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MANAGEMENT, LABOUR PROCESS AND WORKERS OWN CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION IN AN OIL REFINERY, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the refinery workers of an oil refinery in Nigeria conceptualize and narrate their lived work experience in the context of the peripheral neo-liberal management practices that characterize the organization. The paper critically analyses the social processes of workers perception of the organization as a "national farmland" and how this mediates their agentic responses to workplace labour process. Taking on the labour process analysis, the paper explores the dual position of labour in the organization in explaining workers own conception of their commodity relations, and how the prevailing cultural specificities of social process of production dilute an essentialist labour value valorization thesis, and thus the ensuing infra-politics in the organization. In utilizing much of the labour process analysis, the paper claims that workers own sense making and interpretation of the social relations of production at the workplace are accounted for much by their own sensuous "social ontology". To the workers, the specificities of the refinery within the peripheral capitalist mode of production further represent a symbiotic interaction that mediate what could have been conceptualized as a "total" and "absolute" labour subordination to capital. This therefore opens up an ambivalent interface within which to conceptualize and explain the dynamics of labour process in the context. Attempt is made through my ethnographic study of the refinery, to account for workers "ideological construct" of the refinery as "national asset" which consequently explains their experiential orientation.

KEYWORDS

Management, Labour Process, Workers Own Sense- Making.

INTRODUCTION

This paper further contributes to the growing dimensions within the strand of labour process analysis, and comparative labour studies, for examining contemporary workplace relations. As against the essentialist managerial analysis, the paper deflates the claim that contemporary workplace has become a "total" institution where the normative managerial precepts have succeeded in "colonizing" the body and soul of employees. It examines the "lived experiences" and responses of the refinery workers, in the wake of "new" managerial practices in the corporation. It is demonstrated in this analysis that; in response to corporate driven initiatives, the refinery workers manifest ambivalence of attitudes; concertive, and oppositional that further express their "identity concerns" in the workplace, (Hugh Willmott, 2004) in the context of emerging managerial practices. Our findings illustrate how the refinery workers could and indeed employ mix forms of covert and subtle resistance involving their subjectivity and agentic role, (Willmott and Knights 2004) in leveraging and re-appropriating management's normative precepts concerning work re-organization imperatives. In accounting for resistance, we not only note the implications of the emerging patterns of managerial practices in producing "disciplined workers" (Edwards, 1979), but also focus on how other contextual nuances, e.g traditional skilled-craft identity orientation of workers, and "non-workplace orientation" of Plant Operators, in a state owned refinery, mediate the outcome of the managerial normative expectations on them. Among other, our findings qualify the need for labour process analysis to be attentive to the interface between the "managed" and the "unmanaged terrains" of the specificity of the workplace on which the human agency mediates, in the enactment of workplace orientations and lived work experiences.

Study of workplace within the conceptual remit of labour process analysis continues to raise concerns on the specific dimensions of workplace employment relations issues. While earlier concerns, within labour process understanding focused upon control and consent (Edwards (1979), Burawoy (1979), contemporary sociology of work study had introduced new concerns over subjectivity, identity-formation and resistance into labour process analysis (Willmott 2004, Knights 2006, Thompson 2006). These emerging strands within LPT have continued to highlight issues related to agency/structure dimensions which did not privilege orthodox Marxian analysis, nor lay emphasis on essentialist discourse, or normative managerial analysis. Thus, the viability of re-inserting the agency of the refinery worker in the debates resonates itself in this analysis. Indeed, control/consent dimension of workplace relation as "voluntary subordination to the control of capital" (Adesina 1991) provokes a concern on the earlier discourse of labour process analysis (Burawoy 1979). The concern here is on the agentic/subjectivity dimension of workers sense making of the social relations of production in the refinery.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY/RESEARCH CONTEXT

Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), Nigeria, was established on April 1977 by the Federal Government of Nigeria with the mandate to manage the operational aspects of the oil industry in Nigeria, while the regulatory functions reside with the Federal Government. NNPC is a successor organization to the Nigeria Oil Corporation which was established in 1971. In addition to its exploration activities, NNPC developed operational interests in refinery, petrochemicals and products transportation as well as marketing.

In the last two decades, NNPC, as one of the largest federally owned corporation in Nigeria, has emerged from one of the most ambitious and far reaching organizational changes in its thirty-three year history. In 1988, the corporation was decentralized into twelve strategic subsidiaries and units, covering the entire spectrum of the corporations operations. In the last ten years, the operations and activities at NNPC have centered on coping with the challenges of both intense internal and external developments in the oil industry, in particular with regards to its products. The concern has been to make its products compete favorably in the world market, both in terms of pricing and quality. As a result, the various business units and subsidiaries of NNPC have been re-organized in a manner to make them respond to these competitive challenges.

Port-Harcourt Refinery Company (PHRC), Eleme, Port-Harcourt in Nigeria, is one of the twelve subsidiary companies of NNPC. It provides petroleum refinery services to the nation, which underscores its strategic importance to socio-economic development of the country, and which also explains the perceptions workers hold of the corporation. The operations and activities of the company are carried out by two departments. Production, Engineering, and Total Quality Control Department, and Administration, Personnel and Manpower Development Department. However, since the focus of my research work was on "shopfloor"/refinery workers, and how they perceived their location in the production process, my ethnography survey was on the Production, Engineering and Total Quality Control Dept.

Central to this paper therefore, are the patterns of employment relations within the refinery. Within the regulatory framework that established NNPC, operational activities at the refineries are expected to respond to re-organization at the corporate level. The dynamics of labour process at this level thus becomes scholarly important in evaluating workers sense making of the managerial practices. This is because, "it is at this level that the formation of workers consciousness and its manifestation are clearly shown in response to production process", (Adesina 1989, 2-3). Activities at the refinery level "critically reflect workers perception and explanations of their location in the relations of production", (Adesina 1989:2). While on the one hand, workers location in the relations of production reflect these dynamics that underpinned managerial practices, on the other hand; these are mediated by the workers own interpretation and definition of their positions within the context. Port-Harcourt Refinery Company of NNPC was therefore chosen as the site for the study.

MANAGEMENT, LABOUR PROCESS AND CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES

Labour process analysis provides the conceptual approach for this study. This conceptual approach is adopted because labour process and its critical understanding within capitalist mode of production provide a deep insight into the character of labour-management relations. As Gamze (2000:32-38) notes, "labour process analysis generates a critical insight into the world of work, and of the submerged issues of management control, and politics at work". In its critical analysis of managerial control over labour, the conceptual insights from labour process debate have been influential. Its use as a conceptual approach for understanding the capitalist mode of production is largely influenced by Braverman's (1974) seminal work, *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, which in turn was inspired by Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production.

Subsequent contributions and empirical studies on labour process by various authors and researchers have indeed demonstrated how the analysis of capitalist mode of production explains the inherent tensions and strains between capital and labour power in the workplace. Building on Braverman's labour process analysis, "second-wave" analysts and writers such as Paul Thompson (1999), Pual Edwards (2007), David Spencer (2000), Paul Stewart (2005) and those from the Brighton Labour Process Group (BLPG), have written extensively on its valence as a conceptual tool for analysis of capitalist labour process. Earlier works in this area have focused on specific issues, for instance, Burawoy's (1985) analysis of role of consent on the reproduction of capitalist relations of production at work, Friedman's (1977) work on control strategies utilized by those performing the global functions of capital and P. Edwards (1979) responsible autonomy- all this serves as foundational to our understanding of managerial control and workers consent in the workplace (Ellis 2004; 5-7). However, Paul Thompson and Steven Ackroyd's work (1999) *Organization Misbehaviors* have shown how covert resistance is equally implicated in workplace relations.

As noted by Thompson and Ackroyd (1999), not all workplace issues concerning managerial control and hegemony are without counter resistance from the workers. Locked in the managerial control devices are manifestations of subtle covert forms of resistance; thus all has never been quiet in the workplace front, (Thompson: 2009). At the underbelly of the managed terrain in the workplace are the unmanaged arena characterized by workers own appropriation of time, work, product and identity (Thompson: 2009). As earlier noted by Thompson and Ackroyd (1999), these constitute another realm of workplace behavior that fall outside the radar of managerial gaze, and thus, not easily understood as a form or step towards formal resistance". Workers engage in ritual of time wasting, pilfering, fart, fiddling, and soldering as offstage gestures and practices of resistance in the workplace (Scott, 1985), cited in Thompson and Ackroyd (2009). These are "underground" form of resistance enacted at informal level characterized by common "vocabularies of critique" and re-appropriation. As counterposed reactions to managerial prescripts, they are "inversion" of dominant discourse reflecting workplace identity as re-constituted by the workers. In reconstituting their workplace identity, workers still engage in "mimicry, parody, humors" even in the face of on-going managerial oppressive surveillance, (Mumby 2005). Thus, in re-mapping the manifestation of managerial power and regimes, there are diversities of behavior and misbehavior that obstruct the radar of managerial gaze (Thompson 2009).

Empirical studies have indeed shown what work re-organization often meant for workers and workers interests at the workplace, as something different from its presentation by management (Gregor 2000). For instance, Willmott (2000:135) argued that, often, re-organization of work, as cloaked in the discourse of empowerment, are set out to create high levels of workers job satisfaction, trust, motivation and commitment, clearly represents the "latest in a long line of management techniques to ratchet up the level of labour exploitation". Reflecting on the implication of Information Technology in the workplace, Willmott argues that managerial practices represent "the intention and techniques to intensify appropriation of surplus-value from labour, through the use of Information and Technology (2000:135). Conceptualized thus, and from the perspective of labour process analysis, business process at the workplace with its constituent components of new technology of production, employees involvement and work re-organizations are strategies, when stripped bare, aimed at tapping into shopfloor-based knowledge for increased productivity and the intensification of work control (Willonott 2000:137). From labour process analysis therefore, managerial role is to be understood and analyzed, primarily as techniques for extracting surplus-values. Further, Teulings (1986) argues that "managerial work should be understood as part of the collective labour process at the corporate level; and secondly it must be analyzed and treated with the same conceptual tool in the treatment of production relations" cited in (Willmott 1986: 143). Impliedly, at the point of production, managerial practice is to be conceived as a medium and outcome of distinctive and often unequal power relations between capital and labour. If managerial practice is conceived thus, it follows that potentially, issues and tensions are bound to be generated at the point of production with diverse implications on workplace relations.

While conceptual remit of labour process analysis remains foundational as theoretical insight into understanding workplace relations in a capitalist mode of production, "in a context like Nigeria, it needs to take into consideration the specific culture-context and dimensions, through which workers perceive and interpret their location in the world of work" (Adesina 1991-145). In a peripheral neo-liberal economy like Nigeria, labour process framework remains a credible conceptual approach in understanding the character of workplace relations (Adesina 1988). However, controversy have emerged, through later extensions and explorations of the conceptual framework, by other scholars and researchers, which for the purpose of empirical grounding and adequacy needs to "incorporate context-specific insights in its application as an analytical tool" (Adesina 1991:145). Axiomatic as "context-specificity" may be instructive in cases of sociological workplace studies, workers own social construction of their location in social relations of productions also count.

METHOD OF STUDY

The study from which this paper is derived rests largely on the use of ethnographic survey for the empirical investigation of workplace relations in the refinery. Building on the principles of Extended Case Method (Burawoy 1998), as a research technique, the study adopts the technique of "workplace ethnography" in exploring the lived work experiences of the workers within their local and extra-local social process. As an approach to do workplace study, the technique allows the researcher to "share in the daily experiences of the researched subject" (Adesina 1988). It gives meaning to wide array of social process that determines workers location within the unfolding social processes of world of work. It gives insights to workers perception of managerial strategies from "inside and bottom" (Burawoy, 1998:8).

On the relevance of workplace ethnography, Burawoy (1998:12) notes "in so far as meaning attitudes and even knowledge do not reside in individual, but are constituted in social situation, and then, we should be doing study from the "social ontology" of respondents." The study sites for the research work were both the corporate Headquarters of NNPC, and the Port-Harcourt Refinery Company (PHRC), a subsidiary of NNPC. Studying complex organization like the oil company which requires eliciting employees' attitudes and sense-making in the wake of on-going work re-organization entails an immersion in the everyday life of the organization for the period of study. For this study, the primary method of data collection was extensive participant observation at the research sites over a period of five (5) months between the month of April and September 2008.

RESULTS

The wider context of corporate managerial practices at NNPC, as a state-owned Enterprise, had a profound influence in shaping the "shopfloor" orientation of the Plant Operators. Corporate managerial practices that define and drive workplace labour process in the refinery; particularly the socio-technical control strategies as well as patterns of implementation are embedded in the corporate ethos, shaping the outcomes as well as workers experiences. Workers experiences as well as their expectation of the corporation as a State Owned Enterprise were found to have a significant and profound influence on how they interpret and respond to on-going changes in the organization. The corporate culture, encapsulated in its normative values were constantly re-echoed to the workers in diverse and in unmistakable words; erected in main gates into the refinery are the signboards, "NNPC touches your lives in many positive ways" – bringing it into the workers consciousness the significant position and roles of the corporation within the socio-economic context of Nigeria. On why workers should imbibe the corporate values, another signboard reads; "this is our farmland, we should not do anything injurious to it". Pasted on the various notices boards in the refinery, and contained in the company's monthly Bulletin are captions and eulogies compelling operations workers to embrace Teamwork, and new production programs that drive Quality performance.

These values are not only ingrained in the normative orientation of the Plant Operators, it also explains the "dual" perceptions workers hold regarding their labour-power in the refinery. Embedded in the organization's labour process of the oil industry, workers have built a sensuous and material connection between the concrete expenditure of labour-power, and their social ontology of the organization. To the workers, the specificity of the refinery represents a symbiotic

relation that mediates a pure labour commodification, and their social world (Mollona 2005), and therefore constitute an arena where social relations of production are interpreted on their own lived work and non-work experiences. Workers own "ideological construct" of the refinery as "national farmland" gives an experiential interpretation of their location in the social relations of production. This therefore suggests a "two-side" abstraction of pure labour commodification in the context of prevailing peripheral neo-liberal capitalist mode of production that characterized workplace relations in the refinery.

Also, at NNPC, put in place is the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC)-an institutionalized structure of bi-partite relations between management and the two in-house unions in the organization. The institutionalized structure of JCC is meant to forge a collaborative working relation on the various "shared objectives" of the corporation. While it is meant to diffuse the manifestation of overt conflict and opposition associated with the shared managerial initiatives, workers own perception and indeed interpretation of JCC was found to be something different from managerial own perception. To the workers, gradual replacement of the traditional negotiating machinery such as collective bargaining, with JCC, is perceived as gradual weakening and erosion of trade unions power and representative roles. Management's enactment and justifications of normative elements/rhetories surrounding new production systems as often canvassed at JCC Meetings were met with ambivalence thereby providing space for workers inversion, leveraging and re-appropriation of the rhetories. Empirical evidence of workers reluctance to "buy in" into this managerial discourse was observed. And consequently forms of opposition, though covert and subtle, manifested in forms of re-appropriation of time, work, and product and self-identify (Thompson and Ackroyd 2009) remains at the margins of the collaborative arrangement under JCC.

Thus, in spite of the elaborate structure, and managements enactment and justifications for the discourse surroundings TQM and Teamwork, our empirical analysis found out that Plant Operators still rely and indeed mobilize their old traditional "shopfloor collective identity" (Adesina 1988) in moderating some elements of the managerial initiatives. Their collective skills-identity in the refinery is retained in challenging new managerial initiatives. In their "resistance through re-appropriation" Thompson & Ackroyd (1999), the prevailing normative precepts are laced with dimensions of misbehaviors such as absence, pilferage, fiddling, theft, and sub-cultures laced with distinct "shopfloor folklores".

Our findings also demonstrate how the Plant Operators in their agentic-formation and self-identity, rooted in the collective shopfloor relations, shape their interpretation and understanding of new work arrangements. In the refinery, workers experiences of managerial practices were not all consummating, but most fundamentally, tacit opposition and resistance reside and spring up from their re-appropriation of the framework. As part of managerial initiatives to secure Plant Operators acceptance of Teamwork and associated practices such as multiskillings, job-swapping, shift-work, and TQ programs in the refinery, there were series of morning-briefings for team members and leaders, in-plant training sessions organized by Training consultants. As these cascades from corporate level down to Branches and Subsidiaries, management never minced words on the need for workers to embrace the new production arrangements. It is in this context that workplace implications and workers responses have been analyzed. While on the one hand, union leaders were observed to have expressed their willingness to talk the rhetoric at meetings, collective ambivalence and resistance still prevailed on the "shopfloor". As remarked by one of the Plant Operators, "management failure to do things properly has always been the cause of suspicions...because management always remains unrealistic about the problems associated with the new challenges".

DISCUSSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

Among other empirical and theoretical concerns, this paper has focused on the implications of management's initiatives on workers identity investments – subjectivity (as agentic factor) in mediating the process of consent and resistance in the workplace, (Hugh Willmott (1994), David Knights (1993), Collinson (1994). While the implications of managerial strategies regarding control/consent remain inherent of contemporary workplace in producing "disciplined workers", and their work-live experiences, this should not be taken as given. Rather, there are other immanent and nuanced workplace dimensions, manifested in form of organizational misbehavior (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1999).

In providing a conceptual framework for understanding work and non-work experiences, from the "workers ontology", in relations to commodity production, Carrier (1992), in what might be understood as a reinterpretation of Braverman's (1974) Marxian analysis, argues that "modern capitalist" production entails a split in the workers orientation between two juxtaposing "moralities". According to Carrier (1992), the morality of economic institution is seen to be impersonal, and replete with abstract forces of the market dynamics, while the morality of the "community" is seen to be of passion and characterized by communal forces like affection and social bonds between people (Carrier 1992), cited in Mollona 2005:178).

This understanding also resonates with other studies e.g Adesina, (1989) that distinguish the "two sides" of the labour process" a duality of labour-power in which pure labour commodification represents only one dimension of labour process, and in which the other dimension is rooted in workers own social construction of their workplace identity. "Workers social construction in the context of social relations of production "represents distinct evidence of workers re-definition of their roles in production" (1989). Thus, the subjective, experiential and symbiotic ways through which workers perceive their location in relations of production demonstration the ideology they hold of the oil company. The experiential narratives given by the refinery workers indicate a feeling of great attachment and work-life fulfillment for working in the organization; a kind of symbiotic experience that they are able to contribute to the growth of the "farmland". It is in this social construct of their location in the relation of production that provide the "anthropological understanding" of labour commodification (Carrier 1992). As noted by (Carrier 1992), attention must be placed on the historical significance of the concept of 'capital' and "labour-power" in a context, which also explains workers symbiotic relations with the oil community at Eleme, in Port-Harcourt, Nigeria.

The plant workers indeed demonstrated a dual conception of the values of their labour power, one; as an inalienable social capital that could circulate in the course of production, and the other side of it; as an exchange value (Carrier 1992: 179). Consequently, the ideology surrounding the oil company as a national asset is embedded in the complementary narratives put forward by the workers in the explanation of their labour-power; one of concrete activity that must be expended for national growth, and the other as pure economic interest as workers within the organization. As a result, the ontology that explains workers perception of their labour power in production may tend to obscure and dilute classic notion of labour process analysis.

CONCLUSION/SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has provided additional lens to the growing body of theoretical and empirical conceptualizations of contemporary workplace that suggest the "other-side" abstractions and analysis of labour process. It recognizes, even within the critical perspectives of labour process framework, that there are "other sides" to the understanding of labour process that are essentially contextually nuanced, leveraged by social ontology and narratives of the workers. While the contexts of contemporary employment relations are embedded with dynamics of control/resistance, workers "poetics" and narrative tend reconstruct and shape workplace intra-politics. The challenges therefore remain for labour process analysts and researchers to ceaselessly put these "poetics" and "situated narratives" into appropriate theoretical and methodological constructs for the research work to be empirically grounded.

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