

Critical approach to post-fordist theory

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Abstract

Post-fordist theory proceeds a basic distinction, at the organization of production and work, between taylorism-fordism and postwar toyotism or current post-fordism. So its supporters consider that production and work, with approximately the 1980s as a demarcation, was being organized, for the most part, at the basis of a) the discrimination between intellectual and manual function and, subsequently, between production design and performance, that was led to extended managerial control, b) the deskilling of the independent producer, the semi-skilling of the wage-laborer and his/her detailed tasks for the speedup of the routine-work, focused at the standardized and mass production and consumption.

In the last two decades we are driven from industrial to monetary and informational capitalism, that is characterized a) by the modern flexible, lean-and-plain, on-time with-contract work, automatized production of differentiated products and services, after total quality control, and by the minimization of stored supplies, b) by the participatory, communicative, adaptable, multi-skilled, lifelong re-skilled as well as self-educated precarious worker, removed away from syndicalism-from-below and integrated in creative team-work, according to principles of human resource management, in a client-oriented, small-or-medium firm, which collaborates with others, in the framework of the international mobility of commodity.

Post-fordist theory, although it describes real challenges in work organization due to technological changes and due to capital restructure, however it raises, in its generalization, questioning and critique, because fordism and post-fordism could co-exist, as post-fordism is not the dominant regime of capitalist accumulation worldwide. That means that neither big and heavy production industries have been abolished, nor mass production has been vanished, nor the employer's planning to reduce the cost, the precarious work and the atypical marginalized work, the emphasis

in innovation, the forms of hierarchy in work, the discussion about state intervention to economic system are new phenomena in the labor market.

About fordism

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Analytically thinking, taylorism constitutes high division and execution of specific and time-keeping allocated tasks, disconnection between work as execution and work as conception-design-organization-decision-control or work as knowledge-producer's mastery, proletarianization of craftsmen (loss of control at the pace of production, adaptation to new methods of production), redefining of technical-vocational training and apprenticeship, incorporation of large sections of labor power into the industrial employment, enforcement of new hierarchical structures in work, distinction of wage laborers in terms of achieving intellectual or manual work (Ιντζεσίλογλου, 1992: 137. Δεδουσόπουλος, 1993: 393. Χλέτσος, 1998: 158). This means that know-how and initiative are an exclusive privilege of the employer.

“Fordist model combines features of taylorism (automatization, deskilling of workers etc.) with the continuous assembly line and the principle of products' standardization”, as long as the “connection between production and consumption, through the existence of a definite institutional framework of social and economic regulations, that concern wages, profits, consumption, investments”. In these bounds, wage is associated with the productivity, the rate of consumer's prices, as well as with the work section (Χλέτσος, 1998: 158). So, while the phenomenon of deskilling of staff from their possible previous technical specialization is viewed in taylorism, and at least the phenomenon of semi-skilling of personnel is remarkable in fordism, in

toyotism little semi-skilled or even skilled manpower is added (Αλεξίου, 1999: 287. Λύτρας, 2000: 60-64, 66-67).

About post-fordism

In the last two decades we are driven from industrial to monetary and informational capitalism, that is characterized a) by the modern flexible, lean-and-plain, on-time with-contract work, automatized production of differentiated products and services, after total quality control, and by the minimization of stored supplies, b) by the participatory, communicative, adaptable, multi-skilled, lifelong re-skilled as well as self-educated precarious worker, removed away from syndicalism-from-below and integrated in creative team-work, according to principles of human resource management, in a client-oriented, small-or-medium firm, which collaborates with others, in the framework of the international mobility of commodity.

More analytically, industrial wage work in capitalist metropoleis has nowadays been replaced by the informational flexible work, in the frame of a society brought up by the informational capitalism (Λοζκίν, 2004: 26), which requires flexible-multidynamic-multifunctional labor force (Αλεξίου, 2006: 262, 285). In meta-fordist economy, flexible production systems' characteristics are the constant changes of production process, the polymorph and elasticity, the emphasis at know-how, automatization, electronics, and robotics, the re-programming of machinery for different tasks, the technical specialisation of workers, the work differentiation (tasks enrichment, frequent rotation in work positions and in workers' tasks), collective forms of work-multifunctional team work, the limitation of supply storage by the excellent and plain on-time production and distribution, according to market's variations and demanding, without wasted time of production and circulation, the productivity linked to the efficiency, the quality circles, the fast and personalized service to customers, the horizontal hierarchy-participial management with the combination of conception-management-execution in the same work position and with the de-centrality of management (Δουκάκης, 1988: 115, 117-120. Ιντζεσίλογλου, 1992: 138-141, 201. Καυκαλάς, & Κομνηνός, 1993: 214. Carnoy, 2000/2002: 4. Αλεξίου, 2006: 262, 278-279, 281-283, 285). The results of these changes for the worker seem to be his/her replace-ability, the increase of his/her mobility as long as the necessity for vocational further education (Ιντζεσίλογλου, 1992: 202).

Recent work organization of post-fordist type orders “the position of capability for yield in a wide market of functional provinces” for the adjustment to the challenging circumstances (Αλεξίου, 2006: 226). The taylorist mass-worker is upgraded, since his/her polymorphic skills are re-energized, only for the benefits of the enterprise (Αλεξίου, 2006: 119, 161). The new evolution in labor occupations arises from capital’s need for “an employee, who has many similarities with the pre-industrial technician (craftsman), presuming that he/she should possess wider know-how (which he/she will constantly renew), that will allow him/her to participate in more stages of productive process” (Αλεξίου, 2006: 147), as knowledge and its renewal constitutes a substantial element of the economic process (Πατινώτης, 2007: 208). That means that training is limited only in what the capital temporarily needs, “considered as superannuated”, in view of economic conjuncture (Αλεξίου, 2006: 241, 305, 407).

Since the 1980s, electronic programming and incorporation of ‘intelligence’ have given birth to the requirement of operators or maintainers of the mechanized environment (Ιντζεσίλογλου, 1992: 200). Carnoy reports that new employees are much more educated than the old ones, that since 1970s and mainly since 1980s, tension to jobs for higher-educated workers is viewed, and this is certainly accompanied by the reduction of the average wages, and that high-tech is related with increasing demand for high-qualified workers (Carnoy, 2000/2002: 39, 43). The same scholar suggests that new technology increases the importance of human mind in work process, as it is resulted from a range of his references. Deductively, gradual increase of requirements for high-specialized workers has been occurred, and this is expected to continue, as a result of the growing investments to information technology. This was not the main point before the 1980s¹, when this investment was influencing low-skilled white-collar workers (Carnoy, 2000/2002: 43-45).

¹ This chronic demarcation maybe is not of strong validity, if we consider that Touraine, even since 1954, has noticed the proletarianization of educated professionals, despite that this new working class possesses the prospects to negotiate their mode of integration and their utilization in the labor market, due to their high-level education (in Watson, 1980/1987: 132), whereas Kerr in 1960 foresaw that industrial technology required vocational power with high skills, which would be offered by an open training system (in Watson, 1980/1987: 64). Also, in 1980 Watson himself highlighted the upgrading of skills in labor occupations and the increase of vocational mobility as features of the industrialization (Watson, 1980/1987: 130).

Some current work characteristics is the flexible-lean-mechanized production for differentiated consumption, de-centralization of work, working class shrinkage, communicative productive relations, that inside the enterprise lead to team-work, circles of total-quality control, human resource management, and, surely, upgrading of manual work, high and flexible multi-skilling and adaptation (in line with the complex and alternate tasks, and with the multi-functionality), work with the use of new technologies, training (in line with lifelong learning), problem solving, quality control, direct dealing with the client. These forms of work organization, in respect, claim flexible employees with multiple duties and certified training and re-training, in parallel with communicative and compositional semi-intellectual-and-manual skills, which should be rendered by the educational system. In this manner, the demanding for turning of the education from authoritarian approaches to fantasy, capability of composition, and student's collaboration is erected, so that labor market will turn all these qualifications into advantage (Pahl, 1984: 122. Καυκαλάς, & Κομνηνός, 1993: 207, 210-211. Brown, & Lauder, 1996/2003: 174-175. Αλεξίου, 2006: 228-230, 234, 291. Πετράκη, 2007: 178, 191-192, 227, 266, 272).

Opposed forms of work organization or re-organizing capitalism?

Post-fordist theory, although it describes real challenges in work organization due to technological changes and due to capital restructure, however it raises, in its generalization, questioning and critique, because fordism and post-fordism could co-exist, as post-fordism is not the dominant regime of capitalist accumulation worldwide. That means that neither big and heavy production industries have been abolished, nor mass production has been vanished, nor the employer's planning to reduce the cost, the precarious work and the atypical marginalized work, the emphasis in innovation, the forms of hierarchy in work, the discussion about state intervention to economic system are new phenomena in the labor market.

All over the nineteenth and much more in the twentieth century, the phenomenon of mass worker migration was rapidly spread (Wagner, [2007] 2008: 31), no matter if fordism or meta-fordism was the dominant organisation model. The truth seems to be that these stated changes in work organisation legitimate the increase of workers' exploitation through individualised CV-and-occupations (Wagner, [2007] 2008: 101-102), work insecurity and speedup, justified by the notion

that customers are not satisfied enough with the product and therefore the company will be brought to shutdown (Wagner, [2007] 2008: 55). The new work policy coming from the post-fordism aims to force work flexibility and to divide working class union, by keeping a core working team with relatively more working rights, and by hiring-and-firing a mass of stand-by peripheral workers with no rights and prospects (Hirsh, [1985] 1993: 39-40), as there were all over the history of capitalism, a reserved army in part-time temporary, degraded and devalued occupations. Moreover, the meta-fordist analysis uncovers the raise of the new working class, precariat and knowledgariat, thanks to which capitalist appropriation of collaborative power and intellect is obtainable (Negri, [2006] 2009: 171). This leads to the proletarianization of science, technology, and culture (Λάμπος, 2008: 57).

Of course, the alleged changes tend to impoverish trade unions and social policies (Hirsh, [1985] 1993: 18). In addition, fordist work protection was derived from the 1930s' historical consensus between bourgeoisie and proletariat (Hirsh, [1985] 1993: 29. Negri, [2006] 2009: 89), and meta-fordist services' development is not only part of the capital reconstruction but also part of the dominant stat-ized political parties' and trade unions' bureaucratization, centralism, massiveness, class indefinability, and individualized interests/privileges (Hirsh, [1985] 1993: 28-29), as well as a possible answer to world destruction by the mass production and consumption (Hirsh, [1985] 1993: 35). Fordism and post-industrialism seem to be further implicated in G-8 countries (Castells, [1996] 2003: 10, 15-18), but, even accepting that fordism could be interpreted in terms of American work organization model, nowadays there is no unique dominant model of development, American fordist, German Keynesian, or Japanese post-fordist (Jessop, [1988] 1993: 115). Meta-fordism also hides an explicit technological determinism (Peláez, & Holloway, [1990/1991] 1993).

Different forms of work organisation are not the only way that capital chooses as accumulation strategies, but also rapid technological development, market localization or globalization (by diplomatic entrance and marketing, imperialism and world war, internal war and fascism), political hegemony for workers' oppression, cutting down of wages, work speeding up (Hirsh, [1985] 1993: 21), cheap/unpaid work (Hirsh, [1985] 1993: 37, 42), profitable outsourcing, subcontracting and individualism (Ερευνητική Ομάδα «Συλλογικός Διανοούμενος», [2008] 2009: 191-192), creation of worker as a dependent producer and consumer (Hirsh, [1985] 1993:

27). Besides, other theorists refer to long-waves of capital accumulation, which differs from the post-fordist approach (Mandel, [1972] 2004: 117). If we agree that we confront a long-term and unsolved crisis of capital over-accumulation, we have to think that such past crises were solved by the destruction of millions proletarians, that recent working class defeats will not be enough for the capital to be re-founded in a steady basis, and that we are in the middle of continual class fight. This approach is different from the meta-fordist thesis, that capitalism is on the way to overcome the international crisis and to establish a relatively stable basis for the future (Bonefeld, & Holloway, [1991] 1993: 14-15). Post-fordist thesis encourages opportunistic enterprising behaviour, including innovation, exploitation of capabilities, and readiness to face the communication and the unexpected into a non linear production range (Virno, [~2004] 2006: 26-27). In fact, manufactured and industrial production seem to co-exist, as in Marx-Engel's time (Ενγκελς, [1868] 2008: 94).

In conclusion, all along capitalist history, and history of all unequal economic-social systems, work is marked by de-/up-/re-skilling, migration and suffering of working poor, insecurity-flexibility-laborers' division, and every limited or extended change justify anti-proletariat governmental measures and employers' attack against workers. It doesn't seem to be easy to decide if post-fordism or economic crisis is what really affects labourers. In fact, nowadays, companies follow a combination between taylorism/fordism and post-fordism, and, moreover, a mixture of unequal economic systems, class positions, and forms of work organization is presented. What tends to be new is that, in meta-fordism, immaterial know-how is linked to the prevention of environmental pollution that was being caused by the past large industries, but meta-fordism is linked to the death of work protection by trade unions and social policies, and to further exploitation, not only of muscles but also of mind, in return of the legitimation of personal subcontracts, for work as low-paid as possible.

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