Work innovations: transformation, micro-emancipations, or discursive shift?

Fiona Hurd
Department of Strategy and Human Resource Management,
Waikato Management School,
University of Waikato,
Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240, New Zealand
Fax: +64-7-838-4356
E-mail: fah1@waikato.ac.nz

Abstract: Through a deconstruction of the taken-for-granted assumption of the ‘transformation of work’, I argue that the nature of this transformation is largely discursive, underpinned by enduring assumptions of economic imperative and the control of worker subjectivities. Predominated by discourses of mutual benefit and innovation/knowledge work, there appears to be a significant disconnect between the promises of these discourses, and the experiences of most workers. I explore whether new forms of work may be examples of an emancipatory transformation of work. I question whether the polarity in outcomes might be seen as an emancipation for the ‘chosen’, rather than meaningful transformation of the workplace for all workers.

Keywords: changes to work; knowledge work; critical management studies; emancipation.

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Biographical notes: Fiona Hurd is a Doctoral Researcher at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. Her thesis explores the processes of displacement within the global division of labour. Her wider research and teaching focuses on critical management studies, changes to the nature and structure of work, identity and work in late modernity, and issues of gender and management.

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1 Introduction

It is widely discussed that changes to global organisations have significantly impacted on the nature and structure of paid employment (Allvin, 2008; Capelli, 1999; Cappelli and Rogovsky, 1994; Fleming et al., 2004). Rifkin (2000) heralds _The End of Work_ in his book of the same title. Rifkin argues that technological advances and global forms of
organisation are fundamentally changing the nature and structure of work, and threatening the future of work as it has traditionally been conceived. Concomitant developments in the management of employees, and specifically the development of human resource management practices, has led some to proclaim a transformed workplace for employees (Cappelli and Rogovsky, 1994; Lamb and Sutherland, 2010). Discursive framing of such practices includes such terms as tele-working (Sakamoto and Spink, 2008), virtual workers, flexible hours, family friendly practices, diversity management (Karsfeld and Bender, 2009; McVitie et al., 2008; Watson et al., 2009), organisational spirituality (Grzeda, 2008; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009; Long and Mills, 2010; Pandey et al., 2009; Pawar, 2009; Poole, 2009; Zaidman et al., 2009). The new practices come with ‘new’ organisational and industry forms such as the ‘virtual organisation’, ‘network organisation’, ‘creative industries’. Discursively, the changes in the workplace reach far beyond the organisational walls, and even encompass new constructions of the individual (‘knowledge worker’) and society (‘network society’, ‘global society’) (Benson and Brown, 2007; Castells, 2004). These fictive entities dominate popular discussions of work and are largely taken-for-granted.

Much of the discussion around innovations in work practices centres on an assumption of the growth of the professional, creative and services sector, and an increase in ‘knowledge-intensive’ work, with a concurrent decline in manufacturing and traditional ‘low skilled’ work (Kollmeyer, 2009; Steven, 2001). Proponents argue that these changes constitute a transformation to the work landscape (Cappelli and Rogovsky, 1994; Lamb and Sutherland, 2010), both in terms of skill requirements, and in the underlying assumptions of the very nature of ‘work’. Aligned with this view is the proliferation of discussions relating to knowledge work and workers (Alvesson, 2001; Graham, 2005; Lamb and Sutherland, 2010; Shaw et al., 2007; Steven, 2001; Thompson et al., 2001); discussions imbued with assumptions of flexibility and freedom for workers. It is also argued that these organisational conditions have ‘created’ a fundamentally different type of worker as ‘self’, ‘the knowledge worker/creative worker’, who demands different management practices and styles (Abbasi et al., 2009; Mitchell and Meacheam, 2011). Many of the above discussions infer a widespread transformation of the work landscape for most, if not all, workers.

However, recent empirical work points a more complex scenario, with a polarisation of growth in both traditionally categorised ‘low skilled’ positions, and in ‘professional and high skilled’ categories (Brynin, 2002; Fleming et al., 2004; Hughes, 2000; Standing, 1999). Additionally, deeper analysis points to a complex pattern in the skills required at each level, with much of so-called ‘knowledge work’ being predominated with repetitive tasks commonly associated with low-skilled categories of work (Fleming et al., 2004). Further, the assumption of a generalised technological shift is put into question by claims that as few as 7% of the worlds population have internet access (Hirst et al., 2009). These studies suggest that espoused changes may be more disparate and complex, contrary to assumptions made about innovations to work practices.

A current and prevalent example used to illustrate ‘knowledge work’ is the case of Apple Inc. According to Apple Inc (2010),

“Working at Apple is a whole different thing. Because whatever you do here, you play a part in creating some of the best-loved technology on the planet. And in helping people discover all the amazing things they can do with it. You could call it work, or you could call it a mission. We call it a blast.”

(Apple Inc, 2010)
In July 2011, Apple Inc became the world’s largest company, overtaking Exxon (Rusche, 2011). According to Apple, working at Apple is ‘part career, part revolution’, and gives employees a ‘license to change the world’. Additionally, there is an impressive list of employee benefits for Apple employees, from health insurance to organic food outlets. Apple also highlights its status as an equal employment opportunity employer, belonging to the e-verify scheme.

In comparison, Foxconn is the world’s largest contract manufacturer of electronics (Anonymous, 2010), and supplier not only to Apple, but also to such companies as Sony, Dell, Nokia and Hewlett-Packard (Huang, 2010). Moran (2011) named the company in his ‘Ten factories that changed the world’, and commented:

“China’s manufacturers, for all their world-beating volume, remain almost invisible from a brand standpoint, so choosing one to represent all that has gone right for China’s manufacturing sector in recent years isn’t easy. But you could do worse than Foxconn, a huge conglomerate that operates factories around the world, including what many believe to be the largest ever build in the Chinese city of Shenzhen. Employing 500,000 workers and producing everything from toys to Apple’s iPad, Foxconn’s Shenzhen network of factories has leveraged low labor costs – like many factories around China – and attracted business from the world’s leading multinationals.”

In the first six months of 2010, 10 Foxconn employees committed suicide, and another three attempted suicide (Anonymous, 2010; Huang, 2010; Standing, 2010), most by jumping off company buildings. The response from the company was to increase workers pay from US$130/month to US$176/month, with another rise of US$270/month in October 2010, for employees who satisfactorily completed a ‘trial period’ based on the employers assessment of whether the worker was at risk of suicide. Only those found to be at limited risk would be eligible for the pay increase. Additionally, the organisation has installed safety nets around the buildings. As of August 2011, 16 employees from the Shenzhen Foxconn factory had committed suicide since 2010 (Sharma, 2011). In recent developments, Foxconn executives announced plans to install 300,000 robots in its processing plants by the end of 2012, taking the place of human workers (Sharma, 2011). Some have argued that the strategy to install the robots is based on attempts to avoid employee dissatisfaction, and as a response to worker suicides (Sharkey, 2011). Some have even suggested that the suicides are a form of worker resistance and protest (Chan and Pun, 2010). Perhaps these acts were part of the ‘hard fought struggle’ on the path to emancipation – although arguably not for those individuals concerned. However, Foxconn has recently announced plans to move its core production workforce away from the Shenzhen factory to ‘cheaper’ central regions of China (Anonymous, 2011). This illustrates the relative power of the employer and the individual worker, and brings into question the ability of the individual worker to carry out actions that constitute traditional worker resistance in such settings.

Compellingly, this prevalent example highlights the contradiction between the discourse and practice of the parent company, and those of the contracted employees. Does the case of Foxconn/Apple Inc represent an innovation of work practices? For Foxconn employees, they remain in a neo-Tayloristic environment, where very little has changed from a traditional manufacturing model of work. This static environment is veiled, however, by the appearance of the ‘postmodern parent’, the brand-driven Apple Inc, an organisation with, arguably, no material production function.
It is well recognised that the workplace, and changes in the nature and structure of work are also politically bound (Barker, 1993; Braverman, 1974; Foucault, 1970; Giddens, 1971; Marx, 1933). As sources of power and worker control, workplace practices, and changes to such practices, might also be sources of emancipation or micro emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Indeed, from an optimistic perspective, new forms of work might be seen as manifestations of hard-fought battles between management and employees, resulting in more humane and emancipatory work practices.

2 Emancipation and micro-emancipation

Critical scholars share an aspiration for emancipatory outcomes, founded in early Marxist analysis of human alienation and emancipation. According to Marx, alienation is a characteristic of modernity that may occur in processes of consumption, capital production or religion:

“Alienation was the projection of forms of material human sociality – the social relations through which we realize our collective existence, the necessary condition for human existence – into artificial institutions and ideas treated as real; not merely alien to us as individual human beings, but having power over us. Emancipation was overcoming alienation, in all its forms, to return the human world to real human beings themselves.” [Comineli, (2010), p.72]

Emancipation is described by Alvesson and Willmott (1992, p.432) as

“the process through which individuals and groups become freed from repressive social and ideological conditions, in particular those that place socially unnecessary restrictions upon the development and articulation of human consciousness.”

The achievement of emancipation does not come from an isolated example of transformative action, but rather from a holistic transformation of social relations, gender relations, workplace democracy and environmental and societal sustainability (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Critical theorists argue that this transformation occurs through critical self-reflection and associated self-transformation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992).

Alvesson and Willmott (1992) contest traditional Marxist notions of emancipation as totalitarian, and rather conceptualise micro-emancipatory moments. The authors state that

“any substantial and lasting form of emancipatory change must involve a process of critical self-reflection and associated self transformation. From this perspective, emancipation is not to be equated with, or reduced to, piecemeal social engineering directed by a somewhat benevolent management.”


Through an engagement with identity-regulating managerial discourses, spaces may open for resistance of control, and opportunities for micro-emancipation (Zanoni and Jansenns, 2007). These moments of individually-defined micro-emancipation are seen as a less totalitarian conceptualisation of the critical emancipatory project.

In the follows sections, I will deconstruct the taken-for-granted assumption of changes in the nature and structure of work, in order to discuss whether these changes represent moments of emancipatory, or microemancipatory, transformation.
3 Deconstruction of changes to work

Current changes to work structures and practices are linked to the development of human resources practices, developed from the human relations school. Following a labour process analysis, the study of work has become likened to a science, with measurement tools being adapted to the realm of human behavior and personality, reinforcing the objectification of the worker, who is now rendered a valuable resource to be efficiently and effectively ‘managed’.

The traditional labour process deskillling thesis, as illustrated by Braverman (1974) proposes that the capitalist mode of production needs a means by which to domesticate each generation of workers to the needs of management. Through this process of multi-generational education, the deskillling and dehumanising production process embedded in capitalist production becomes taken-for-granted and permanent. To support this domestication, a complex set of practical and theoretical disciplines have emerged which are devoted to studying the worker and work. These disciplines are focused on perfecting methods of selection, training, motivation and compensation of the objectified worker. The aim is to identify the conditions under which a worker will freely cooperate with the wishes of management/capital, arguably the function of the human resource management discipline. Therefore, from the outset, the fundamental assumption of the practices of managing employees, and the structure of work, is designed to ensure a complicit workforce.

Under Taylorism, personnel management (Miller and Rose, 1998) was a purely administrative function, charged with carrying out testing and administration related to staffing (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992). Consistent with the ideology of scientific management, management was seen as ‘expert’, and the personnel department was charged with providing the routine administrative support to management. Complex issues such as wage bargaining were undertaken between the management and unions (and often state), and the personnel department (along with other administrative bureaucratic functions) would administer the outcomes of these negotiations.

The Western Electric Hawthorne studies highlighted productivity weaknesses with Tayloristic management practices, and gave rise to the human relations discipline, and the beginnings of industrial psychology and sociology. As a result, during the 1970s, traditional Tayloristic practices began to incorporate considerations of job ‘enrichment’ (Ingraham and Lutz, 1974) and notions of employee ‘empowerment’ in an attempt to improve measures of ‘job satisfaction’. Concurrently, deskillling and direct control were increasingly deemed inappropriate, and terms such as ‘responsible autonomy’ began to be enter the workplace discourse (Jones, 2000). The responsibility for managing these aspects of the work environment were placed with the personnel department, in an early incantation of current human resources functions. The emphasis remained – and still remains, however, on increasing organisational productivity and profit, and although each variable discursively focused on the employee, the remaining focus on measurement reflects the deep embedding of Tayloristic ideology.

The strength of Japanese companies (Robinson and Schroeder, 1993; Towill, 2011; Tsuda, 1985) and their alternative work practices post-WWII reinforced the suggestions of change from the human relations scholars. During the 1980s, companies begin to move away from traditional Tayloristic management and bureaucratic structures, to team-based approaches to work, flatter structures, and more ‘flexible’ work practices. However,
although attention as first turned to Japanese companies due to their productivity and efficiency outcomes, these practices were quickly linked to arguments about employee wellbeing, through the mutually beneficial ‘autonomy = increased productivity’ argument of the human relations ideology. In this example, the contradiction between a discourse of employee benefit, yet the focus on outcomes with a profit motive is again observable.

Combined with the politico-economic and organisational ‘crises’ (Kelsey, 1997) of the 1970s, management ‘experts’ emphasised the need to employ a flexible workforce, and to structure the organisation so as to achieve maximum flexibility in a ‘new’ and ‘complex’ global world (Kalleberg, 2001). Models of flexible work were typified by Atkinson’s (1984) ‘Flexible firm’

Atkinson (1984, p.29) argues that a flexible organisational structure will

“...involve the break-up of the labour force into increasingly peripheral and therefore numerically flexible groups of workers, clustered about a numerically stable core group which will conduct the organization’s key, firm-specific activities. At the core, the emphasis will be on functional flexibility; shifting to the periphery, numerical flexibility becomes more important. As the market grows, the periphery expands to take up slack; as growth slows, the periphery contracts. At the core, only tasks and responsibility change; the workers here are insulated from medium term fluctuations of the market, whereas those in the periphery are more exposed to them.”

The prevalence of flexible workplace practices (Brenner et al., 2004; Fletcher, 2009; Rodgers, 1992) increased significantly during the 1980s and 1990s, although appears to be largely limited to developed countries (Lee et al., 2007). These practices are typified by part-time work, job-share agreements, outsourcing and contracting; all forms of work now closely associated with the ‘new’ work landscape.

Changes to work practices, employee management practices and flexible forms of organisation, further enabled by a neoliberal mobility of capital, significantly impacted on the geographic organisation of work. Whilst labour theorists associated traditional manufacturing with a division of labour based on function or product (Kelly and Roslender, 1988; Rosenberg, 1976), many now refer to the international division of labour (Harzing, 2004; Lincoln, 2009), whereby functions of an organisation are separated geographically into locations based on labour cost, which is representative of a neo-Tayloristic ideology. This change to the structure of organisations results in a variety of functions being performed in low-cost locations, a marked change from the traditional form of internationalisation, whereby each location would house a full set of functions. Therefore, while some subsidiaries appeared to have flattened organisational structures, or were operating a flexible core/periphery model, these were within a larger international hierarchy, reminiscent of traditional bureaucratic structures.

For workers, this has meant that work is geographically grouped according to skill or other cost-related characteristic. This practice assumes perfect mobility of capital which has been facilitated by financial market deregulation (Kelsey, 1999), and also assumes perfect mobility of labour. The embedded neoliberal assumptions of individual freedom and choice further reinforce that workers can choose to move to the location which houses their work category (or choose to retrain).

Recent evidence shows that although outsourcing was initially deemed most suitable for the lowest skilled functions, a variety of functions at all skill levels are now performed externally to the firm, including in off-shore locations (Lacity et al., 2008; Miller and Mukherji, 2010). Low-skilled positions are often outsourced to factories
which operate employment conditions reminiscent of an intensified Tayloristic manufacturing process. In comparison, high-skilled work is also out-sourced, for example, information technology and engineering workers in India (Fifarek and Veloso, 2010; Messner, 2011), film production workers in New Zealand (de Bruin, 2005; King, 2010). This trend has led to the outsourcing of skill based on locations where appropriately skilled labour is available.

3.1 Harnessing the self

Leading on from a discourse of employees as a factor in ‘competitive advantage’, and a ‘strategic resource’ to be leveraged, discussions have increasingly led to a holistic view of ‘life’ within the organisation as not simply being occupational, but encompassing multiple layers of life and ‘self’. This emphasis is consistent with a flexible work environment which is not based around a single organisation, and may require periods of unemployment and extended ‘leisure’ time. This changing emphasis can be seen in the proliferation of work enrichment, motivation, leadership initiatives, and more recently, the emphasis on the management of workplace diversity and spirituality. Although hailed by HRM professionals as evidence of a ‘humanised’ workplace, the introduction of these discourses might also be critically viewed as a greater form of worker alienation, bringing the realm of both labour and spiritual alienation to the workplace.

The ‘management’ of diversity was originally seen as a paradigm for discussing issues around equal employment opportunities (EEO), increasing women in the workforce, and policies for workers with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. However, with the proliferation of global forms of organisation and the international division of labour, diversity management has taken on a new global, cultural meaning within the HRM discipline (McVittie et al., 2008). As described by Watson et al. (2009, p.62),

“...As well as cost-effective inclusion and management of diverse workforces at the local level, globalisation means companies must manage workforce diversity across national boundaries. Moreover, cosmopolitan city and global markets mean there is now a greater diversity of client and customer groups. The importance for businesses to manage such diversities in order to achieve improved profit margins and competitive edge can hardly be stated.”

The harnessing of further aspects of the self can also be seen in the emerging workplace spirituality literature (Karakas, 2009; Poole, 2009; Suwanakul, 2009; Zaidman et al., 2009). According to Karakas (2009, p.17), ‘This new spiritual movement embodies employees’ search for simplicity, meaning at work, and interconnectedness to something higher’. Further examples of the discourse of workplace spirituality include:

“From the business case literature, flawed though it may be, it is clear that, in the most general terms, workplaces that nourish their employees gain their increased commitment and discretionary effort... is, as many of the sources cited above suggest, attention paid to human flourishing in the workplace creates increased engagement and potential for enhanced performance, then it is safe to assume that the development and/or expression of a person’s entire being – mind, body and spirit – is self-evidently good.” [Poole, (2009), pp.586–587]

“Journeys of spiritual growth, usually a search for greater meaning in life spill over to the work domain creating the potential for organizational benefits.” [Grzeda, (2008), p.68]
“In comparison to other roles; e.g., spiritual leader, the role of manager as healer has received virtually no attention in the literature. To formulate role expectations in this domain, the value of spirituality as an element in individual and organizational healing must be understood and legitimized. Consider how a manager acting in a healing role would respond to an employee who appears unmotivated at work.” [Grzeda, (2008), p.72]

One reading of the above excerpts could reveal themes not concerned with the inclusion of spirituality in organisations, but rather concerns regarding spirituality of organisations. Although the espoused benefits to the employee focus on the inclusion of their diverse spiritual beliefs in the workplace, the managerial discourse reveals more emphasis on viewing the workplace as a realm for organisational spirituality – that supersedes traditional religious and denominational boundaries. Additionally, the discourse emphasises that organisations benefit from harnessing ever more of the worker’s commitment, loyalty and effort.

4 Transformation for all?

From a deconstruction to so-called changes to work and associated discourses, it would appear that for many, significant change can be questioned, and even for those whom work location and mode has changed, the underlying emphasis and assumptions of ‘work’, based on organisational profit motive, remain intact. There does not appear evidence of increased worker resistance leading to a transformation of the workplace for the majority of workers. Does this signal that workers are not engaging in micro-resistance and emancipations; or that these individualised emancipatory moments are not transferring to meaningful social change for the majority?

As the discourse of ‘value’ shifts away from manufacturing output to ‘knowledge’, many managers now view an organisations core ‘product’ as less about the tangible outputs, and more related to tacit resources such as culture, innovation, marketing and human resources (Barney, 1991). The manufacturing of material products has increasingly been placed in the ‘non-core’ category, and viewed as a function that is open to outsourcing, with the core functions now consisting of value-bound branding, intellectual property, and other tacit ‘resources’. The manufacturing contractors, increasingly operating in developing countries, organise workforces based firmly around Tayloristic hierarchical manufacturing processes (Crowley et al., 2010). Reminiscent of Tayloristic management practices, in the case of Foxconn (Anonymous, 2010; Huang, 2010; Standing, 2010), highlighted earlier, ‘Labour activists accuse the company of having a rigid management style, an excessively fast assembly line and forced overwork’ (Anonymous, 2010).

The inclusion of culture and spirituality in workplace discourse can be viewed as a further extension of the realm of the organisation to all areas of life. Some argue that embedding issues of cultural and spiritual difference in management discourses and practices, including EEO policies, simply silences these differences. Instead, a culturally-homogenous workforce is created, tied by commitments to the organisation and to ‘self fulfilment’ through career (Humphries and Grice, 1995). McManus (2009) adds strength to this concern when he argues that work-life balance strategies are “technical exercises in ethicalization. These practices serve to de-contextualise and de-politicise the terrain of well-being” (p.111).
Miller and Rose (1998, p.49) share these concerns, and suggest that governance and the ‘technologies of government’ have moved from the domain of society to the workplace, where

“a new importance is accorded to regulating the internal psychological world of the worker through a calculated administration of the human relations of the workplace, in order to turn the personal wishes of the employee from an obstacle into an ally of economic efficiency.” (p.55)

According to Miller and Rose, human resource management practice represents workplace governance technologies that aim to align worker and organisational goals; importantly so that the worker perceives the organisational goals as their own. In agreement, Deetz (2003) states that

“Modern human resources management (HRM) is clearly in the culture and meaning business, its focus is on the production of a specific type of human being with specific self-conceptions and feelings. And, equally importantly, much of the work promotes concepts of the person that make the critical investigation of the person and his or her experience less likely and seemingly unnecessary.” (p.24)

Such constructions of the ‘worker’ is one who is not necessarily committed to an individual organisation (as flexibility dictates changes to organisation/employer), but is committed to the overarching ‘dream’ – that hard work will lead to happiness. By committing to such a dream, such a worker implicitly or explicitly commits to the underlying assumptions of the centrality of profit and corporate sovereignty, not as an individual ‘corporate’ sovereign, but as a collective global ‘corporate’, neo-liberal sovereign.

Foucauldian analysis holds that new HRM discourses can be seen as another aspect of the panoptic ‘gaze’. The individual turns the gaze upon the ‘self’, and becomes a self-regulating ‘being’ within the system (Danaher et al., 2000), and is being taught how to redefine structural inequalities and inequities as stories of celebrating life’s ‘journeys’. Zizek (2000) discusses discipline in the workplace in the absence of grand narratives. He suggests that although overarching theories and grand narrative (the Lacanian ‘Big other’) [Zizek, (1998), p.487] of organisational discipline have declined in importance, these have been taken over on an individual level by internal discipline measures such as paranoia and narcissism.

Additionally, the emphasis on the ‘volatility’ and continuous change (Benner, 2004) which occurs in the new workplace, taken as an external ‘force’, and necessitating flexibility of capital and workforce, could be seen to be an extension of what Fromm (1942, p.49) termed the ‘spirit of restlessness’ which was characteristic of modernity and the modern emphasis on time and efficiency.

5 Discussion

From the above, the assumption of a transformation of work practices seems problematic, at best. While, for some, the workplace now involves new technologies, new locations, for others the workplace remains an archetype of the Tayloristic manufacturing. Further,
even those for whom the workplace has changed, ‘work’ is still defined by an economic imperative, centred on (despite discourses of mutual benefit) maximising benefit and flexibility for the organisation.

Although workers may now not come under direct forms of control, workers have not been freed of management control, and the discussions of organisational benefit of news forms of work are predominated by assertions of how the new techniques will ensure further complicity by workers. One way this complicity is achieved is by embedding ideals of economically-defined ‘work’ further into realms of personal life and self, ensuring that direct forms of control are no longer required to ensure commitment to the overarching ideals of corporate benefit.

Ogbor (2001, p.591) describes how “critical theory serves the important purpose of effecting change in societies, including its institutions, by the very disassociation of itself from the material practice as defined by the established order”. As discussed earlier, critical scholars share an aspiration for emancipatory outcomes, founded in early Marxist analysis of human alienation and emancipation. The achievement of emancipation does not come from an isolated example of transformative action, but rather from a holistic transformation of social relations, gender relations, workplace democracy and environmental and societal sustainability (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Indeed, “emancipation is not to be equated with, or reduced to, piecemeal social engineering directed by a somewhat benevolent management” [Alvesson and Willmott, (1992), p.434].

If we are to use these critical aspirations as the benchmark to measure transformation, I would therefore argue that the foregoing review of the literature demonstrates there has been no meaningful ‘transformation’ of work. Workers have not become free from domination. Work is not centred on the development and articulation of human consciousness. Most tellingly, the ‘lawlessness’ and ‘immorality’ exposed by the recent economic ‘crisis’ has highlighted that these changes have certainly not resulted in organisations committed to the progressive development of all.

Additionally, despite espoused increased ‘autonomy’ and inclusion of factors outside of the workplace, one outcome of these ‘new’ forms of work is to distance workers from each other, from a collective body, and place the focus on the individual worker. This distancing has the effect of de-politicising the workplace, silencing any protests about collective working conditions, rendering matters of gender, ethnicity, culture and religion as ‘irrelevant’, in a world of individualised, all-encompassing ‘work’, where every person (worker) is judged based on their ‘efforts’, and is expected to extend the opportunities for ‘career’ outside of the workplace, and to see leisure and rest time as opportunities to further enrich the skill-set, and the ‘career experience’ of the individual.

Additionally, as the responsibility for the completion, and sourcing of work is placed more completely on the individual, and removed from the responsibility of management, organisation and government, so too is the responsibility for the implications of the new ‘boundaryless’ work, which prevails over traditional notions of the working week. Therefore, issues related to over and underemployment, stress and burnout, are increasingly seen as issues to be ‘managed’ by the individual employee (Allvin, 2008) as part of the ‘active participation’ in their career.
6 Conclusions – spaces for emancipation?

The discourses of the new workplace are presented as evidence of emancipated outcomes; however, any outcomes are on an individualised level. Indeed, the discourses of ‘new’ work are individualised, emphasising individual benefits. Moments of resistance and concern are, in this framework, also limited to individualised actions by individual workers. These moments confer to Alvesson and Willmott’s (1992) micro-emancipations. However, these individualised acts appear to have little effect on the structures of the paradoxically global, yet micro-individualised, workplace. For example, in the case of Foxconn, the organisational response to the acts of suicide and subsequent public outrage was to financially incentivise ‘god behaviour’ in the short term, and in the long term, to automate, and move the manufacturing plant. In a neo-liberal environment where mandate of government is largely based on measures of economic growth, the leverage of such a large employer is likely to dictate limited response to such organisational acts. Significant critical academic analyses and dialogue has also appeared from within the critical management studies community. However, this community remains at the fringes of management studies, and as such, the impact on management practice is limited. Zizek (2000) goes as far as to suggest that critical scholars have become the radical element necessary to ensure the resilience of any prevailing ideology.

Ultimately, if there is one overwhelming lesson to be learnt from the failings of the Marxist project, it is that not one totalising approach is likely to work in isolation. From a Frierian perspective, the goal of developing conscientizao, critical consciousness, would seem to provide an important point of reference for possible paths to emancipatory outcomes, centralising once more the project of critical management education and critical management studies. For some, moments of micro-emancipation from corporate colonisation may provide a route to emancipation. However, for others, the ‘option’ to engage in micro-emancipatory struggles may be limited. In this case, the analysis of critical scholars serves to highlight contradictions, and bring these to public spaces for discussion. Further, the adoption of critical pedagogy within a management classroom helps to develop a critical consciousness in those aspiring to be organisational decision-makers.

In short, there is no clear answer, and there is certainly much work to be done. However, the role of critical management scholars is providing spaces of interruption to the exploitative nature of so-called ‘new’ forms of work is as relevant in this ‘innovative’ work environment as ever.

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