

Comprehensive Field 2: labour as situated practice

How is labor organized in a post-industrial, networked society? In studying accumulation processes in a knowledge intensive society, I am interested in investigating to which extent the use of digital means of communication and new organizational paradigms is creating, or has the potential for creating, novel forms of non-alienated labour.

This investigation developed from a reflection on Boltanski and Chiapello's *projective city*. The authors of *The new Spirit of Capitalism* (2007) relied on this metaphor for explaining the hegemonic power of a new mode of accumulation, by someone called *flexible capitalism* (Sennett, 1998), which naturalizes *the project* as the superior organizing principle. Unlike bureaucratic command structures of industrial capitalism, *projects* are temporarily and spatially limited segments of networks organized in such a way to generate value for the organizers (the *networkers*), and for those involved in it. The project is acknowledged not only for its efficiency, but also because it would allow productive forces to rapidly self-organize in networks of teams, outsourced functions, and subcontracts. Ideologically, the network stands in stark opposition to the alienating techno-bureaucratic organization of labor (Du Gay, 1994). The artistic critique to capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007, p. 39) that sprang from the counter hegemonic discourse of 1968 (Feenberg, 1999, p. 21) and that denounced the alienating effects of a technocratic organization of society, now undergirds the connectionist understanding of labour. A proper example of such conception is the *network society*, whose legitimacy stands on self-organization of labour, decentralization and bottom-up emergence (Castells, 2009, p. 23; Sennett, 1998; Terranova, 2004, p. 117).

Unlike industrial capitalism, which was premised on the separation between control and execution (Veblen, 2001), the network society promised to overcome the negative implications

of the old-fashioned scientific management (e.g. the destruction of crafts, the reduction of labour into simple routines, the deskilling of the workforce) by means of digital technologies (Chandler & Cortada, 2000, p. 247). Exponents of the managerial position (e.g. Chandler & Cortada, 2000) emphasize the possibility to reconstitute the long-lost operational autonomy of the working class by means of Information Technologies. In the network society, workers would be capable to achieve fulfillment in the workplace and to find ‘in their brain their own, unalienated means of production’ (Tapscott, 1996 as cited in Terranova, 2000). In opposition to the managerial perspective, scholars from the Marxist tradition (e.g. Braverman, 1974; Fuchs, 2010), see in the current uses of digital technologies the ultimate means of exploitation. From this perspective, the managerial culture permeating these technologies and procedures would be responsible for the proliferation of precarious forms of employment, of alienating jobs and of the progressive elimination of competences through the atomization of production.

In this comprehensive field, I propose to further expand this debate by exploring the ontic dimension of labour. With this I mean exposing the multiplicity of practices and micro dynamics which collectively constitute ‘labour’ in post-industrial, network production. Instead of looking exclusively at the condition of existence of modern work environments, i.e. instead of analyzing digital work technologies and organizational schemes in relation to the managerial culture that inform their development, I suggest to expand the inquiry to include the specific uses of technological and organizational instruments. In doing so, this comprehensive field connects studies on post-industrial labor (Boltanski and Chiapello *Projective city* (2007), Thrift’s *soft capitalism* (2005)) with studies on practices and situated action (Bruni & Gherardi, 2007; Bruni, Parolin, & Schubert, 2016; Gregg, 2011; Neff, 2012; Ross, 2003; Suchman, 2007).

The goal is to identify the unrealized potentialities of technical action (Feenberg, 2002, p. 34) by studying labour within the technological and organizational milieu in which it takes place. From this practice-oriented perspective, labour is no longer conceived as a planned and goal-oriented routine, but instead as a situated activity; situated in time, in space and in a context made of material and symbolic infrastructures (Star, 1999; Suchman, 2007). Accordingly, organizational paradigms and technologies are analyzed not only in relation to the objectives pursued by those who design them, but also in relation to the successive modifications carried out through their execution.

From an epistemological perspective, the inclusion of work practices in the scope of the analysis should be accompanied by a shift in the study of work plans (Suchman, 2007, p. 51), to micro-analytical studies of labour (Bruni et al., 2016), capable to follow the actors in their intricate and *hybrid* (i.e. human and technological) work environments. As also argued by Julian Orr, the opacity of technical work, attributable to the specialization of knowledge and its black-boxing into inscrutable technical artifacts, can lead researchers to abstract key concepts such as *labour* and *technology*, thus generating a disconnection with the actual nature of work under investigation (Orr, 1996). For this reason, it is all the more necessary to study labour by looking at practices as they unfold within the technological and organizational contexts in which they normally occur.

This approach to labour practices is currently being developed by scholars working at the intersection of Technology, Work and Organization (TWO, e.g. Bruni & Gherardi, 2007; Bruni et al., 2016). There, STS meets Organizational Studies with the aim of foregrounding how work and organization are influenced by technologies, but also how organization shape work and technology and lastly how technologies and organization are designed by work practices (Bruni

et al., 2016, p. 2). Despite the focus on practices and a predilection for ethnography, TWO inquiries are often limited to the study of the actualized dimensions of technology and labour practices. Most importantly, these inquiries seldom, if never, reflect on the political significance of the gap separating labour's planning from execution.

For this reason, in this comprehensive field I aim at bringing a critical constructivist perspective to the field of Technology Work and Organization. In particular, this field explores the possibility of framing ICT and work routines as under-determined im/material artifact (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 2012, p. 36). Here plans and work technologies are conceived as rhetorical devices in a reflexive relation with situated actions. They are rhetorical because they can create the conditions for the achievement of preferred outcomes, but cannot determine them completely (Terranova, 2004, p. 108). They are reflexive because they emerge and evolve also in response to the constant resistances and adjustments that their same existence generates (de Certeau, 1988, p. 40). Not only, through the adoption of a critical constructivism perspective it is also possible to study plans in relation to the rationalities which inform their design and the socialization that characterize their execution as a situated action (Feenberg, 1999). In this manner, it is possible to understand which dimensions are actualized, which are removed and which are recuperated throughout the planning and the execution of labour.

As a further way to explain, and make sense of, the differences between labour as a plan and labour as a situated action, this field relies on de Certeau's concept of *strategy* and *tactic* (1988). Adapting de Certeau vocabulary to the study of labour, the space of the strategies can be identified in the managerial perspective of bureaucratic capitalism, or in the freedom of *networkers* in flexible capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007, p. 356). On the contrary, tactics are ephemeral in time and space and their existence depend on the nature of the strategies they

counterpose. For this reason, *labour's tactics* can be only found in practices, as they unfold in the interstice, in the *margin of maneuver*, dividing labour's planning and execution.

Reading List

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