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THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR RADICAL WORKPLACE INTERVENTION?

This article has two features. The first offers a brief overview of the purpose and character of radical social science, specially, labour process analysis, and its shortcomings in this respect. The second highlights how challenging current orthodox thinking about the future of work and employment can be used to overcome those shortcomings. It outlines one possible reworking of this orthodoxy to exploit it to push for amelioration of that work and employment. More specifically, a critique of knowledge work is complemented with suggestions drawn from a wide range of evidence-based secondary literature on work and employment with the purpose of indicating how the current knowledge economy policy agenda can be turned to create the potential for the 'better job'.

'...industrial social science [has] remained richer in its promise than in its accomplishments...' (Baritz, 1970: 137. p.)

Baritz was referring to the mid-twentieth century social science but the same is true at the start of the twenty-first century. Baritz was also referring to a managerial intent to use social science to 'solve the problem of human relations' as Henry Ford II (1946: 39.p.) described it. But if social science has failed managers it also too often fails workers. The lack of accomplishment in trying to affect change in work and employment to benefit workers is something that social scientists concerned with labour process analysis need to address. By not articulating and pushing for alternatives, social scientists are complicit in the workers' current and future experience of work and employment. This article acknowledges that social science has still to fulfil its promise but that an opportunity emerged recently to do so.

No claim is made for capitalist transformation, only that change which is desirable and feasible but no less important for its effects on the experiences of ordinary employees. The view of Rowlinson and Hassard (2000-01) that the politics informing labour process

analysis is overly concerned with workplace reform to the detriment of a politics focused on transforming political economy is noted, but to only pursue the latter would be to abdicate responsibility when opportunities arise for improving existing work and employment. The approach here is sensitive to the feasibility of the emancipation of workers per se. This approach appreciates that whilst initiatives from below are sometimes vehemently opposed, sometimes checked, sometimes accommodated by management and none have resulted in the overthrow of capitalism, in the words of Salaman (1986: 21.p.) they do illustrate the intent and capacity of workers within capitalism 'to make sense of, and to a degree achieve control over their own destinies and experience'. Radical social science cannot ignore or abandon these initiatives; instead it must aim to be part of them. An opportunity currently exists for social scientists, through government policy and practice, to participate in shaping discussions and developments that effect work and employment. The participation in policy is the main focus of this article but the practice is also raised in the final section.

The first section of the article examines the radical intent of labour process analysis. The second section

provides a critique of knowledge work, mapping out the claims and problems with workplaces being 'knowledge-driven'. Making a crucial distinction between knowledge work and knowledgeability at work, the third section then suggests how being knowledge-driven can create an opportunity to reconfigure and ameliorate work and employment and so potentially creating better jobs for workers. Finally, the further contextual levers that might aid the creation of the better job are identified and discussed. Much of this material is drawn from the UK though references are made to debates and developments elsewhere. With caveats, the article suggests that initiatives can be pursued that can create the better job, although that possibility is not pre-determined, and that pursuing this possibility should be a concern for radical social scientists.

Workplace Reform and Radical Social Science

Braverman's (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital* is a good critique of the implementation, process and purposes of scientific management. It is also much more. Braverman provides an account of 'the modern trend of work' that is 'mindless and alienating' (p.4) but he also criticises then contemporary 'reforms' for 'represent[ing] a style of management rather than a genuine change in the position of the worker' (p.39). Nevertheless, Braverman, laid down a challenge to a younger generation of social scientists to change that work by creating alternatives to those managerially-driven reforms-from-above. Following Braverman, labour process analysis emerged informed by a 'radical intent'. This intent was to create 'a transitional politics at the level of the workplace and state' by 'develop[ing] ideas and practices which empower workers and their organisations' (Thompson, 1990: 122-4.p.).

Unfortunately, this radicalism has floundered and labour process analysis has failed to make any progressive workplace impact (Jaros, 2000-01). This lack of impact must be related to the lack of alternative models or ideas from which radical reformers can draw. Socialist experiments to create alternatives – whether in communal or state socialist economies – have disappeared or are rapidly disappearing (if they ever existed in the first place in some cases). Adamant that Taylorism was also manifest in the Soviet Union, Braverman was as dismissive of the socialist labour process as he was derisive of the capitalist. This dismissal is a generalisation broadly accepted or at

least not contradicted by analysis of Soviet Union, Chinese and Yugoslavian labour processes for example (see Littler 1984 & 1985; Forbes and Jermier, 1995 respectively). As a consequence, Thompson (1989: 61.p.) concluded that under 'actually existing socialism', there was 'a failure to transform methods of work and relations between mental and manual labour' and that, as a consequence, there were many commonalities in the control of the state socialist and capitalist labour processes. Any differences that could be discerned between state socialist and capitalist labour processes were attributed to pre-socialist patternings of work (Littler, 1985). This analysis, it has to be said, was myopic, confined to state socialism. Analysis of communal socialism suggested greater possibility for transformation though this example too is faltering (Warhurst, 1998).

Within capitalism, workplace reformers have recast their past efforts. Some involved in the 1970s work humanisation projects, for example, now regard themselves as little more than 'reactionary henchmen to the employers', actively immiserating rather than liberating employees (Hegelson – Johansson, 1991: 2.p.). In any case, Durand (1998) believes, many of the workplace gains that were made briefly during this period resulted from historically specific problems for management arising from labour shortages. With labour surpluses, initiatives to develop the better job dropped off both management and trade unions' agendas. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, employer-led initiatives such as lean production resulted in mean (rather than just lean) production. During this period, trade unions continued to have little real capacity to resist: frozen out of government, pre-occupied with inter-union turf wars or remodelling themselves to appeal to a declining membership.

It is thus been easier for labour process analysts to settle back into the *comfort zone of critique* in which there seems a little point in active intervention in policy debates about and actual developments in the labour process. This article suggests that a radical approach can be used to challenge current orthodox thinking on the future of work and employment and lever change within that prescription. It also highlights the opportunities and acknowledges the limitations to this change. Working to these parameters, the 'better job' is feasible. Such jobs encompass employees' having greater autonomy, more responsibility and more control in and over their labour. It also includes a capacity for employees to develop themselves through that labour (Durand, 1998).

It is a possibility arising out of recent policy agendas that seek to affect change to jobs. Policy-makers have been concerned with jobs for the last twenty years or so. The focus, however, has been the quantity not the quality of jobs: job creation rather than job content. Although well meaning, some of the strategies for this job creation have been questionable. Many of the jobs created were the result of foreign direct invest. The companies involved offered labour intensive operations – hence their attractiveness to policy-makers. But, as any business under-graduate knows, such low skill, screw-driver plant jobs are often vulnerable when foreign investors' country of origin economies take a down turn or the investors find more amenable locations elsewhere. It seems that job content does matter, after all.

In this respect, policy-makers are recognising the importance of knowledge. A belief exists that a worldwide radical transformation is occurring with the emergence of a knowledge-driven economy. The main source of value and competitive advantage is no longer financial but intellectual capital. To meet this challenge, a consensus has emerged across and within governments that what is needed is a highly skilled workforce, with 'thinking skills' the bridge to knowledge work.

This article argues that the importance of managing knowledge provides a radical opportunity to place the better job at the centre of the work and employment policy agenda. The rest of this article outlines the problems but also some of the possibilities that exist with recent initiatives to manage knowledge in the workplace. With caveats, the article suggests that such initiatives, if properly facilitated, can create the better job although that possibility is not pre-determined.

The Rise of the Knowledge Economy and Knowledge-driven Work

Being 'knowledge-driven' now features heavily in advanced economies' governments' blueprints of national economic competitiveness (see for example DTI 1998; OECD 2001; Reich 1993). Academics focusing on firms' competitiveness too have become enraptured by it (see for example Davenport – Prusak, 1998; Hamel – Prahalad, 1996; Nonaka – Takeuchi, 1995). A new epoch is said to have emerged when old orders are being swept away to be replaced by the new: '...we are again standing with Galileo, realising the

contradictions of traditional wisdom, and reaching for a new world order' (Bertels – Savage, 1998: 9.p.). In the words of Ichijo et al.'s (1998) '3Cs', the key task is to create, capture and capitalise upon knowledge.

It is now broadly recognised that today's global economy is in transition from an industrial based society to a knowledge-based or information society ... knowledge and information are now incorporated into all aspects of economic activity to such a degree that it is exercising profound changes in the operation of economies and transforming the basis of competitive advantage. (Scottish Executive, 2001: 5.p.)

National governments are exhorted to stimulate the conditions that will foster the knowledge-driven economy (OECD, 2001). Those countries and firms that do not realise and rise to this challenge are doomed to relegation to the lower divisions of economic (un)competitiveness. Drucker (1991: 70.p.) even suggests it is really a social challenge, with failure resulting in 'increasing social tensions, increasing polarisation, increasing radicalisation, possibly even class war'. Focusing on the task and working smarter is the only answer according to Drucker. The type of work required to make firms and national economies knowledge-driven requires not only the development and use of new skills by employees – 'thinking skills' as they are labelled by the Scottish Executive (2001) – but to make effective use of these skills also a fundamental restructuring of the management and organisation of firms (von Krogh et al., 1998).

Recently, knowledge management writers have made much of the need to lever employees' knowledge for product and process innovation. As Drucker states: 'To find out how to improve productivity, quality and performance, ask the people who do the work' (1991: 77.p.). The task for management is to facilitate workers' revealing and sharing of their knowledge in the workplace for their firm's commercial utility – the 3Cs. To become knowledge-driven, the labour process has to change in firms. Workers need to have higher levels of discretion with more cognitive demands made of them and the right skill and behavioural profiles to be able to undertake this work. To enable this work there needs to be new ways of thinking and managing, with all workers needing the intellectual resources bolstered by lifelong learning to becoming self-managing. These intellectual resources undermine traditional management models of command and

control because workers' value is with their heads not their hands. What is critical to the success of firms – intellectual capital – is workers' intangible key asset, for 'it is impossible to separate knowledge from the knower' (Despres – Hiltrop, 1995: 11.p.). There is, not surprisingly, common agreement that these knowledge workers are difficult if not impossible to manage, with a decisive shift in power to knowledge workers. As Drucker (1992: 101.p.) states bluntly: 'Knowledge workers cannot be supervised effectively. Unless they know more about their speciality than anybody else in the organisation, they are basically useless.' As a result, the control of work is ceded by management to workers (Frenkel et al., 1995). This reversal of scientific management echoes the recent outline of the 'better job' provided by Durand (1998). Such jobs, Durand suggests, encompass employees' having greater autonomy, more responsibility and more control in and over their labour. It also includes a capacity for employees to develop themselves through that labour.

Unfortunately the rhetoric, as ever, falls short of the reality. Some criticisms of these claims can be found in Thompson et al. (2001) but there are others that are more germane to this article. In particular, there are three main problems with the current approach to being knowledge-driven. Firstly, the emphasis of government policy is on the stimulation of *knowledge-intensive industries* of the economy such as biotechnology and pharmaceuticals and networking these industries with universities. GDP created by these industries, however, is limited, possibly rising to 10 per cent at some stage in the future (DfEE, 2000). Secondly, the other emphasis tends to be not on utilising employee knowledge but extracting *customer information*. Consumers road test prototypes and also provide data on their preferences to enable trend predictions for example. In other words product not process innovation is the key concern of firms, with 'consumers [organised] as outside staffed' Nonaka et al's. (1998: 147.p.) case studies illustrate. Thirdly, and resonating with the first point, most focus is on *high value-added jobs* such as technical and professional labour, often associated with ICT and sometimes labelled cyber-workers. It is these workers that comprise the 'gold-collar' workers. Again though, the number of 'real' knowledge workers will be limited. Only 10 per cent of new jobs in the UK can be classified as knowledge work according to the DfEE (2000).

Limited to particular industries, emphasising product rather than process innovation and focused on the expert labour of technicians and professionals, the knowledge-driven approach is exclusive. There is a continued marginalisation of the knowledge possessed and used by ordinary employees.

Where there is brief mention of employees' task knowledge, the results of this marginalisation and the real concerns become apparent. In one of the case studies of leading exponents of knowledge management, Nonaka et al., (1998), management elicit the task knowledge of their craftsmen. The end result, however, is that these craftsmen are then required to instruct semi-skilled workers using that knowledge. The case studies of Kanevsky and Housel (1998) too reveal that knowledge is used for deskilling and regulatory employee control, and is seemingly commended by these authors when they suggest that organisational knowledge has to be reduced to a set of instructions, preferably encoded into automated computer systems. To this end, these authors evoke an efficiency model based on the recalculation of subdivided organisational tasks or 'component processes' (pp.273, 277 & 281). These outcomes are familiar to anyone versed with Taylorism and scientific management and undermine claims of a fundamental restructuring of organisations.

Making Knowledge Work

As a consequence of these problems, it would be easy to say that being knowledge-driven is a busted flush and radical social scientists to retreat back into cynicism and the comfort zone of critique. However, because, firstly, it is the dominant discourse in economic development and will effect work and employment and, secondly, that work and employment offers an opportunity to reverse scientific management a better course of action is to try to shape the discourse and make policy-makers aware of both the limitations and opportunities that it offers. The aim should be to explore the requisites and possibilities of a more inclusive model of being knowledge-driven.

Knowledgeable workers

The starting point must be the recognition that all employees possess and use knowledge at work underpinned by intra- and extra organisational learning. Even Toynbee's (2003) low skill, low wage,

employment insecure workers with jobs, such as telephone sales and hospital porter, in the bottom third of the labour market need and use knowledge in order to effectively do those jobs. Thus call centre workers need to know how to 'read' customers with whom they are interacting and hospital porters need to know their way around a labyrinthine hospital. A typology of the different types of knowledge used within work is provided by Blackler et al (1998) that goes beyond the abstract embrained knowledge associated with knowledge workers. It might be said that these examples from Toynbee are indicative of encultured knowledge achieved through shared understandings.

However, the knowledgeable worker is not a phenomenon but rather, as Jacques notes, an integral part of the development of industrial capitalism. At the turn of the twentieth century owner-managers were keenly aware of the task knowledge possessed by workers and how important that knowledge was to the development of their firms, as Jacques reveals in his historical account of management knowledge; 'It is an important part of [the manager's] duties to find out what [the workers'] ideas and opinions are...and thus to make capital out of their originality and their suggestions.'¹ What then happened through the introduction of scientific management was the appropriation of this knowledge, so effecting in management and labour a 'complete mental revolution' (Taylor, 1947: 27.p.). Codified and abstracted from workers, this knowledge both enabled a rationalisation of work and functioned as a source of legitimacy and power for managers. This 'knowledge transfer' is part of the forgotten history of the workplace.

Interestingly, however, even Taylor lamented how, even after instruction from 'teachers', workers would quickly return to their own working practices. If disparaged by Taylor, such informal practices were accepted by managers throughout the twentieth century as a form of innovation that enabled the job to be done more speedily and effectively than officially recognised and prescribed. In this process of 'making out' workers possess considerable ingenuity, initiative and intimate knowledge of their work.

Workers thus retain and management need the informal and practical task knowledge of their employees. Even though management had tried and often succeeded in formally separating thinking and doing, 'knowledgeable practice' could be and was retained by workers. However, although tacitly

accepting the initiative and informal intervention of employees in the production process, management have generally attempted to prohibit the formal intervention of workers. Knowledgeable practice and the interventions it enabled in the production process by workers had to remain informal or hidden. Management would deny that workers even had to think about work – that was an activity for management. Workers became 'hired hands' and nothing more, at least formally. For these reasons then, workers' task knowledge was pushed into the shadows during most of the twentieth century; that is, manifest as informal working practices and behaviour which, whilst yet vital to efficacious production, is not formally encouraged and only begrudgingly accepted and then accommodated by management. This situation has changed with calls for knowledge-driven work and economies.

Transforming Work: Taking the High Road

That a desire for leveraging knowledge within organisations does exist offers an opportunity to enhance work and employment. Given the widespread acceptance of this need amongst academics and business writers, it is not surprising that there has been a policy impact. The priority for governments must now be 'facilitating the diffusion and application of knowledge', argues Graham Vickery (1999: 10) of the OECD. Firms must, therefore, be encouraged to pursue employees' knowledge in a more sustained and inclusive manner.

In doing so, there are two possible scenarios, the first of which has already been shown to be readily pursued by firms.

- The 'low road' – firms taking the low road seek profitability by minimising costs, and knowledge is used for the further regulation of work.

In this scenario, experimental knowledge is used in 'single loop' operations to eliminate errors in existing processes. A past example of this low road was quality circles. Moreover, such elimination, in the form of reduced 'downtime' and the introduction of 'management by stress' further reduces the opportunity for employees to contribute to workplace innovation through experimentation. Hence its label as 'single loop'. If the experience of quality circles provides a marker, then this first scenario will have a limited life span in terms of providing knowledge-

driven competitive advantage for both employees and their firms.

Firms must shift from single to 'double loop' thinking, and encourage continuous and systematic innovation on the part of ordinary employees.

- The 'high road' – firms taking the high road seek to enhance productivity by investing in the technologies of production, and knowledge is used for continuous innovation.²

In this scenario, work is characterised by knowledge-driven experimentation, with trial and error, and in collaborative arrangements within and across departments, functions and occupations to develop new processes and even products. An example of this approach is the tripartite of production tasks (TPT) that has three features: production – learning by doing; experimentation – reflection, trial and error, innovative capacity; diffusion, collectivisation of gained experiential knowledge (Ahanotu, 1998).

Such a system would require support through employees' access to design knowledge (product and process) that is also codified and abstract. Knowledge can be gained through practice and from external sources. As such TPT requires an intra-organisational environment that facilitates, encourages and develops employee thinking, learning, communication, sharing and trust both within and across immediate tasks, functional areas and occupational groups.

In practice, a high road firm might have a form of teamworking resulting from delayering and devolution – though not downsizing (Belbin, 1996).³ Such teams require knowledge development and deployment, best affected through communities of practice (Sapsed et al., 2002). Pursuing such an initiative would require a *new division of labour* with the introduction of strategic, operational and cross-functional teamworking in which management relinquish power so that each team can control money, machine and people in relation to their allocated task. What would follow would be changes in payment systems, selection procedures, labour control, training, career development and task enactment. Such comprehensive teamworking is rare in the UK – around three per cent of those workplaces reporting the use of teams (Cully et al., 1999: 43.p.). However their existence should be promoted because they raise the possibility of workers' 'job influence' or task control.

Pursuing but shaping the knowledge-driven agenda means that an opportunity exists for affecting a transformation of work that connects ordinary

employees with the desires of policy-makers. To make that transformation, however, required more than just a reconfiguring of work. The terms of employment too must be changed.

Better Employment: Trade Unions Remembered

Extravagant claims are made for the changes wrought by being knowledge-driven. That much change has yet to occur, in part, must be attributed to the unfilled need for learning and trust in the workplace. Learning and trust are key elements of the better job as well as underpinning workers' development and deployment of their knowledge in the workplace. Nevertheless neither feature heavily in the experience of UK employees.

Firm-led VET in the UK is mainly targeted at management and other already highly skilled employees, for example professional and technical labour. By contrast there is a general tendency for low or no skills development and VET with other (non-managerial and related) employees; and where VET occurs it tends to be low risk and firm specific, which does not lead to the development of transferable skills (Green, 2001; Clarke, 2002). Learning, however, must also be encouraged in the workplace – and not just through apprenticeships for younger employees. It is a key feature of TPT in the workplace. The continual learning associated with being knowledge-driven is difficult without employee involvement (Ford, 1993).⁴ It can only occur when management are persuaded to stop shedding and start investing in labour.

Once learning has been developed, its deployment is underpinned by trust: trust facilitates the exchange of knowledge between management and workers. As Frenkel et al. (1995) argue, management ceding control to workers requires reciprocated trust. Two types of trust have been identified by Ring (1997) – fragile and resilient. The former is calculative, the latter based on the experience of outcomes such as equity and reciprocity. It is resilient trust that is required to pursue continuous employee involvement. Unfortunately, after a nearly a century of scientific management, work intensification and job losses, that trust is low in the UK. Given these experiences, a key problem will be the lack of trust by workers of management. Workers need to feel that they will benefit, not be punished, by the diffusion of their task knowledge. A form of insurance is thus required. The obvious insurers are the trade unions.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly given employees' previous experience with both quality circles and organisational restructuring in the 1980s, employee involvement is more effective when involving trade unions according to the US Dunlop Commission of 1994. Trade unions' presence results in: lower labour turnover; higher levels of productivity; and, importantly, encouraging managers to optimise their returns by, for example, investing in training and reskilling (Dunlop, 1994).

Trade unions therefore have a key role in facilitating firms being knowledge-driven. The reason is that trade union presence 'encourages' management to invest in rather than shed labour: 'There is considerable evidence,' Perry et al. (1995: 56.p.) state, 'that (workplace) reform is most effective where unions are involved – forcing management to devote more resources to the management of employees.' Trade unions therefore not only compatible with progressive work initiatives but unionised firms more likely to have such schemes in the US and UK. The reasons are that unions provide organisation, resources, leadership and training, and their involvement assures workforce of mutual respect and partnership with management. Thus, not only are trade unions compatible with such initiatives, unionised firms are more likely to have them in both the UK (Millward, 1994).

With a Conservative onslaught, the numerical and political power of trade unions diminished during the 1980s and 1990s. Union density in the UK is now around 29 per cent. Variations are apparent with union density remaining strong in the larger manufacturing plants. Although union membership had declined to around 53 per cent of workplaces by 1998, there is some evidence that this decline had been arrested by the end of the 1990s (ACAS, 2000; Cully et al., 1999). With a new administration, there is now the emergence of a sea change in attitudes to trade unions in the UK. The Fairness At Work initiative enhanced trade union-employer dialogue. The subsequent Employment Relations Act 1999 provided for statutory trade union recognition, a duty for management to inform and consult trade unions about training and created a Partnership Fund to contribute to the training of management and trade union representatives in the development of partnership agreements. The number of partnership agreements is increasing in the UK and are promoted by Government. Better relationships with Government plus new legislation seem to be

creating a new mood of optimism amongst trade unions (ACAS, 2000) even though (rightly) disputes remain in public sector. The future of trade unionism in the UK looks more assured than for many years.

The strengthening of trade unions thus bodes well for enhancing work and employment. For workers, it seems that trade unions' presence in the workplace is a key lever in this respect. Trade unions provide insurance to workers against potential exploitation by management; discipline management to invest in workers rather than shed labour; and assure workers that initiatives by management have some instrumental benefit for workers. Management too, it seems, also benefits from the presence of trade unions. Little wonder that 'mutual gains' is becoming more common parlance in the workplace.

The Limits to Enhancing Work

The better job can thus clearly be developed if certain choices are made about work and employment, and in doing so further policy-makers' desire for a knowledge economy. Nonetheless, a note of warning must be sounded. It would be unwise to expect that every job can become the better job. Policy-makers assume that high skill, high wage iMacJobs are the future but, as Thompson et al. (2001) note, the reality is very different. Many jobs today, especially in the expanding interactive service sector of selling, cleaning, guarding and distributing are McJobs: routine, regulated and with low pay and low skill. For these employees it might not be possible to introduce the type of task knowledge levers being suggested here. Introducing work practices that lever employees' task knowledge tends to be correlated with firms operating in product markets that are high value-added (Keep, 2000). McJobs are not of this type. The possibility of 'job enrichment', to use the old industrial sociology term of the 1960s and 1970s, is remote. Customers use these services precisely because they are cheap, with standardised and predictable product.

For these workers, however, it might be possible to pursue what might be termed 'employment enrichment' in which their work or job content remains unchanged but their employment is enhanced. The most obvious examples are the minimum wage and its policing, and fuller trade union activity in these workplaces. Another possibility is for non-work-related learning opportunities through work. Some

companies in the UK already offer their employees non-work related study at work, using workplace facilities and resources. Employees study foreign languages for example. Such study is indirectly beneficial to the firm, it is hoped. These employees tend to have limited learning histories (perhaps leaving school at the minimum age), as 'academic under-achievers' they be fearful of learning but such learning can enhance both their confidence in doing their work and their commitment to the firm. It must also be said that such learning might also enhance these workers' labour market mobility and so provide an escape route out of their McJobs.

In the UK, the obvious mechanism for this type of learning was the Individual Learning Account (ILA). These ILAs were introduced by New Labour for those already in employment (rather than the unemployed) but who had traditionally not continued with education into adult life. It was a voluntary savings account into which an individual, his or her employer and government could deposit funds for the purposes of learning activities. As a complement to work-related training, the objective of ILAs was to:

- encourage employees to individualise their 'personal development', whilst,
- raising current levels of investment in work-related learning (for which UK firms are notoriously poor contributors for ordinary employees) and,
- increase awareness and expectations amongst ordinary employees about the benefits of learning (Warner 2000).

Late in 2001, New Labour at Westminster announced a suspension of ILAs because of alleged fraud by bogus learning providers. However, ILAs did have a positive impact for many workers most in need of enhancing their employment opportunities and prospects. Focus groups run by the DfEE revealed employees in low paid jobs, younger workers and members of ethnic minorities as the groups most likely to want to open an ILA.⁵ Interestingly, initial evidence from trials of ILAs demonstrated that the participation of trade unions facilitated traditional non-learners and the low-skilled opening ILAs. This finding should be of little surprise given the data on trade unions presented in the previous section.

Whilst their job content is difficult to develop, such that McJob employees' work remains much the same, their terms of employment can be enhanced with little, if any, cost to their firms. Subsequently, even these

employees – so often overlooked in discourse about the knowledge economy – can have their employment opportunities enhanced.

Conclusion

Given past experiences, it would be easy for and understandable if radical social scientists retreated into cynicism about any possibility to create the better job. Such an attitude would be lazy and, more importantly, it would not serve the emancipatory purpose of labour process analysis.

Although talk of 'planning' has long disappeared, there exists still a need for the left to develop emancipatory initiatives based on practice. Policy-makers desire for knowledge economies can be used to enhance work and employment. This outcome is not pre-determined but requires a supportive trade union environment. Enhanced work and employment would significantly contribute to creating the 'better job' for workers and go some way to addressing, if not ameliorating by reversal, the outcomes of scientific management in the workplace.

There are a number of recent developments that might act as a lever to enhance work and employment. One is a growing awareness on the part of managers that their firms benefit from enhanced work and employment. A financial case can now be made for the benefits of management acceding to new work and employment practices, including, for example, problem-solving groups and work-improvement teams. Despite low current take-up of such initiatives, firms should be able to be persuaded to be more inclusive in the operationalisation of their knowledge base for instrumental reasons. Firms would benefit commercially from engaging employees' task knowledge, and should formalise the organisation and managerial structures and practices that would lever that knowledge. Guest reports that there is now a body of research that demonstrates that HRM best practice, including the practices suggested above, does provide competitive advantage for firms. A full outline of these practices, associated with the 'high performance and high commitment workplace', can be found in Guest (2000). The UK 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey also indicates that high involvement/high performance human resource systems have positive effects on organisational performance (Cully et al. 1999). Adopting this approach is not to suggest that the better job is to be driven by managerialist concerns

rather that management can be persuaded that it makes practical sense. For management to then be recalcitrant would be to expose their ideological objections.

Another key development is the growing awareness that management are a major blockage to enhancing organisational innovation generally, and the amelioration of work and employment specifically. Here a distinction needs to be made between senior and lower level managers, particularly operational managers. As to the first;

'...despite the rhetoric of some top managers, claiming that 'our people are our most important assets' relatively few organisations make a serious attempt to apply the practices associated with positive worker outcomes.' Guest (2001: 102.p.)

There are many reasons for this dissonance: people management issues being less of a priority than other aspects of management, finance and technology for example, and the straightforward retention of the 'command and control' model of management in most workplaces are just two (Emmott, 2001). As to the first reason, chief executive officers and human resource managers seem to be becoming more aware of the link between human resources practices in training and job design, for example, and business performance (Guest, 2000). As for operational managers, there is evidence from outside the UK that job reform is blocked by recalcitrance and ignorance. Milkman (1998) illustrates how 'dinosaur' supervisory management resisted the introduction and operation of 'high road' workplace reform at the 'new Linden' in the US. Because New Labour demands better management, it is becoming all too aware of the limitations of existing management in the UK. British management is poorly qualified compared to other professions, is narrowly trained and developed and is too often led astray by fads and fashions (Bosworth, 1999; Keep – Westwood, 2001). On a purely practical level therefore, management's inability to lead or even accommodate workplace reform is not surprising, they lack the appropriate skills and knowledge: Bosworth concludes that it 'is inescapable that in British management education is *too little, too late for too few*' (p.33).⁶ With government funding, the UK's national Economic and Social Research Council has commissioned research to assess existing and better practice management in the UK.

Workers too, it seems would be in favour. Despite cynicism about past management initiatives – the

failure of quality circles in the 1980s being just one example – many workers want to be innovative, aware that they could and should make innovative contributions to their firm's processes and products if only they were able to do so but opt out because management asks too little of them too. Some involved social scientists have a tendency to view workplace reform as nothing more than worker exploitation. Such sweeping statements are matched only by the exaggerated claims of management gurus who insist there has been, or there is now occurring, a complete transformation of work. More tempered evidence from the US suggests that;

Workers who have experience with both the traditional, authoritarian management approach and with the new, participatory initiatives appear to strongly prefer the latter, even if they are critical of it in some respects ... Most workers find the rhetoric itself intrinsically appealing and they are generally enthusiastic about any reforms that increase their autonomy and input into decision making at the workplaces to which they devote so much time and energy on a daily basis. (Milkman 1998: 31)

Not surprisingly, partnership agreements involving mutual gains with benefits for workers are, in principle, favoured by workers, as a survey of two companies based in Scotland conducted by Findlay et al. (1999) affirm. That partnership must involve more than a formal agreement between managers and trade union officials, it must include equipping workers with 'the appropriate skills and abilities to make partnership work at the level of the shop or office floor' (Findlay, 1999: 103.p.). Whilst this partnership can provide for greater employment security, the importance of which should not be under-estimated, it also includes greater training and development for workers and enhanced task participation for them. As Findlay points out, partnership agreements are possible that deliver mutual gains. To repeat, her and her colleagues research at UDV affirmed the possibility that established plants can successfully introduce work restructuring, institute team-working, develop formal initiatives in partnership and invest in employee learning and development.

These developments signal that there exists impetus that would allow the better job to be put at the centre of governments' knowledge economy policy agenda. It is possible that, with the support of trade unions and encouraged by government, firms can be

persuaded to develop the better job. Workers appear to desire the type of work and employment associated with the better job, and would respond positively to it. This article has outlined the possible content of how and why that policy agenda can be shaped in favour of those workers and, in doing so, progress radical social science such as that inherent of labour process analysis.

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Endnotes

- 1 From T.A. Edison cited in Jacques (1996: 2.p.).
- 2 Adapted from Harrison (1997)
- 3 The '3Ds' identified by Belbin as associated with teamworking.
- 4 Cited in Garrick (1998).
- 5 Not long after the suspension of ILAs and recognising their utility, the Industrial Society was calling for ILAs to be retained and expanded, see Westwood (2001).
- 6 Emphasis in the original.

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