Responding to Class Theft:
Theoretical and Empirical Links to
Critical Management Studies

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to recommend closer connections between the fields of Postmodern Class Analysis (PCA) and work in the field of Critical Management Studies (CMS). The proposal is that CMS could contribute to the empirical elaboration of the over-determined relations between class and non-class processes inside the production process. This appears to have received relatively little attention in PCA. CMS, meanwhile, has neglected analysis of class (in surplus terms), and of exploitation more generally (see Rowlinson, Hogan and Hassard, 2001; Rowlinson and Hassard, 2000 for discussion of this point). PCA’s theoretical and conceptual commitments may provide one means for CMS to engage in class analysis. At the same time both fields share similar political and ethical commitments.

To deal with these two issues the paper first establishes some grounds for CMS’s contribution to PCA by querying one aspect of Resnick and Wolff’s recent polemic (2005). The argument here is that CMS provides some resources for unpacking what Resnick and Wolff identify as the repression of knowledge about class theft ‘inside the production process’. To show how this might unfold I present some features from Covaleski et al.’s analysis of control practices in large accounting firms (1998). Then, turning to the contribution that PCA might make to CMS, I re-read Covaleski et al.’s
work for ‘class’. While class processes do figure in such work they require a theoretical and analytical framework, such as that developed and refined by PCA authors, to draw them out. I conclude by briefly summarizing the ‘connections’ suggested by the paper, and their implications.

**Querying theft and awareness**

In their recent call for a renewed class politics, Resnick and Wolff (2005) rally against the injustice of the capitalist form of class ‘theft’ and the processes that repress our knowledge and experience of this injustice. Their purpose is to encourage us to think, talk, dream and propose *different* futures: to help us conceptualize and articulate a world where the staggering extraction of surplus labour from workers (for example Chinese workers at the current period) would be considered intolerable and outlawed as serfdom and slavery were before it. While I support their purpose, their argument makes the claim that workers lack ‘a conscious understanding of their exploitation’ (ibid.:34). While this certainly seems to be the case in a generalized sense, what the claim misses is the possibility that at the level of the *workplace* knowledge of class theft *is* available to us but the full articulation and engagement with such knowledge is inevitably tied into the complex and over-determined interconnections between class and non-class processes. What is required, and what CMS might offer, is an empirically elaborate means of unpacking these interconnections. The claim here is that knowledge of class processes (distribution of surplus labour) is frequently an element of *workplace cultures* (see for example Ezzamel, Willmott and Worthington, 2004; Taylor and Bain, 2004; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999) and a reasonably available form of popular knowledge. But the articulation of such knowledge, at the level of the workplace, is mediated by powerful organizational practices that shape
the character of our relations with work organizations, and with ourselves. In other words, knowledge of class processes is not simply restricted to a ‘dangerous few’, as Resnick and Wolff suggest, and neither can we assume that some transfusion of such knowledge would lead to the renewed class politics that Resnick and Wolff seek to inspire (2005). Rather, knowledge of class theft is widely distributed but simply one of the many forms of knowledge by which workers respond to the relations and practices that make up work organizations. Knowledge of our class positions is frequently set aside as we confront the demands and problematics that organizational practices and forms of knowledge induce.

Of course Resnick and Wolff (2005) are not unaware of the complex ways in which cultural and political processes bear on and are shaped by class processes (1987). And their recently published piece (2005) neatly highlights some features of such relations. They note that the incessant celebration of capitalist hegemony in most forms of public life, and interdependent ‘unconscious’ processes, make it difficult for us to draw on knowledge of class processes. One feature of these ‘unconscious’ processes is that we tend to embrace ways of thinking that save us from confronting our victimization or complicity in class processes (we might say that we tend to respond poorly – in a political sense - to being robbed). However, what is missing from Resnick and Wolff’s account (and what I present below using resources from CMS) is an engagement with how unconscious, political and cultural processes are ‘played out’ in the locations where, as Resnick and Wolff assert, this theft takes place (‘inside the production process’).
Resnick and Wolff take a particular stand with respect to the location of class theft. Following Marx they insist that the wealth produced by workers is ‘systematically taken from them immediately inside the production process’ (2005:34). The ‘crime scene’ of class theft is thus inside the workplace wherever that might be (in homes as well as factories). Yet despite this claim and the richness of the conceptual resources that Resnick and Wolff provide with respect to ‘the production process’ (1987: 109-230), the two explanations they offer for a lack of ‘conscious understanding’ of class theft are: ‘capitalist hegemony’, and ‘individual repression’. What is missing is the empirical exploration of relations between class and other processes – that are assumed to overdetermine the character of knowledge about such processes – inside the production processes. Only a small number of empirical works linked to PCA could be said to have stepped ‘inside the gates’ (van der Veen, 2001; Curtis, 2001; Gibson-Graham & O’Neill, 2001).

**Stepping inside the gates with Critical Management Studies**

Critical management studies draws on strands of poststructuralism, critical theory, feminism and labour process analysis [see Alvesson and Willmott (1992, 1996 and 2003), Fournier and Grey (2000), Zald (2002), *Organization* (2002)]. Strongly empirical (but not empiricist) it tends to follow two trajectories, or ‘entry points’ (Resnick and Wolff, 1992). One is concerned with the political nature of organizational knowledge and practices, and the other explores how human identity and subjectivity mediate the tensions and conflicts found in work organizations. This latter strand of work shows that we as workers and managers respond to workplace subordination, subjection and oppression in various ways: with cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), ambivalence (Fincham, 1999), self-protectiveness (Knights and
Willmott, 1989), careerism (Grey, 1994; Willmott, 1997) and localized, routine, forms of resistance (Prasad and Prasad, 1998). This latter work by Prasad and Prasad shows that workers often maintain and develop cultures of critique and questioning of owners, bosses, wages, incomes, and the distributive practices and circumstances that surround them which include forms of routine resistance (see also Collinson, 1992; 1994; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Taylor and Bain, 2003). Such ‘worker’ knowledges often make-ups what managers refer to as the informal or shadow organization. It is from this, very often, that we draw our understanding of the political, cultural and class processes that could be said to work ‘behind our backs’ in organizations. Carried along by gossip and grapevines, distributed via humor and joking, supported by long-standing or aggrieved staff, and sometimes used by managers in their political turf battles, such informal knowledge feeds on formal organizational processes. Formal organizational processes are frequently regarded as simply the façade behind which class distributions are made and political battles fought. Thus Resnick and Wolff are right to claim that in general terms the practices and relations that make up class processes are secretively performed. But we shouldn’t then assume that workers are unaware of them or that they are not part of the available knowledge that circulates in organizations.

Research associated with CMS takes a particular interest in how organizational practices mediate ‘conscious understanding’. In order to illustrate such work I offer an exemplary example of work drawn from Critical Management Studies (Covaleski et al., 1998). Through this I hope to show what Postmodern Class Analysis might glean from such works. I then use the same example to suggest how Critical Management Studies might draw on Postmodern Class Analysis. But before I proceed...
it is important to identify some features of CMS. Critical Management Studies, as a political project and developing field of academic research, appears to have a different trajectory to that of PCA. While there are some institutional similarities between the two fields, CMS by comparison lacks a central theoretical apparatus and relies on a wide range of critical resources from across social sciences. While its central adversary – managerialism and forms the management and organizational analysis that support it – is certain, the theoretical resources marshalled to engage this target vary. As noted, CMS has however two particular ‘entry points’: analysis of management and worker subjectivity/identity, and analysis of managerial knowledge and practices (and the intersection between these). If prompted to identify CMS’s core theoretical resources then we might located this (with some likely disagreement from various corners) in Habermasian critical theory, Foucauldian analytics and poststructural feminism. While Labour Process Analysis is an important precursor to CMS, links with its more orthodox forms are problematic [see O’Doherty and Willmott (2002), Willmott (1997), Ackroyd and Thompson (1995)]. There are some insoluble differences between these theoretical resources, and as such CMS must be regarded as a ‘broad church’. What unites CMS however is its opposition to oppression, domination and subordination in work organizations, and its methodological concern with empirical accounts of the managerial and organizational practices that produce such effects. I have chosen Covaleski et al’s Foucauldian-inspired critique of managerialist practice in accounting firms as an illustrative exemplar of CMS as it is representative of one strand of theoretical interest. More important for my purpose here is that it also exemplifies the field’s commitment to empirical work, largely inherited from mainstream management and organization studies, and its concern to highlight the ways in which many management and
organizational practices amount to only slightly veiled attempts to orchestrate inequality and corrupt human freedoms⁴.

**Empirical and conceptual focus of Critical Management Studies**

Drawing on extensive ethnographic field work with senior staff in the Big Six (at the time) accounting firms Covaleski and his colleagues (1998) provide a compelling analysis of the political and subjective processes by which people are enrolled in and come to intensively engage with the work of these large accounting firms. The authors show particularly how the objectifying and subjectifying elements of the processes of mentoring and management-by-objectives (MBO) conspire to produce ‘corporate clones’ (ibid.:324) whose *very sense of themselves* is tied to organizational objectives and control. MBO, as the name suggests, is a planning and evaluation activity. Usually run on an annual cycle, it involves objective setting, the allocation of objectives and the monitoring and evaluation of performance against these. Mentoring meanwhile can be regarded as a formalization of ‘master-protégé’ type-relationships. Here senior staff are assigned trainees whom they are expected to coach and support through confessional and pedagogical dialogue. Trainees typically expect to develop close relationships with mentors that will enhance their careers. Mentoring thus personalizes and makes routine, hierarchical relations of influence and authority and reinforces the particular positions of ‘trainee’ and ‘partner’. Both MBO and mentoring meanwhile (but in different locations and with different audiences) require staff to ‘talk about the details of their performance, emphasizing their failings and remedies for overcoming them’ (ibid.:303). Through this they tend to tie themselves to these organizations by using the organization’s norms and objectives as means of evaluating and monitoring who, and what, they themselves are. Covaleski et al. show
how each of these formal practices conspires to enforce discipline and conformity to organizational objectives. They also identify some resistance across the accounting firms to the formal disciplinary mechanism of MBO. One partner related the following (recorded at an exit interview):

Every year when they called you in for your review, it’s always ‘Well, you did great this year. You did wonderful. Now, what are you going to do, to do twenty percent more next year?’ Felt great the first couple of times they said it, but by your sixth or seventh year in [partnership], and you’re doing twenty percent more every year, there’s got to be a point when you say, ‘Gee, how much more can I do?’ (1998:293)

Covaleski et al. offer the following comment on this disclosure.

Partners were unwilling to discard their professional autonomy for the greater good of the firm, thereby signaling that their conformity to such control techniques was incomplete and that they were effectively resisting the management of their activities. (ibid.:293).

While it might seem hypocritical for accountants, whose work involves the application of financially orientated management practices to other workers’ labour, to cry foul when such measures are applied to their own work, this highlights the problematic and contradictory features of that we might refer to as ‘conscious understanding’. Yet Covaleski et al. suggest that rather than this resistance leading to conflict it, paradoxically, reinforces the importance of mentoring, and the self-
disciplinary processes that are its primary target. In this sense MBO and mentoring can be regarded as complimentary in conspiring to further enhance staff and partner subordination to organizational objectives. These complimentary features highlight how organizational processes at the very least mediate what might count as ‘conscious understanding’ of the class, political and cultural circumstances and conditions in which we are engaged.

**Class and its contribution to critical management studies**

Postmodern class analysis with its particular concern with exploitation potentially provides a means for Critical Management Studies to re-engage with class in Marxian (rather than Weberian) terms. In the remainder of this paper I briefly sketch out how might this be done? For the sake of continuity and brevity, I illustrate using Covaleski et al.’s work. Here I simply sketch out how class analysis, in surplus labour terms, might be set alongside, but not conflated with, the political and subjective dimensions that the original authors prioritize.

Covaleski et al.’s work uses Foucault’s discussion of disciplinary power and technologies of the self to explore how firms inculcate staff in normalized forms of control. From a class perspective such work could justifiably be accused of conflating class and power processes (Resnick and Wolff, 2005:36). The distribution of surplus labour produced by staff and partners, and distributed to partners as ‘first receivers’, tends to be either taken-for-granted or treated as an effect of the subordination of workers to organizational regimes.
Yet some features of the Covaleski et al.’s work could be used to read the class processes of such firms. For instance MBO includes both financial and behaviour aspects. The financial elements identify the partner as ‘a revenue stream’ and calculate a ‘realization rate’ (billed hours minus costs). Such a metric allows the comparison of both individuals and offices.

Practice offices were subject to periodic visits by the firm’s deputy managing partner to ascertain if the office was ‘meeting plan’ . . . These plans focused almost solely on financial goals. (ibid. 309)

MBO then, as a practice, articulates both class and political processes. Speaking in class terms (rather than in terms of the meanings that are attached to MBO), it appears to establish and normalize, at both office and individual ‘levels’, particular rates of exploitation i.e. surplus labour production.

Resnick and Wolff’s framework (1987) posits that class, power, cultural and natural processes rely on each other for their mutual effectivity. ‘Class’ analysis involves investigation of the practices and relations that articulate class positions, and the flow of surplus labour between such positions (Resnick and Wolff, 1987:1992; 2003a). Without conflating class and power, we can suggest that class positions (fundamental and subsumed) are given effectivity by the practices and relations that make up, for example, what is labeled here as MBO and mentoring. Postmodern class analysis might suggest that partners occupy at least three class positions depending on the practices that address them. They may occupy fundamental class positions as producers and receivers of surplus labour (their own and others), and subsumed
positions as managers and mentors of others in fundamental and subsumed positions. The position of ‘receiver’ meanwhile is exercised via a raft of practices that include partner ownership practices and mechanisms for the distribution of the firm’s surpluses (or losses).

The practice of mentoring meanwhile works, via political and cultural means, to locate the trainee in the position of producer of surplus labour. Such practices are based on trainees coming to understand themselves as possibly taking up a position in political and cultural processes of the organization as partner - and thus occupying the class position of receivers of their own and others’ surplus labour. Together, mentoring and MBO can be regarded as institutionalized configurations of class, power and meaning (cultural) processes.

We can also identify in Covaleski et al.’s work the links between capitalist and non-capitalist class processes, notably between the firm and family. Postmodern class analysis explores the ‘theft’ of surplus labour inside the production process wherever that occurs. The family, like the firm, is not only a location for particular practices that exercise political, cultural and natural processes, but also a site of production and appropriation of surplus labour. Traditionally men have occupied a position as receiver (and consumers) and women of producer of household surplus labour. In the case before us, family class processes are linked to those underway within the firm in two ways. Spouse labour is directly appropriated by the firm, and spouses are drawn into the disciplinary practices that surround this appropriation. Covaleski et al. note:
It was also reported to us during interviews that even having the correct spouse, one committed to the firm, could enhance one’s career. The firm in effect was getting a ‘two-fer’ (two for the price of one). . . Spouses where expected not only to represent the firm at client functions, but also with the firm member to whom they were married. The regional managing partner [they had spoken with] proudly stated that he sent the entrepreneurial reports [on financial goals to be achieved] home to the partners’ spouses ‘to add a little more pressure’ for achieving the individuals’, office’s, and region’s objectives’. (ibid.:312).

Here we can see how choosing one’s partner, and the practices and relations of one’s family, are drawn into the firm’s production and distribution of surplus labour (e.g. ‘two-fer’). The regional managing partner’s practice of sending reports of a partner’s expected financial objectives home to the spouse can be read as an attempt to intensify this exploitation. The regional partner seems to identify this as an innovative practice (others might regard it as an insidious use of power). The practice can be read in class terms as an effort to more closely connect political and class processes of the partner’s household to the firm.

Of course we do not know how spouses responded to being sent their partner’s ‘report card’. Spouses might simply discard such messages. We also do not know why ‘extra pressure’ was needed. It seems possible that resistance by the firm’s partners to the application of intensified financial objectives (noted above in the ‘20 percent more’ comment) might have spurred this ‘innovation’. Alternatively, the regional partner’s move might have been defensive. Spouses may have been attempting to consolidate
their positions (in class and political terms) - perhaps as a consequence of developing feminist sensibilities - and were trying to exact a greater contribution from their spouses, as *partners in household and family labour processes*, and not simply as partners in the firm. If this is the case (and it would require some further empirical work to establish), Covaleski et al.’s work might support further discussion of how families become sites of sometimes destructive conflict as a consequence of being drawn into, or suffering from, the intensification of the firm’s disciplinary practices.

What might we draw from this discussion regarding the original issue of the links between class theft and the claim that workers lack ‘conscious understanding’ of exploitation? Covaleski et al. identify some shuffling resentment to the intensification of partner labour in these organizations. But the key point they make is that a powerful combination of organizational practices (MBO, mentoring, and hierarchical practices) that bear on workers and partners as individuals and groups (‘offices’), and in some cases draw in their spouses and families, mediate how workers (partners and staff in this case) respond to such conditions. They argue that such practices produce staff whose very sense of themselves (while not closed off) is tied to, and measured against, organizational objectives (demanding financial results and exacting behavioural obedience). Through this other forms of knowledge that reference class distributions (although not necessarily expressed in class terms) and political subjection are set aside. In other words the Covaleski et al. work highlights how the complex interplay between forms of organizational knowledge and practice, embodied relations, and the particular proclivities of our relation to ourselves mediate (but does not determine) forms of understanding and practice ‘inside the production process’. The work thus shows how, class, power and cultural processes reinforce
each other (in sometimes paradoxical ways). It shows how knowledge of class processes, which are organizationally identified as ‘realization rates’ and could be translated by workers as ‘exploitation rates’, is subsumed by the problematics of taking up institutional positions made available by political processes. And the work shows how, in some locations, we do not so much consent to or tolerate our own exploitation; rather we could be said to conspire with ‘our’-selves and others (our mentors and auditors) in our own exploitation. Of course such organizational processes are not totalizing or determining and in a sense their very openness makes them even more seductive. The seemingly contradictory, irrational or counter-intuitive conclusion here is that practices such as MBO and mentoring help to produce actors and agents who, by the very nature of who they are, seek to achieve objectives that include their own exploitation.

Implications

What are the implications of these points for the two fields of study we have been discussing? Work, such as the Covaleski et al. paper which I take to be representative of work underway in CMS, points toward empirical work that may extend discussion of the processes that shape the clearly highly variable understandings we have, as workers and managers and even partners in this case, of class theft. Such work provides a means through which postmodern class analysis might engage in a more extensively empirical discussion of the ‘production process’. Meanwhile PCA’s political commitments and its analytical framework (with its opposition to reductionism, determinist, rationalism and empiricism) potentially provides a means of including class analysis in work underway in Critical Management Studies. Particularly, it may provide a means of developing a form of critical institutional
analysis (Cullenberg, 1994) that explores the interpenetration and complexities of class, power and cultural/symbolic processes within organizations.

In more general terms both fields could be said to be grappling with a similar question: how and why it is that we as people ignore or put aside certain kinds of available knowledge of those processes that exploit, oppress or dominate us, and what should be done about it? The hope here would be that through some interconnection PCA and CMS can contribute to the development of organizations and societies where such ‘understanding’ is drawn on and used, explicitly and openly, to challenge exploitation, oppression and subordination wherever it takes place.

References


Notes

i My thanks must go to the Remarx reviewers of their engaging and thoughtful commentaries on an earlier version of this paper. The paper also benefited from discussions with Johan Alvehus, Alessia Contu, Ralph Stablein and Hugh Willmott.


iii While the purpose here is to discuss the ways in which organizational processes bear on our knowledge of class processes, this does not discount the assertion (which we might locate at the level of public discourse in a market society) that we also respond to capitalist forms of class theft with the rationalization that capitalism offers a better standard of living than any possible alternative. Resnick and Wolff provide a compelling presentation of this last point. They show (2003b) that since the 19th Century a large portion of the US workers have experienced a rising standard of living as wage increases kept ahead of commodity prices. Provided commodity consumption is assumed to be a satisfactory indicator of a standard of living [an assumption that Resnick and Wolff (2005) clearly challenge], then it is hard to deny that our generalized response to capitalist class processes has been to either trade (or accept) a
level of social dissatisfaction, high rates of class exploitation for the experience of intensive individualized commodity consumption.

iv The Covaleski et al. piece is also chosen here as an example of work as it was published in a special issue of the management field’s premier US journal, Administrative Science Quarterly. Other papers included in that special issue could also be consulted as exemplars of work underway in Critical Management Studies (see particularly Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998; Jermier, 1998.)

v We might say that while cultural analysis addresses the organization and surplus (or excess) of meaning in organizations, and political analysis addresses the organization (e.g. distribution, concentration, elaboration) of power, class references the organization (e.g. production, distribution, concentration, exchange) of surplus labour.