Three Decades of Lean Production: Ideology, Practice and Resistance

Christopher Huxley
Trent University
chuxley@trentu.ca

International CRIMT Conference
“New Frontiers for Citizenship at Work”
HEC Université de Montréal
12-14 May 2014
Citizenship at Work

Notion put forward by T.H. Marshall in his 1949 lecture “Citizenship & Social Class”

• Trade unionism creating a secondary system of industrial citizenship parallel to & supplementary to the system of political citizenship

• Citizenship at work implies curbing the class system
Two Questions:

1. How do we assess more than 30 years of Lean Production (LP)?

2. How does citizenship at work contrast with LP?
Controversies on ‘citizenship at work’

• Limitations of trade unionism
• Criticism focused on gender, racialized minorities, immigrants & other historically marginalized/excluded workers
• Seeming absence of alternatives following worker upsurges of the 1960s, QWL programs and labour process debates
• Neoliberal objections
Rise of LP

Post-war Japan:

• Defeat of newly emergent militant unionism
• Quality movement (Suzuki & Toyota)

End of postwar boom North America in 1970s

• International competition. Quality concerns
• Re-thinking of postwar industrial relations compromise
• Emergence of new managerial practices/ideologies (R. Bendix 1974 [1956] Work and Authority in Industry: Ideologies of Management in the Course of Industrialization)
Lean Flexible Production

• Rise of a new managerial practice & ideology
• Less of everything compared to mass production (described as robust). Less waste. Kaizen (continuous incremental movements to a new standard)
• Claims system empowers workers, enhances skills & delivers a more humane work environment
Is LP Post-Fordist?

Two meanings of Fordism:
1. system of work organization
2. political economy regime where employers, labour and the state articulate with one another to regulate advanced capitalist accumulation and development

If any break has occurred more in second meaning of Fordism
Research on LP

• *Just another Car Factory? Lean Production and its Discontents* (Rinehart, Huxley, and Robertson 1997)

• Light truck assembly in Canada, the U.S. and Mexico (Huxley 2003)

• Detroit Three auto companies and their U.S. based suppliers (Meyer, Cooke and Huxley 2005)
LP as Practice & Ideology

• Advocates for LP. Both managerial & even some qualified support from progressives
• Combined emphasis on work reorganization & human engineering
• Rapid adoption

  J. Womack et al 1990 *The Machine that Changed the World*

Critiques of LP

• Work intensification, injuries, multi-tasking, management by stress (kaizen)
• LP human engineering in non-union workplaces as managerial counter movement to union principles (pattern bargaining, seniority, bidding for jobs, company values vs union values)
• Corrosion of character in the new work culture (R. Sennett 2006 *The Culture of the New Capitalism*)
Explaining LP Longevity (1): Employers

Employers/managers/HR & academic proponents:

• Claim of efficiency
• Spread of LP way beyond manufacturing e.g. medical care and education
• New iterations. Lean six sigma. Lean product development
Explaining LP Longevity (2): Workers

- Neoliberal return to the capitalist norm of permanent unemployment
- Climate of never-ending threats & resulting fear: bleak alternatives of precarious work, outsourcing, going south/offshore, de-unionization
- Exhaustion of alternatives
Resisting LP

- Documenting worker response (union/non-union). C. W. Mills on manager/scholar dialogue that ignores the worker

- Role of unions
  - example of 300 supplementary workers in 2013 contract negotiations between GM and the union
  - Current organizing drive at Toyota in ON

- Political economy context within which most workplace & contract bargaining occurs
Conclusion

• LP as both work reorganization practice & managerial ideology under neoliberalism
• Unions offer an alternative citizenship at work
• Example of CAMI workers’ banner during 1994 strike: *Old values:* open communication, empowerment, kaizen, team spirit. *New values:* dignity, respect, fairness, seniority
• How much has LP changed (& is continuing to change) unions? How much have unions changed (& are continuing to change) LP?