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Meeting report: "Fair and decent work in the global economy?". International Labour Process Conference, 2023, Glasgow, UK (hybrid)

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The 41ˢᵗ International Labour Process Conference (ILPC) was held at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow from April 12 to 14, 2023, with a focus on 'Fair and decent work in the Global Economy.' The conference is the annual gathering of sociologists of labour from the field of Labour Process Studies who investigate how social inequality and domination are reproduced in workplace realities. The ILPC is grouped around the Labour Process Theory (LPT), which emerged within Anglo-American sociology of work in the 1970s. This research program and its discussion at the ILPC offer enriching insights for the community of technology assessment (TA) on the genesis and impact of technology in the world of work.

Labour Process Theory and technology assessment

Harry Braverman's 1974 standard work Labour and Monopoly Capital established the Labour Process Debate with a study of labour in the US-American steel mills of Bethlehem Steel. In the heyday of industrial mass production, he looked at the standardized and sharply divided work of pig iron shippers and machinists and the hierarchical command relationships between management and workers. Braverman reconstructed the work organization, ostensibly solely oriented toward technical efficiency, as the result of corporate conflicts and social domination. Assembly lines, working rules and machine tools were shaped by a systematic conflict over wages and work performance between management and workers. In the centre of this struggle for each side lay the control over the labour process. For example,

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Braverman and other researchers like David Noble showed that the development of numerically controlled (NC) machine tools was used specifically to assert the interests of management over workers. The ability of engineers to program machine movements deprived machinists of control over the quantity and pace of work and adjusted their output to the management's specifications. At the same time, the introduction of the technology was repeatedly accompanied by sabotage, slowdowns, and work stoppages that reshaped the design of the NC-technology. These conflict-theoretic assumptions about the genesis of technology form the basis of the research agenda that guides the papers presented at ILPC.

For the TA community, LPT research provides some interesting stimuli, since from its onset it has deliberately discussed the genesis and effects of technology embedded in social conflicts. Over the past 40 years, the subject of research has changed from machine tools and assembly lines to computer-aided production planning systems in robotized factory floors, dialer software in call centres, virtual software development environments for IT experts and digital platform technologies that control the work of couriers and cab drivers. However, LPT-oriented research has always asked which latent contradicting interests or open conflicts between management and workers give rise to technology in the world of work and what effects this has on working conditions. In this respect, it offers promising starting points for TA, too, both with its social constructivist-conflict-theoretical understanding of technology and with its view on the effects of technology in the world of work.

Industrial automation and digital platforms

The 41ˢᵗ ILPC placed its thematic focus on work in global value chains and the Global South. One conference stream concentrated on labour issues in agricultural and extractivist industries in the Global South. For example, Rama Salla Dient (University of Edinburgh) spoke about land grabbing in the wake of economic development strategies in Senegal, or Antonio Mitidiero Junior (Federal University of Paraíba) on the impact of flexible crops on land distribution in Brazil. In the stream on migrant mobility regimes, Samia Dinelacker (University of Onabrück) presented findings on the work of Taiwanese manufacturing workers in Indonesia and their resistance practices, some of which are based on solidarity networks in local subcultural heavy metal scenes.

Despite this strong focus on labour relations in the Global South, the conference also dealt in many aspects with technological change in the world of work. The debate about the impact of digital automation technologies on the skills of workers in industry shaped some of the contributions. Paaritosh Nath (Azim Premji University), for example, used quantitative labour market data to criticize the assumption that automation in the Indian automotive industry would lead to a higher demand for qualified workers. Instead, he said, technically skilled workers are facing fewer and fewer demanding jobs. This is because Industry 4.0 technologies would be used primarily to devalue labour.

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A particular focus was on the digital platform industry. In particular, the work of couriers on platforms such as Deliveroo and Lieferando or of cab drivers on Uber have already been intensively researched over the last ten years, guided by the LPT. Ethnographic methods and research more interested in informal conflicts celebrated their renaissance on this subject especially in German-speaking countries. As such platforms make employment very easy this enables low-threshold field access, which is probably a weighty reason for the inflation of research on the topic. This year again numerous contributions in different sessions dealt with the locally and temporally flexible algorithmic

partners in the transfer of research findings. By contrast, Jamie Woodcock (University of Essex), a representative of the younger LPT generation defended a strictly partisan approach to research as a solidary science for workers and unions. This is because the analytical and methodological foundations of LPT, with its focus on social relations of domination, conflict and resistance, can only be sustained if one takes a critical view of social inequality and dominant labour regimes. Transferring this debate to the TA community could be equally fruitful. Ultimately, TA's pro-democratic impetus indicates that, above all, those who are negatively affected by technological change in a variety of ways

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management of digital platform work, its insecure employment relationships and informal and collective resistance practices of workers against digital labour regimes. A recurring question here was to what extent the production model on delivery platforms could be described as a digital update of Taylorism. Lorenzo Cini (University College Cork) for example, argued against this assumption in his contribution. Work on platforms, he emphasized, is less characterized by a clear separation of conception and execution, and instead systematically relies on the wayward contributions of couriers. Even the violation of work rules – for example, when ignoring route specifications – ultimately ensures the efficiency of the work processes. All in all, however, it can be said that LPT's research agenda at the time contributes little that is fundamentally new about platform work. After several years of fruitful research, the subject matter seems to have been well illuminated and current findings often only illustrate old findings.

On the partisanship of (technology) research

A discussion of particular interest for the impact interests of the TA community unfolded in the stream 'Braverman and beyond', which shed light on the historical origins of LPT and its potentials for future research on work. One of the sessions focused on the question of how LPT research should relate to economic, political, and civil society actors as addressees and buyers of its findings. Paul Thompson (emeritus, University of Stirling) – a doyen of the research community from the early days of LPT who, by his own account, organized factory intervention to politicize workers in the 1970s in the aftermath of the student movement – argued for a neutral research practice that provides knowledge for multiple actors. In this respect, he saw both unions and management consultancies as potential practice

without being able to make their own decisions should be provided with knowledge and strengthened in their ability to act politically. If this assumption is followed, TA would also have to be moderately partial in its own research and consultancy.

Work and technology assessment

In any case, for TA researchers interested in the social negotiation and consequences of technological change, the 2023 ILPC offered a rich reservoir of debates, illustrative cases and research desiderata. In addition to the focal points mentioned here, results were presented on the robotization of care work, labour in blockchain-based Decentralized Autonomous Organizations, or the digitalization of the construction sector. The world of work is possibly the place where people not only come into contact most intensively with diverse technologies, but also are affected by technological change without any chance of democratic influence. A stronger orientation of the TA community towards the sociology of work would hence be profitable. The next opportunity for doing this, at comparatively close geographic range, will be the 42nd ILPC, which will take place from April 03 to 05, 2024 in Göttingen and thus at one of the centres of German sociology of work.

Further information

https://www.ilpc.org.uk/