observed of similar allegations by Ezzamel, Willmott and Worthington (2004), the practitioners of this reductionist creed are left anonymous. In Willmott (1997), however, a substantial part
of the argument is directed against three papers in which I developed a theory of intra managerial competition within the capitalist agency relationship (Armstrong, 1989a, 1991a and 1991b) and on that basis I must assume that I am one of the culprits. Since I now need to compare my theory with the one which Willmott criticises, it is necessary that I offer a brief exposition.

In general, managerial work consists of two parts: the intellectual labour of production and a contribution to the ‘global function of capital’ i.e. the extraction, realization and allocation of surplus value. The proportions vary with different managerial positions but generally speaking the capital functions dominate at the higher levels.

Insofar as they perform the functions of capital, managers act as agents of the principals who own the capital. That is, managers are employed for the purpose of furthering the interests of their principals through the management of their subordinates. This does not mean that they simply carry out the instructions of the owners of capital and nor are they bureaucrats employed to follow rules laid down by those owners. Agency on behalf of a principle is not a matter of obeying instructions or of performing specified tasks in accordance with predetermined procedures. Instead, agents are expected to use their best abilities, their initiative and their judgment in the interests of the principle. When principals know less of the business in hand than the agents they employ (a condition which institutional economists call ‘information asymmetry’), this means that all positions of agency are, in some degree, positions of trust.

Trust, however, is an expensive commodity. At its higher levels, it commands spectacular salaries and extensive benefits. It is also the subject of various forms of social production ranging from relatively formal schemes of appraisal and career progression to the clubhouse propinquity through which male managerial cultures achieve the feat of cloning which Wilbert Moore memorably described as ‘homosexual reproduction’ (Moore, 1962, p. 109, quoted in Kanter, 1977, p. 48). These expenses mean that principals have an interest in economising on the extent to which trust is diffused downwards into hierarchically organized agency relationships. Crudely put, it may be cheaper to employ highly trusted managerial agents to control less trustworthy agents than to vest some intermediate level of trust all. So it comes about that the more junior positions, though still positions of agency, are also subject to supplementary controls by more trusted agents in positions of greater authority.

The disproportionate rewards attaching to positions of trusted agency sets up a competition in which the displacement of trust from one managerial position (or set of positions) to another is at stake. This competition exists at a number of levels, ranging from the individual, through the functional department, to the efforts of entire managerial professions to promote themselves as the proper custodians of some ‘vital’ aspect of company policy. Since the implementation of these policies (or decisions)

---

4 Readers are entitled to a frank account of a writer’s motives. Writers, though, are entitled to offer one only to those readers who are conscientious enough to truffle through the footnotes. It is here, therefore, that I confess that an irritation at Willmott’s treatment of my work is a supplementary motive for the production of this critique.
necessarily involves authority over other professions (or individuals), trust, to a first approximation, can only be gained by one set of agents at the expense of others.

All of this means that the ‘proletarianisation’ of managers referred to by Willmott and other writers actually incorporates a number of potentially independent processes. There is, firstly, a proletarianisation of condition which refers to a deterioration of the conditions of employment. Secondly, a proletarianisation of function refers to a substitution of intellectual labour for some part in the global function of capital (Crompton, 1979). Thirdly there can occur a withdrawal of trust within the global function of capital such that a particular position is subjected to additional performance controls and audits.

To go further is not possible within the confines of this paper, but the interested reader is referred to Armstrong (1991b) for a fuller exposition. We are now in a position, though, to see what Willmott makes of this theory.

As Willmott presents the argument of the 1989a paper, I contend that ‘managerial work forms no part of the labor process’. I am further accused of ‘conceptualizing management only as “a means of degrading, controlling and driving manual labour” (Armstrong, 1989a, p. 309)’. ‘This manager-as-an-agent-of-capital formulation,’ Willmott continues, ‘effectively denies, or at least views as insignificant, the contradictory positioning of many managers within capitalist work organizations.’ (p. 1336, italics in original). This, of course, is exactly wrong: the contradiction between the employee status of managers and the expectation that they will act in the interests of their employers lies at the very heart of my approach. As for Willmott’s quotation from my 1989a paper, that is lifted from a sentence, the first half of which explicitly points out that the productive contribution of intellectual labour remains productive (i.e. a labour process) even when it is co-opted as “a means of degrading, controlling and driving manual labour” as it is in Scientific Management. Thus Willmott’s truncation of the quotation and his addition of a gratuitous and italicised ‘only’ is a gross distortion of its actual meaning. Far from contending that managerial work forms no part of the labour process, both the sentence in question and the preceding paragraph make it perfectly clear that the intellectual components of productive work, whether performed by specialized advisory staffs or incorporated into the work of managers are indeed to be regarded as labour processes. In the light of this, it is more than a little galling to read Willmott’s comment that, in making precisely the same point in a later paper of 1991a, ‘Armstrong (1991a) appears to acknowledge his mistake’ (p. 1336).

It is those parts of managerial work which are devoted to the extraction, realization and allocation of surplus value which should not be considered as labour processes, for the simple reason that work of this kind produces and reproduces nothing but the capitalist social relations of production. It is hard to see what Willmott finds to disagree with in this restriction of the term ‘labour process’. In Willmott (1990) we read that ‘A more adequate appreciation of subjectivity must be founded upon the materialist premise that the labour process “is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature” (Marx 1976, p. 283)’ (Italics added). It is not immediately apparent, to say the least, how such a definition might be
stretched so as to include the extraction, realization and allocation of surplus value. Willmott and I are also as one, or so it appears, in objecting to the promiscuous use of the term to describe any and all occupations within the capitalist social order because doing so ignores the social relations of production (p. 1336). It is only when the question moves on to specifics, to the matter of which managerial work, if any, Willmott would exclude from his definition, that matters become rather more imprecise. Quite soon in his 1997 paper, in fact, all mention of any such restriction disappears and a labour process approach to management surreptitiously morphs into an unproblematic treatment of everything managers do as a labour process. In the course of this conceptual slippage, the deficiency which Willmott earlier condemned in ‘bourgeois sociology’ – namely, its denial that management occupies a particular position within the social relations of production (p. 1333) - creeps into his own analysis. This denial then becomes overt when he recommends an ‘analytic move’ in which the ‘capital-privileging exploitative organization of labor processes’ are considered to be undertaken by at different times by ‘different elements within the collective worker’ (ibid, p. 1337, italics added). This bizarre redefinition of Carchedi’s (1977) collective worker, with its correlative erasure of the distinction between managers and workers in respect of their placement in the capitalist social relations of production is achieved by arguing that autonomous groups of workers are, in the very fact of their self-organization, acting as agents of capital. Directly counter to Willmott’s own strictures against ‘bourgeois analysis’, it is also an insight from academia, which will come as a retrospective clarification to the former colliers of the National Union of Mineworkers. It is, of course, the product of mistaking organization within the labour process for the organization of the labour process for the purpose of extracting surplus value. Self-organizing groups of workers do not control the whole of the wage-effort bargain and it is on this that the rate of exploitation depends.

Part of Willmott’s objection to the idea that management involves agency on behalf of capital, or that they perform the functions of capital, may lie in an overly-mechanical view of what this entails. Burawoy’s surely uncontentious observation that management ‘is concerned with securing co-operation and surplus’ (Burawoy, 1985, p. 39) for example, is castigated for ‘reducing managerial work to the execution of capitalist functions’ (p. 1339, italics added) as if the performance of capital functions were a programmable task. It is not of course. As I have already explained, it is characteristic of principal-agent relationships that the actions of the agent are not wholly specified, that they are expected to use their best judgment and creative capacities in the furtherance of the principals’ interests, with all the misperceptions of

---

5 In its context, this summary form of words is Burawoy’s description of the particular management interest in the game of ‘making out’ (the workers’ practice of making the maximum possible bonus allowed by the incentive payment system). Whatever else managers may do, it is reasonable to suppose that their particular interest in a payment system is to do with its efficacy as a means of extracting surplus value. That Burawoy points this out tells us nothing about his view of other aspects of management work and Willmott is out of order in suggesting that it does. Even reading Burawoy as referring to the generality of managerial work, his ‘co-operation and surplus’ need not refer to capital functions at all. Work in any social formation must yield a surplus and if management exists at all, it must be its primary task to see that it does so. Capitalism is not distinguished by the production of surplus value but by the fact that the surplus goes to capital.
those interests, failures of judgment and infirmities of capacity which decision-making autonomy entails. Further, that same autonomy exposes agents – and through them, principals - to whatever ‘moral hazards’ have survived the systems of incentivization and monitoring on the one hand, and the social production of trust of the other. Provided such defalcations remain the exception, there is no incompatibility between an agency theorization of management and such instances of misplaced trust. As for Burawoy’s so-called ‘reduction’ of managerial work to capital functions, it needs to be remembered that these are economic categories, not concrete forms of managerial action. Once it has been recognised – as it is in Burawoy’s treatment- that some of management consist of the intellectual labour of production, there is no reduction involved in speaking of the rest of it as the execution of capitalist functions.

An Unproductive Encounter with Unproductive Labour

Willmott also objects to my use of the term ‘unproductive labour’ in Armstrong (1991a) to describe that part of managerial work which consists of agency on behalf of capital6, though it is a little difficult to see why, since he also allows that the distinction is ‘heuristically and politically useful insofar as it recollects how, within capitalist labor processes, managers are hired to perform the “unproductive” task of ensuring that surplus value is pumped out of the collective laborer.’ (p. 1336). As I have already pointed out, I do not myself think of management in such infantile leftist terms, though I sympathise at this point with what I take to be Willmott’s general drift. For a theorist who insists that managerial work is not reducible to a function of capital, however (p. 1339, 1343), this still does not seem a very intelligent thing to say.

‘Mistakes’ apart, Willmott’s makes two objections to my identification of capital functions with unproductive labour (and by the same token, presumably, to Braverman’s also, 1974, Ch. 19). The first is his claim (already discussed and dismissed) that elements of unproductive management are actually dispersed throughout the ‘collective worker’. The second is that it is difficult to separate the productive and unproductive elements in any given act of management. This is admitted in the general case, although there are aspects of managerial work which fall clearly into one category or the other. Attempts to unpick the weave of managerial work in this mechanical fashion, however, are largely beside the point. What matters about the work of managers is not so much the elements of which it is made up it but the outcomes which it achieves and these are comparatively easy to separate into productive and unproductive aspects. Performance monitoring systems, for example, can easily distinguish between the volume and quality of production on the one hand and measures of financial performance on the other.

6 On this there is a tale to tell, and it is one which says as much about the quality of the editing which has gone into the successive volumes from the Labour Process Conferences as it does about my own failings as a theorist. On being told by one of the editors of the 1991 volume that they wished to include my paper, I intimated that I wished to reconsider my remarks on unproductive labour in the light of comments made at the conference. The reply was as illuminating as it was succinct, ‘Too late mate.’ Since the work was published under my name, nevertheless, I make what defence I can in the main text.
In an attempt to further explicate and justify the distinction between the productive and unproductive aspects of management, I also sought to show that the distinction between management as intellectual labour and management as an agency of capital, is one which is recognised – roughly speaking – in the practitioner tendency to restrict the term ‘management’ to the capital functions (Armstrong, 1989a, p. 310) and that this usage is an historical product of the capture of ‘management’ from industrial engineering by educational and consultancy interests (Armstrong, 1991a). On the first point, and as a proxy for many similar discussions I cited Koontz and O’Donnell’s (then) widely used textbook, thus:

Failure to distinguish executive functions from nonmanagerial technical skills is another source of confusion . . . The manager . . . may or may not possess such technical skills. In his managerial capacity he is certainly not utilising such operating expertness [sic] . . . if he [sic] can rely on upon and successfully use the technical skills of others, he need not possess a nonmanagerial skill at all.

(Koontz and O’Donnell, 1968 p. 55)

To this, I might have added:

In a very real sense, the goal of every manager must be surplus . . . the goal of managers as managers is fundamentally the same in business and non-business enterprises. It is also the same at every level

ibid p. 7

And similar pronouncements can be found in other influential writers, ranging from Henri Fayol to Drucker. From these I drew the inference that talk of ‘management’, at least within the culture of Anglo-Saxon capitalism, refers not to the entirety of what managers do, but to the generalised task of producing, realizing and allocating surplus values through the control of people as distinct from any technical expertise and ability to organize which managers contribute to the productive process itself. It is in that sense, not the crude generalisation about the work of actual managers implicit in Willmott’s critique, that I identify ‘management’ with unproductive labour.

Having criticized my work for views it does not express, and for views which it does express but are shared by himself, Willmott feels able to sum up and dismiss its overall conclusion thus, ‘Asserting that managerial work forms no part of the labor process is no way to defend the distinctiveness of labor process theory’ (p. 1336). Though he refers to my paper of 1991b, the one in which my theorization of the dynamics of trust within the capitalist agency relationship is set out in its most developed form, he does so only to remark that, ‘Management hierarchies, as even Armstrong (1991b, p. 18) allows are “battlegrounds of mutual obstruction and ideological warfare, in which as much effort goes into subverting opponents as into constructive efforts on behalf of the principal”’ (p. 1348, italics added). From Willmott’s form of words, the uninformed reader would assume that ‘even Armstrong’ referred to some fundamentalist bigot for whom the monolithic nature of capitalist management was an article of faith, albeit one reluctantly abandoned in the face of evidence to the contrary. In fact, even the title of the paper in question *Contradiction and Social Dynamics in the Capitalist Agency Relationship* makes it clear that the view of management as a conflictual plurality lies at the core of my

**Arguing the Case 2: In Search of Recalcitrance**

For Willmott it is important that ‘relations of production are practically accomplished through the existential media of human conduct’ (p. 1344). That they allow for a good deal of variation in their enactment is common ground. The capitalist agency relationship, as I describe it in Armstrong (1991b), is built on trust as well as on incentives and monitoring, and this implies precisely that managers bring their personal capabilities, perceptions and values to the business of capital accumulation. This, however, is not enough for Willmott, since, as we have seen, he objects to any suggestion that managers can be adequately understood as agents of capital:

‘. . managers do not “just” operate or supervise the physical and organizational means of production in ways dictated by the imperatives of capitalism. Their materiality as human subjects also obliges them to struggle with the existential significance of the purposive quality of human consciousness and not just with its contribution to productive activity

(Willmott, 1997, p. 1354)

In more accessible language, Willmott believes that the attitudes of many (most?) managers are inimical to the prioritization of capital accumulation, and that these attitudes (sometimes?) influence what they actually do.

Since the quotation is taken from his conclusion, it is not unreasonable to expect the body of his paper to marshal some supporting evidence. Recognising this, Willmott devotes two pages to a discussion of ‘Managers as (Misbehaving) agents.’ (pp. 1338-1340). In fact these two pages contain little evidence of managerial recalcitrance of any kind and none at all of refusals to act in the interests of capital accumulation. He quotes Braverman (1974, p. 151) on the existence of “unbounded cynicism and revulsion”, but neglects to inform his readers that Braverman was speaking of workers in the cited passage, not managers. He castigates Burawoy (1985, p. 10) for his portrayal of managers as ‘compliant functionaries who unproblematically perform the task of securing and obscuring surplus value’. He argues that games of office politics ‘cannot be assumed to be consistent with, or fully functional for, the extraction of surplus’. He tells us of Hyman’s (1987) opinion that managers have more opportunities for misbehaviour than other employees. And apart from more exhortation to take note of existential subjectivities and so forth, that, believe it or not, is all.

In a later section entitled ‘On the Materiality of Managerial Subjects’ we learn more of the managerial recalcitrance which figures so prominently in Willmott’s analysis. A Manufacturing Director ‘at one of our case study companies’ bemoans the difficulty of getting his middle managers to use computers (p. 1347). Sir John Harvey-Jones has a grumble about obstructive bureaucrats at ICI (p. 1348), and in a footnote to the same page, Goffee and Scase (1986) discover that managers often resist
changes which devalue their accumulated skills and knowledge. In fact this last is highly believable, but is also explicable as resistance to a degradation of their positions within the capitalist agency relationship, as I point out in Armstrong (1991b).

None of it, either separately or cumulatively, holds up as evidence for the case Willmott is trying to make.

The strange thing is that such evidence should have been easy to find. Though the capitalist enterprise depends on the extraction of surplus value, competitive conditions permitting, it is not essential that the maximum amount of it should be extracted the entire time. This being the case, it should have been possible to find examples of small acts of managerial kindness performed at the expense of capital accumulation. Part of the problem may be that managerial ameliorations of the conditions of employment at the expense of profitability have typically been interpreted as ‘indulgency patterns’ of the kind first described by Gouldner (1955). That is, they have been viewed as a control strategy rather than a principled protection of the workforce from the full impact of capital accumulation. Whether through ignorance, complacency or lack of competition, there are circumstances in which senior managers and shareholders can be satisfied with sub-maximum levels of output. It then becomes possible for junior managers to reach an accommodation with the workforce in which informal concessions are traded for co-operation in achieving the required levels of performance. As an account of managerial motives, it is possible that this reading is overly cynical: whatever their efficacy in achieving a smoothly running workplace, it is entirely possible that some managers may enter these arrangements out of a genuine desire to treat their fellow human beings decently.

If and where this is the case, two things need to be borne in mind. The first is that the managers who enter such arrangements with their workforces are not really resisting the demands of capital accumulation; rather they are making use of a temporary and local slacking of that demand in a particular way – choosing the ‘welfare goods’ of a pleasant working relationship over the possible career advantages of maximising output. The second is that ‘indulgency patterns’ are extremely vulnerable to changes in personnel or policies. This, in fact, was demonstrated in Gouldner’s own study when a new manager took over, determined to make his name by boosting the financial performance of the plant (ibid). The implicit analogy with the takeover bidder suggests that this kind of erasure of indulgency patterns is a process general to the capitalist economy as a whole, but more particularly to the newly ‘impatient capitalism’ described by Sennet (2006).

All this said, it is still striking that it is so difficult to find instances in which managers have sheltered their workers from the demands of profit. The reasonable conclusion, surely, is that such instances are thin on the ground and that Willmott’s depiction of managerial subjectivities and the way they act on them is broadly incorrect.

**Arguing the Case 3: Re-Reading ChemCo**

Having made so much of the divergences between managers’ private values and motivations on the one hand, and the demands imposed upon them in the name of
profitability on the other, there is something distinctly odd about Willmott’s violent reaction to Nichols and Beynon’s exploration of exactly the same moral problem in their ‘ChemCo’ studies (Nichols and Beynon, 1977). Willmott (p. 1349) picks up Nichols and Beynon’s story at the point where a plant manager has come across a left-wing leaflet which described managers like himself as “pigs”. The manager’s outraged reaction was, “I’m not a pig. I bloody well care about what I’m doing” (ibid, p. 39 – all quotations from Nichols and Beynon (1977) are in double quotes).

Willmott objects, first of all, to Nichols and Beynon’s interpretation of this outrage as a conflict between “personal morality and economics” (ibid, p. 40 ). ‘Keeping faith with the precepts of orthodox of Marxist analysis’, as Willmott puts it, Nichols and Beynon have failed to consider the possible agency of this manager in ‘shaping and reforming the social relations of production’. As we have already seen, phrases of this kind in Willmott’s lexicon, mean something like the face-to-face styles of social interaction between managers and workers – habits rather than structures and, as such, most definitely susceptible to managerial agency since they are its proximate expressions. Even in this sense any meaningful revision of the terms on which managers and workers interact might prove difficult, since Willmott himself has previously pointed out just how limited is the scope for managers to neglect the priorities of capital accumulation (p. 1333, 1335). And having himself commended ‘Marxian theory’ as offering a ‘penetrating analytical framework’ (p. 1333), it is hard to understand what he finds objectionable in the ‘precepts of orthodox Marxian analysis’ when he believes himself to have encountered them in Nichols and Beynon (p. 1349).

Undeterred by these contradictions, Willmott proceeds to accuse Nichols and Beynon of assuming that managerial work is ‘wholly “structured by the needs of capital” (Nichols and Beynon, 1977, p. v)’.

Before considering the accusation itself, notice the forty-or-so pages which separate the quotation taken from Nichols and Beynon’s preface and the passage which Willmott is currently considering (on p. 39). Such a gap suggests that there is a cut-and-paste job going on. Sure enough, on Nichols and Beynon’s p. xv (not p. v) we find that it is the future of both managers and workers which will be “structured by the needs of capital”, not managerial work as such. Naughty!

On the next page of their book (ibid, p. 40), Nichols and Beynon report a conversation between the same manager – the one who objected to the “pigs” leaflet – and his engineer-in-charge. In it, the manager expressed concern that the seemingly interminable experiments in human relations which were going on in ChemCo at the time tended to deflect attention from the fact that “we are in business to make money”. For Nichols and Beynon this is further evidence of the same conflict between personal morality and the treatment of labour as a commodity. They describe the manager as “one of those who hesitatingly inspect themselves for cynicism”, and provide an extended quotation in which he does just that, reflecting on his experiences of selecting people for redundancy. Despite his misgivings, the manager also recognises that he had “a job to do” (ibid, pp. 40-41).

Willmott’s reading of this passage is tortuous indeed. He first tells us that Nichols and Beynon interpret the exchange as ‘unambiguous confirmation of the plant manager’s identification of managerial work with making profits’, where, in fact, they have just
told us that he also identifies it with making distasteful moral choices. Having chosen his ground, Willmott then takes Nichols and Beynon to task for their supposed failure to realise that the manager’s ‘rationalisation of his position’ is context-dependent – when Nichols and Beynon themselves have just made exactly the same point: that there is a ‘task-specification’ view of management in tendential conflict with a moral one. For Willmott, however, context-dependence does not refer to the differing frames of reference within which the repercussions of one’s work may be considered, that of personal morality and that of the ‘realities’ of business. For him it is a more superficial and calculative matter of talking about money in the presence of one’s superior (remember that the manager was in conversation was with his engineer-in-charge) and about personal morality for the benefit of ‘lefty researchers’ (footnote p. 1350). If this last contemptible insinuation were true, we could indeed expect this manager, and most others for that matter, to act as the unproblematic agents of capital, since ‘lefty researchers’ are thin on the ground in most companies whereas the presence of one’s superiors, both in person and in the implicit form of performance monitoring and appraisal schemes, is more-or-less continuous. Perhaps realising that what he has just said conflicts with his conviction that there exists the possibility of a disarticulation of managerial action from the dictates of capital accumulation, Willmott immediately qualifies it with the observation that there may not be a complete break between personal morality and the performance of a rôle.

Having made this point - and then having unmade it too - Willmott kicks off in a big way. Nichols and Beynon, he thunders, are ‘blinkered by the framework of orthodox Marxism’ in that they ‘assume the existence of a stable managerial identity’ (Willmott, 1997, p. 1349). This, one observes sotto voce, is a feature of orthodox Marxism which seems to have escaped the notice of previous scholars. The assumption, continues Willmott fortissimo - wherever it comes from - leads Nichols and Beynon to assume the plant manager must be dissembling when he insist that “I bloody well care about what I’m doing”.

No they don’t. They say the exact opposite. It is Willmott who assumes that the manager must be dissembling – and then does not assume it (footnote p. 1350). What Nichols and Beynon actually say is that the manager is “doubtful and a little confused, even about what his own motives are” (ibid p. 40).

Now Willmott is a major figure in, and on some accounts, the co-founder of, Critical Management Studies, a sub-discipline not noted for the clarity of its expositions. How is it that he is unable to grasp the literal meaning of some of the most accessible prose in the entire field of industrial sociology? And why, having commended a Marxian approach for its ‘penetrating analytic framework’ (above) does he become so incensed when he believes himself to have encountered it in Nichols and Beynon?

Recognising that we are in the realms of conjecture, it appears that Willmott needs data from ethnographic fieldwork to lend substance to an otherwise unconvincing

---

7 So intent is Willmott on taking a swipe at Nichols and Beynon that he fails to notice his inadvertent hack at his own theory on the backswing. If, as he maintains, ‘identity’ is context-dependent, it is difficult to see how it differs from ‘rôle’ and also hard to see how it might have any explanatory value independent of the expectations which attach to a rôle.
argument but also needs to take issue with Nichols and Beynon because their findings contradict the manner in which he wishes to portray middle management. Elsewhere, as we have seen, he writes as if profitability in capitalist economies is a minority preoccupation, largely confined to senior executives plus a few hangers-on, and that it is imposed by these on a largely apathetic or disaffected majority of managers through the machinery of performance monitoring, appraisal schemes and incentives (p. 1348-9). From this point of view it was remiss of Nichols and Beynon to discover that Chemo’s plant managers accepted both the legitimacy of profit and a personal morality which sometimes conflicts with it, and downright inconsiderate of them to report that on these occasions, it was profit which won out. These are findings which cast doubt on Willmott’s whole thesis – that the personal and moral commitments of managers may bring them into significant conflict with the demand for profitably. This might explain why he constructs Nichols and Beynon as straw men who believe that the ChemCo managers are unproblematically committed to profit since it enables him to disregard the (for him) damaging finding that the managers’ moral misgivings were practically inconsequential.

Over two pages of convoluted argument, in fact, Willmott manages to convince himself that these managers’ declared opposition to human relations experimentation in the name of profit ‘may be conjectured’ (p. 1351) to have been a contextually acceptable means of articulating a defence of their preferred way of doing things. By thus constructing an interpretation of the managers words in diametric opposition to their literal meaning, Willmott is able to pull an interpretive victory from the jaws of empirical defeat. As Thompson (2005, p. 372) has remarked of similar acrobatics of interpretation by others of the Critical Management Studies school, it is an impressive demonstration of the theory-dependence of data.

Willmott’s masterful way with empirics is again in evidence in his discussion of Harris’ (1987) replication of the ‘ChemCo’ studies. His first move is to select a passage from Harris in which senior managers express doubts about their subordinates’ commitment to the efficiency and profitability of their plants, claiming that it provides ‘further evidence of managers’ “identity work”’ (p. 1351). Not in itself it doesn’t. Such an interpretation depends on two assumptions of Willmott’s own: firstly that the senior managers concerned were by implication emphasising the indispensability of their own supervision and secondly that this was a means of reinforcing their own view of themselves. These things may have been so, of course, but equally they may not. It is just as likely that the senior managers concerned were expressing their exasperation at what they saw as an unnecessary distraction from all the other important things which senior managers have to do.

Willmott then uses Harris’ material to mount yet another attack on ‘orthodox labour process analysis’. The problem he faces here is that Harris’ book, far from exemplifying a labour process orthodoxy is actually written as an attack on it, at least as it is represented in the work of Nichols and Beynon (1977). Willmott cannot

---

8 Since Willmott sees fit to recall my ‘unequivocally hostile critique’ of Harris’ work at the 1988 Labour Process Conference (footnote p. 1351) it is as well to set the record straight. Harris’ work is presented as a replication and refutation of Nichols and Beynon (1977). It is based on an ethnographic
simply paraphrase Harris’ critique of Nichols and Beynon, however, since it is made from a unitarist position, in declared opposition to even so much of a labour process approach as might survive Willmott’s ‘reconstruction’. Rejecting out of hand the idea that the employment relationship might involve some conflict of interests, Harris prefers, as she puts it, to see the employer as the Arbeitgeber - the ‘giver of work’ (Harris, 1987). Willmott’s way out of this unfortunate circumstance is simply to ignore Harris’ interpretation of her own data and – incredibly – to use her data to concoct ‘orthodox labour process’ interpretations all of his own, the inadequacies of which he then demonstrates at some length.

The material he chooses is Harris’ account of the junior managers’ resistance to an ‘industrial relations strategy’ (probably the ‘New Working Arrangement’ described by Nichols and Beynon (1977, Ch. 7). The first of Willmott’s ‘orthodox labour process’ interpretations makes the ‘Panglossian assumption’ that whatever managers do will turn out to be to the ultimate benefit of capital. The second assumes that it would have done so had the design of the scheme taken into account the reactions of workers and junior managers. Having himself set up both of these feeble efforts, Willmott has no difficulty in knocking them down again, thereby demonstrating once more the superiority of his own approach.

Arguing Against the Case

Whereas Willmott cannot discover, or cannot convincingly re-work, evidence which will support of his imputations of managerial resistance, I can produce some which shows managers reacting to proletarianisation, both of position and function, by intensifying the exploitative pressures on their workers. The case material comes from four months’ full-time observational fieldwork which I performed in a medium-sized shoe factory in 1978. It has been previously reported in Armstrong, Goodman and Hyman (1981) and Armstrong (1983, 1989b).

The managers concerned were the first-line supervisors, badly paid and routinely abused by the production manager whenever the operatives which they supervised were discovered to be waiting for work or otherwise idle. Added to this proletarianisation of condition (cf. Crompton, 1979), they had also suffered a proletarianisation of function in that they could only discharge their responsibility for maintaining the flow of production by searching for the materials which would keep their operatives occupied and personally hauling these materials into position. Far from reacting to this ‘double proletarianisation’ (ibid) by resisting the pressure to make profits or by making common cause with their operatives, however, these supervisors repeatedly clashed with them over the rates to be paid in the event of work stoppages.

study of some of the same plants studied by Nichols and Beynon and is addressed throughout to the interpretations made in that study. In fact Nichols and Beynon (1977) is by far the most frequently cited work of industrial sociology referred to in Harris’ book, being mentioned on almost half of Harris’ pages and always in ‘unequivocally hostile’ terms. Since I was one of the research assistants employed on Nichols and Beynon’s research, the ‘critique’ to which Willmott refers was actually a reply to Harris’ own critique and should have been evaluated as such.
According to the national agreement between the trade union and the employers’ association, various standby hourly rates were supposed to be paid in the event of stoppages. Wages thus paid out, with no corresponding production, were counted as departmental ‘losses’ for which the supervisors were held responsible. In extreme cases, the supervisors concerned would have to account for these losses in an inquisition chaired by the universally-feared production manager. In order to avoid this, they would go to extraordinary lengths to avoid paying the standby rates. The favoured tactic was to assign responsibility for the stoppage to the operatives themselves, since the agreement stipulated that the standby rate applied only to stoppages outside the operatives’ control. Since this tended to provoke confrontation, the less assertive of the supervisors would do this surreptitiously in the hope that the discrepancy in the operatives’ pay packets in a fortnight’s time would go unnoticed. The female supervisors (of female workers) were more confrontational. One of them went so far as to thrust a brush into the hands of any stopped pieceworker, refusing to authorise a standby payment on the grounds that ‘you can’t be stopped because there’s always work to do in a factory’. This author of this particular syllogism was said to ‘pay you as if it was her own money’.

In summary – and there was much more - the rancour which existed between the supervisors and their operatives was palpable, bitter and clearly related to the functions which the supervisors were supposed to perform for capital. Spoken of by senior management as an ‘unproductive’ cost, their situation was precarious. They could only justify their position, and so hang onto the little they had, by demonstrably playing what part they could in maximising the ratio of output to wage costs – the rate of exploitation in Marxist terms. In other words, they reacted to the degradation of their position in the capitalist agency relationship – and the immiseration of condition which went with it - by hanging onto that position as best they could.

This, it will doubtless be objected, was just one factory, was a factory observed thirty years ago, and observed into the bargain by the labour process fundamentalist ‘even Armstrong’. It is, on the other hand, evidence, and it is evidence against a belief in favour of which Willmott is able to produce none: the belief that managers react to a degradation of their position by resisting the demands of capital.

It is also arguable that similar processes have occurred at the collective level. During the decline of collective bargaining which took place in the early 1980s, personnel managers, as many of them still styled themselves, did not react to the threat to their livelihoods with a collective disaffection which expressed itself in an attempt to shield workers from the pressures of capital accumulation. Re-branded as human resource managers and their professional organization as the Institute of Personnel Development, they sought instead to restore their position within the global function of capital by finding new ways of contributing to profitability, achieving this principally by annexing and extending the training functions previously carried out by line managers.

Concerning subjectivities, there may also be lessons to be learnt from the conduct of the production manager who featured in the foregoing account. Notorious as a bully, his most recollected exploit was to terrorise the workers in the factory’s largest department by smashing up the chairs which they had installed in their toilet for the
purpose of enjoying a quiet smoke. More routinely encountered during this period of fieldwork was the managerial saying ‘In this job you can be a bastard or a bloody bastard’ – a bloody bastard being one who is in the habit of adding gratuitously inflicted deprivations and humiliation to the routine pressures of capital accumulation (see also Nichols and Beynon, 1977, p. 34). That ‘bloody bastards’ are quite commonly the product of the search for meaning and identity in managerial work is suggested by the substantial literature on bullying in the workplace (e.g. Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf and Cooper, 2002), a literature which includes surveys which indicate that it is widespread (I.P.D., 1996). Insofar as this is the case, the hidden injuries of capitalist management may lie not only in the habitual suppression of the decent impulse in the furtherance of capital accumulation but also in the seepage of the delegated power attached to the ownership of the means of production into the psychology of the procedural sadist and the petty tyrant (Ashforth, 1994).  

Concluding Remarks

First, the procedural issues. Reading Willmott on other authors – and that is the greater part of Willmott – one is struck by the virtual absence of unqualified approval. There are always ‘failures’ to report, always the ‘unfortunately’ or ‘however’ which prefaces the details of the ‘deeper reflections’, ‘more adequate appreciations’ or ‘fuller theorizations’ which are required, almost invariably on the topic of subjectivities or identities. Reading these disquisitions as closely as has been required for the production of this critique, one is also struck by how often Willmott’s own readings turn out to be at best careless and at worst unscrupulous, with most of them somewhere in between. As Friedman (2004) has pointed out, positions from which Willmott, and sometimes his co-authors, wish to express their dissent are subject to various forms of ‘strawmanning’, the most blatant of which involves the appropriation of an author’s core ideas and their representation as the critics’ own corrections of that author. Such is the case with my own thinking on intra-management competition within the global function of capital. Quotations are lifted out of context, truncated so as to distort their meaning and sometimes juxtaposed with others so as to suggest a continuous flow of thought when they actually occur in remote and quite different contexts - all of this in a manner which recalls nothing so much as the black arts of the blurb-writer. Casual forms of words which are quite peripheral to the main thrust of an author’s argument are exhibited as if they were major position statements, the failings of which then testify to the importance of our critic’s work of theoretical purgation. Such is the case with Burawoy’s summation of the management interest in the production process as concerned with ‘co-operation

---

9 Blake Ashforth is an honest man. Having produced a widely-quoted paper on the subject of petty tyranny he subjected the syndrome to empirical investigation thirteen years later and duly reported that the construct was really rather rare, at least as he operationalised it (Ashforth, 2007).

10 Thompson and Smith (2000) have commented on this aspect of Willmott’s writing, though from a slightly different point of view: ‘All contributors are picked over to see whether they matched the appropriate analytical criteria or demonstrated the favourite sins of post-structuralism: determinism, essentialism and dualism.’
and surplus’, surely legitimate in a participant observation study of a machine shop, during which management was offstage throughout.

The empirical evidence mustered by Willmott in support of his belief in the ubiquity of middle management resistance and the centrality of a search for existential significance is treated no better. Classic ethnographies of the workplace and elsewhere are subjected to a series of ‘reinterpretations’, in every one of which the authors are accused of misreading their own data and into each of which Willmott projects his own preoccupations with subjectivity and identity by way of correction.

Much of Willmott’s manner – the misreadings, the opacity of expression and the pile-up of qualifications which teeter on the edge of self-contradiction and sometimes topple into it - stems from the logical impossibility of the position which he is trying to take up. He objects to ‘bourgeois’ pluralism because it does not recognise the primacy of the capitalist social relations of production, but also to what he calls ‘orthodox labour process analysis’ which does. As far as one can tell, since he does not name any of its practitioners, this orthodoxy appears to be his own invention. This being the case, one can only reconstruct it from the authors criticised (say) in Willmott (1990 and 1997) and on that basis deduce that that its only common features are a disregard of existential subjectivities and a belief that managerial capitalism is still a form of capitalism. Since bourgeois pluralism is simply the negation of this latter position – coinciding in that respect with what Nichols (1969) called ‘non-sectional’ managerialism, there is simply no space between the two positions. Either the capitalist social relations of production are the primary context of managerial thinking and behaviour or they are not.

Willmott’s response to this logical impasse is to try to create such a space by constructing a ‘labour process orthodoxy’ which asserts that managers do nothing but instantiate and maintain the capitalist social relations of production. This probably explains why he represents a few chance remarks by Burawoy and more extended passages from my own work as arguing just that. Thus hamstrung, ‘labour process orthodoxy’ can indeed offer no explanation of the very obvious fact that (most) managerial work involves more than a performance of the functions of capital, a deficiency which leaves it unable to compete in that respect with the satisficing of stakeholder interests posited by bourgeois pluralism. It is into that manufactured breach that Willmott inserts his theory of managerial subjectivities. By positing that these incline managers to react against the prioritization of capital accumulation he can simultaneously claim to recognise the primacy of the capitalist social relations of production and account for the fact that managers do other things besides execute the functions of capital. The problem, of course, is that such a theory relies on the improbable assumption (and Willmott presents no evidence that it is anything more) that most managers (and Willmott always writes of them in general terms) react to organizational controls by rejecting the purpose behind them.

Given that Willmott presents this theory of managerial contrariness as a reconstructed labour process approach, one of its extraordinary features is precisely its neglect of the labour process. Managers do other things besides execute the functions of capital not because their subjectivities so incline them – or not in the first instance - but because they must first ensure that use-values are produced. Without these there can
be no exchange values, no surplus of those exchange values over the values of the inputs which went into them and hence nothing for capital to appropriate realise and allocate. The problem for (many) managers is that they must contribute to the co-operative division of labour required in the production of use-values and simultaneously ensure that the surplus value thus created goes to capital. The moral dilemmas described by Nichols and Beynon (1977) amongst others stem from the resulting conflict between the psychological conditions of co-operation and the pressures upon managers ‘at the end of the day’ to treat labour as a commodity. As compared to the theorization of subjectivities offered by Willmott, a very traditional theory of this kind – which would be my own view of what an labour process orthodoxy would look like - has the merit of locating the existential anxieties experienced by (some) managers in the fact of their general conformity to the pressures upon them rather than in a general – and empirically elusive - rebellion.

Finally, a comment may be in order on the quasi-existentialist
preoccupations which run through the entire Knights-Willmott corpus of writings on the labour process: the unwavering assumption that managers, workers and everyone else for that matter, are engaged in projects of self-exploration variously described as ‘a struggle with the existential significance of the purposive quality of human consciousness’ (p. 1354), the pursuit of ‘elevated identity’ (Knights, 1990, p. 312) or a search for a ‘sense of order in which identity is “secure”’ (Knights and Willmott, 1985, p. 33). Since this process (these processes?) seem to have been missed in every one of the ethnographic studies reviewed by Willmott and his co-authors, the weight of evidence, surely, is that they are either insignificant in most cases, or even non-existent.

It is not hard to see why this might be the case. From Dubin’s (1956) discovery that work, for most workers, is not a ‘central life interest’ to Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer and Platt’s (1968) identification of ‘instrumental privatization’ to Gouldner’s (1969) reflections on the ‘unemployed self’, alienated labour was a major theme of industrial sociology from the 1950s to the late 1970s, meaning that work for most people is precisely not an expression of the ‘purposive quality of human consciousness’. As C. Wright Mills memorably put it, ‘Each day men [sic] sell little pieces of themselves in order to buy them back each night and weekend with the coin of fun’ (Mills, 1956, p. 237). Mills’ observation has since been expanded into a major theme of the sociology of the 1980s onwards: that identities in late capitalism are mostly constructed not through work but in the sphere of consumption and constructed there through a bricolage of commercially available significations. DuGay (1996) has even re-imported this theme back into the workplace, arguing that identities are formed therein, not by reflection on the involvement of the individual in the labour process but by the consumption of a discourse of enterprise which bears only the most tenuous connection with it. Though DuGay’s particular argument and evidence are ultimately unconvincing (Armstrong, 2001), they do suggest that the

---

11 Willmott (1990, p. 372) has commented on the ‘baggage’ carried by the terminology of existentialism. If this is a complaint, it is a disingenuous one coming from an author who has used it with such consistency. Words are the medium of academic production and it is a basic competence that they should be handled with an adequate grasp of their connotations.
experience of the labour process for many is so void of content that almost any script can be written onto it.

One of the odd things about the Knights-Willmott treatment of identity is that they both recognise the prevalence of alienated labour – en passant at least - yet still expect it to be the subject of existential ratiocination. For example, Knights (1990, p. 312) observes that the raw materials of ‘elevated identity’ are not commonly available to shopfloor workers whilst Willmott argues that the primary orientation of most managers ‘is likely to be to their careers, their families and perhaps to their “profession”’ (1335, 1338), a fairly clear statement of instrumental privatization as it relates to managers, albeit one which is largely untested.

Obviously the prevalence of alienated labour does not mean that there is no fulfilling work to be found in capitalist societies. Reality is always messier than theory and capitalist societies are never capitalist in every nook and cranny. Notwithstanding Willmott’s conjectures on the effects of organizational control systems, there may be many middle and junior managers for whom work is a major means of self-expression, and we know for a fact that there are a few for whom that involves the bullying of subordinates. In such cases we could indeed expect work to figure prominently in the process of identity formation, though not in the contrarian manner envisaged by Willmott. Where alienation prevails, on the other hand, we would not.

It is as well to remember, perhaps, that academia – for some at least – is one of the enclaves of expressive possibility which have so far resisted the alienating tendencies of capitalist rationalisation. It is from academia that researchers such as Willmott and I observe the work of those who are not so privileged, sometimes at first hand but often through the reports of other fieldworkers, and it is back to academia that we render our accounts. As with any act of translating between two forms of life there are pitfalls, one of which is that the method of verstehen as applied to the social sciences can so easily morph into a projection of one’s own preoccupations into the interpretation of social action. Specifically, the self-absorption of reflective intellectuals, who are largely sheltered from the urgencies of ‘impatient capitalism’ (Sennett, 2006), cannot be assumed to be shared by managers and workers who are not.

References


