

# The Significance of Labour Process Theory to the Arab Gulf Countries: Developing A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Consent and Conflict in the Workplace

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## Abstract

This paper reviews the literature on the main concepts of labour process theory to highlight its significance for analysing workers-managers struggles in workplaces of the Arab Gulf countries. The paper builds on the core principles of the labour process theory and engages the dimensions of neo-patriarchy and mobility power to build a conceptual framework for the analysis of workplace relations in the Arab Gulf context. Previous research show that the dialectics of control-consent-resistance and the concept of mobility power, are effective tools for analysing how work is organised in commercial organisations. Nevertheless, this paper argues that acknowledging the nature of ‘neo-patriarchal managerial control’, which is an ‘informal mode of management’, is vital for analysing the nature of power relations between the management and labour in workplaces of the Arab Gulf countries. Moreover, since the majority of the labour force in the Arab Gulf countries are migrants, the concept of mobility power has a critical role in explaining struggles between the management and migrant labour.

**Keywords:** neo-patriarchy, labour process, workplace relations

## 1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged in the work and employment literature that the labour process theory (LPT) is able to provide a critical analysis of workplace relations (Grint, 2005; Edgell, 2006). The main tenet of LPT is that workers and managers are intrinsically oppositional under a capitalist system, and the indeterminacy of labour power is the primary source of this struggle (Smith, 2016). Relations between labourers and firms are established since the defining of the employment contract. Although there is an agreement on the amount paid to labour, there is no agreement on how much effort the worker needs to put during the workday (McIntyre, 2017a). Furthermore, since firms want to generate profits, it is in their best interests to lower the cost of labour, for example, by reducing salaries, limit labour mobility, lengthen the workday, and intensify the workload to boost employees’ productivity, which would result in an increase in total profit. On the other hand, the quantity and quality of the labour’s capabilities to work are unpredictable, and normally it is in their best advantage to exert the least amount of effort and demand greater earnings (Olsen, 2017: 51).

The notions of control, consent and resistance (Burawoy, 1979; Friedman, 1990) and the concept of mobility power (Smith, 2006, 2010), are effective tools for understanding workplace relations in modern organisations. However, analysing workplace relations in the Arab Gulf countries requires understanding the nature of power relations between the firm and labour. The reliance on easily replaceable migrant labour is a core element of the labour markets in this region and has impact on shaping workplace relations (Hammer and Adham, 2022). This paper focuses on notions within what is described as ‘core’ labour process theory (Thompson, 1990, 2010) to develop a conceptual framework for analysing workers-managers struggles in workplaces of the Arab Gulf countries. It draws on previous research to incorporate the concepts of neo-patriarchal control and mobility power in the analysis of workplace relations in the Arab Gulf region.

The paper opens with the development of the labour process theory followed by outlining its key concepts of labour power. Section three reviews the literature on control, consent and resistance. It then moves to outline the organisational misbehaviour framework in section four and mobility power in section five. The final section outlines the proposed conceptual framework for future research on workplace relations in the Arab Gulf context.

## 2. The Development of Labour Process Theory

Karl Marx analysed the labour process in 19<sup>th</sup> century's England in volume one of his book *Capital* ([1867] 1990). Marx begins his examination by listing the three components of the labour process that business owners must acquire in order to produce goods: 1) the ability of humans to work, and 2) the means of production, which include both tools and machines as well as 3) the products of labour (i.e. raw materials). Additionally, he suggests that the labour process and the valorisation process are two processes that work together to form the 'unity' that is known by the capitalist process of production. The deliberate action of utilising tools to turn raw materials into a product with a single or perhaps several uses is known as the labour process. The production of surplus value—which is done by workers but received as compensation in the form of overall net income by capitalists—is the subject of the valorisation process. Because of this, the primary goal of capitalists is to provide a good or service that is more valuable than all of the inputs that were acquired to make it work (ibid).

### 2.1 The Basic Elements of LPT

The LPT, as initially articulated by Marx, had been only significantly extended until Braverman's (1974) contribution. Several researchers gave the hypothesis more consideration in the late 1970s (e.g. Burawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1979; Littler, 1982). Since the late 1980s, a number of researchers, especially from the United Kingdom, have conceptualised the LPT (e.g. Chris Smith and Paul Thompson).

The four elements that constitutes what is known by the core theory, was proposed first by Thompson (1990), and it is widely acknowledged among the labour process community. These four principles are as follows:

- 1- Because the labour process is so crucial for economic reproduction, the analysis focuses on labour-capital interactions with the workplace.
- 2- Firms rivalry and labour-capital conflicts push firms to continually revolutionise manufacturing techniques.
- 3- Because market mechanisms alone cannot govern the labour process, management in capitalist enterprises has a control imperative.
- 4- Labour-capital relations are essentially adversarial and marked by conflict and consent.

The four elements outlined above have constrained the purposes of labour process studies. In terms of class analysis and the labour theory of value, both Thompson (1990) and Edwards (1990) separate LPT from Marxism, while preserving a materialist base that renders mainstream labour process theorists a kind of post-Marxist materialism. As a result, much labour process research examines class conflicts in the workplace rather than on class conflict in the economy as a whole (Thompson and Vincent, 2010: 48). According to Thompson and Smith (2010: 20), one of LPT's major strengths is its potential to connect workplace relations to a larger economic issues.

### 2.2 Labour Power

It is difficult to understand workplace interactions from the labour process lens without paying adequate attention to the idea of labour power as a commodity (McIntyre, 2017a; Olsen, 2017). Labour power is the sum of all the mental and physical abilities present in the physical form of a human being, abilities which he puts into action whenever he produces a use-value of any sort (Marx [1867] 1990: 270). Labour, on the other hand, is defined as the actual activity focused at creating something that has a value to consumers. Consumption of labour power is unlike consumption of any other commodity since it is embodied in employees (i.e., a part of the worker's person). Labourers own the commodity of labour power, which is consumed by employers who put workers to work either directly or indirectly through managers and supervisors (Smith, 2016).

Labour power only becomes a marketable commodity under capitalism when the individual agrees to sell it to a firm for a predetermined amount of time in exchange for a financial remuneration. This is in contrast to slavery, when the slaves were treated as commodities to be purchased and traded. Like all other goods, labour has a use-value as well as a value; the latter is its market worth. While its value is established by the expense of sustaining the labourer at a specific standard of living, use-value is determined by the effort it can perform at work. According to Harvey (2017, p. 7), the worth of a worker's labour power is mostly reflected in the wages that they are paid.

Marx (1867; 1990) maintains that the value of labour comprises a historical and moral component, which is reflected in the average cost of maintaining labour power. By this, acknowledges that the value of a worker's labour power is not just a physical quantity, but rather is determined by the basket of products workers need to survive, which is in turn determined by various volatile social factors, such as a country's cost of living and the dynamics of its class relations. The vital necessities for human existence, such as food, clothes, fuel, and shelter fluctuate according to the physical circumstances of the nation where the labour resides, but they are constant at

a certain location and time.

### 3. Worker-Manager Conflicts

It is implied by the conflict of interests between labour and capitalists that workplace relationships are essentially incompatible, with each group pulling in opposing directions (Smith, 2016). Previous studies on the labour process reveals that employers utilise a variety of control strategies to enhance employees' productivity and discipline. Workers regularly display symptoms of resistance, either as organised groups during trade union strikes or individually in the workplace, a practice known as 'organisational misbehaviour,' despite the fact that workers and capital occasionally come to a degree of consent (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). The development of the LPT has been heavily influenced by the dialectics of control, resistance, and consent.

#### 3.1 Control and Resistance

One definition of control describes it as a word that summarises a collection of procedures and activities that govern the conditions of the labour process (Edwards, 1990: 143). Marx ([1867] 1990: 304) referred to the unification of the labour process and the process of producing surplus-value (also known as valorisation) as "the capitalist process of production." This was necessary for firms to do in order to produce goods that can be sold at a profit. Since the generation of profits requires that the manufacturing of a given good should not require more labour time than necessary, the capitalists exercise stringent control over the entirety of the production process in order to preserve this unity. This control ensures that there is no wastage of the means of production and labour power. Thompson and McHugh (2009: 105), on the other hand, suggest that labourers follow their own interests for job security, higher pay, and comfortable working conditions, developing their own resistance techniques through limiting output, escaping the workplace and other behaviours. This combative relationship between labour and capital has always been at the heart of workplaces in the capitalist societies (Smith, 2016).

In modern businesses, it is common practice for employees to do their jobs inside surroundings that contain policies and procedures that have been established by the firms. Their actions are frequently observed by managers, who are agents of capitalists and determine what kinds of behaviours are acceptable and which are not. Managers define what kinds of behaviours are unacceptable in the workplace. Controlling workers and directing their actions so that they serve the interests of the company may be accomplished with the help of disciplinary instruments such as pay reductions, missed promotions, and even termination (Thompson, 1990).

Braverman (1974) noted that employees were more deskilled when corporations used scientific management concepts advocated by Taylor to increase production capabilities in the recreation of profit. By analysing the evolution of industrial capitalism in the USA, Braverman argued that the exclusive control that business owners and their representatives (managers) had over the manufacturing process was the cause of the 'degradation of work' and the 'deskilling of labour'. Because they could replace them quickly, hiring workers with minimal skills allowed businesses greater control over them. This provided them more leverage in salary negotiations. However, Braverman received harsh criticism for overemphasising control and deskilling while underestimating consent and upskilling among the workforce (e.g., Grint, 2005: 180–5; Edgell, 2016).

#### 3.2 Managerial Control

Much of recent labour process work relies on contributions from what is known by the 'second wave' of labour process research in the late 1970s. This second wave is mostly dominated by contributions from Friedman (1977), Burawoy (1979) and Edwards (1979) on control and consent. These studies advocated that there are numerous methods of managerial control in different models of workplace regimes, as labour gradually asserted that they are not passive receivers of management control, continually pursuing clever ways to circumvent it. The second wave places a greater focus on the forms of control, and why workers accept or resist them, which describes a situation in which managerial controls provoke dissent from employees, which then leads on to new control systems in a cyclical way (Smith, 2016: 216).

Two of the key studies on control-resistance paradigm are the works that were published in 1977 and 1979 by Friedman and Edwards, respectively. Friedman (1977), drawing on labour unions in England, made the observation that trade unions in giant corporations were able to oppose the type of direct control of supervisors and managers, and replace it with a craftier control method, which he termed responsible autonomy. Edwards (1979) in the United States emphasised that the relations between workers' resistance and management control continually affect the way in which workers are organised. Workers learn how to fight back against the control methods that are being implemented by employers, which leads to management perfecting the control systems that they use. According to Edwards, there are two primary control systems that are dependent on the magnitude of the organisation: 1) Simple control denotes the direct interactions that exist between the employer and his or her

workers in small enterprises; 2) Structural control is a kind of control that is observed in large firms and is comprised of a) technical and b) bureaucratic modes of control. The first term describes the conformity of employees to the technical processes of production, whereas the second term describes the institutionalisation of work organisation through applying job description, salary ladder and promotions). The end outcome of both kinds of structural control is dehumanised authority.

Workers may reject different control tactics in different ways within a single organisation, but there is a demand for consent within this conflict, as firms requires free trade with workers. Worker engagement may be increased by methods such as, managerial methods for upskilling and teamwork (Thompson, 2010).

### 3.3 Consent

Michael Burawoy (1979) shifted the emphasis from control and conflict to the creation of consent in his seminal work *Manufacturing Consent*. In the analysis of workplace relations in a single case study firm in Chicago, Burawoy (1979), observed that workers voluntarily, and sometimes 'unintentionally, volunteer to work hard for their company. More significantly, he discovered that employees agreed to the management because they had some degree of resistance capacity. Burawoy contends that since it curtails more significant forms of opposition, permitting little resistance helps sustain management's dominance. Engaging with workers does not imply that oppressive and traditional modes of control have decreased; rather, gentler and more softer and innovative modes of control have arisen in modern workplaces (Smith, 2016, p. 208).

Additionally, research has shown that modern management engages with employees, particularly non-manual workers, in addition to using Taylorist control tactics as Braverman suggested (Williams and Connell, 2010). Neo-normative control was introduced by Sturdy, Fleming, and Delbridge in 2010. They contend that management, while using this control method, pays close attention to the psychological characteristics of employees. In contrast to bureaucratic supervision, it emphasises the philosophy of "simply being yourself." Since having fun at work is thought to promote productivity and commitment to the company, employees are allowed a lot of liberty; yet, this comes at a price in terms of workload and effort bargain (Thompson, 2010: 10). Therefore, despite the obvious differences between bureaucratic and neo-normative modes of employee control, the goal of all these strategies employed by capitalists is still to extract additional labour effort, which leads to the production of 'organisational misbehaviour'.

## 4. Organisational Misbehaviour

Ackroyd and Thompson (2016) present an analytical model to analyze conflicts and consent surrounding the relations between managers and workers. The main objective of the analytical framework of organisational misbehaviour, is to understand the nature of conflicts between managers and labourers around the three main dimensions of time, work and product. Labour, as a class actor, views misbehaviour as anything else than organised and collective activity. Additionally, it may be seen as a synonym for words like struggle and resistance and is best characterised as non-compliance.

According to the chart above, Ackroyd and Thompson (2016) contend that there are three primary potential areas of misbehaviour where employers and employees suffer the most: 1) Appropriation of time, which is the duration of a task; 2) Appropriation of effort, which is the volume of work; and 3) Appropriation of product (i.e. access to the use of goods produced at the firm).

Workers sell their time under a contract that specifies their working hours and pay, but there is no agreement on how much effort they put in. Some restrictions and duties to a sort of work may be established by a job description and requirements. Ackroyd and Thompson (1999, p. 29) contend that in the absence of such restrictions on tasks, employees often carry out their jobs in accordance with what is regarded as 'acceptable behaviour.' Misbehaviour may be observed in a variety of levels and forms (such as absence, refusal, sabotage, and resignation). The classical types of misbehaviour, according to Ackroyd and Thompson, are systematic time wastage and job limitations, absenteeism, sabotage, fiddling, and theft. Extreme organisational misbehaviour happens when employees deny the reality of the situation. This can lead to resignations or the sabotage of the production process.

In addition, managers (especially supervisors) are frequently involved in the acceptance of organisational misconduct. They do so for a number of reasons, such as because the misbehaviour poses no harm to the workflow or because the supervisors do not react. Therefore, supervisors become increasingly involved in the creation of misbehaviour. Managers will not, however, allow misconduct to become a habit to senior workers. Typically, minor infractions are accepted because the cost of permitting them is lower than the expense of removing them. Therefore, finding how far the regulations can be bent has become a common practice among employees (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 78). Furthermore, accepting inappropriate behaviour might be a potent technique for

managing employees. New regulations may be made to prohibit or criminalise a certain behaviour, which may be practiced regularly as intimidations to workers. However, ignoring a misbehaviour does not exclude supervisors from threatening employees that they would use the policies to criminalise them. The extent to which labourers can engage in inappropriate conduct is also related to mobility power negotiations.

### **5. Mobility Power**

The concept of mobility power proposed by Smith (2006) is considered one of the key advancements to the LPT. Smith (2006, 2010) contends that the indeterminacy of labour mobility is also vital in defining workplace relations, as both the employees' capacity to change firms and the employers' retention methods have a significant impact on the relationships between the two groups. The struggle around mobility power between labour and managers shapes the relations in the workplace and critical aspects of work such as, including the duration of employment, the intensity of work, and the form of jobs.

Mobility power cannot be determined since firms do not know whether an employee will remain with the firm; similarly, employees do not know whether their contract will be renewed or not by the firm (Smith, 2016: 217). The clearest example of mobility-effort negotiation is when a worker uses the fear of leaving his or her job to renegotiate perks such as changing shifts, rotating responsibilities, removing autocratic managers, and establishing advancement possibilities. However, Smith (2016) argues that in mobility-effort negotiation, firms often have the upper hand, especially in a labour market when the rate of unemployment is high. This imbalance of power between employers and workers has detrimental effects on several areas of labour, including remuneration and work intensity (Olsen, 2017, p. 55).

Due to the large supply of labourers in many regions of the world, labourers frequently lack the ability to threaten their current employers with resigning; instead, they frequently seek fixity to have stronger position when negotiating new employment contract. Workers desire fixity via different mechanisms such as, mastery of a certain occupation, and membership in a specific community, such as ethnic groupings and organised labour unions (Smith, 2010). In contrast, enterprises reduce workers' mobility primarily through the use of flexible employment contracting to partition positions into multiple contracts such as, part-time and outsourcing. However, flexible work contracting has little effect on the mobility of highly trained individuals, as their capacity to sell their capabilities is greater and they may make more by selling their skills as independent contractors as opposed to being bound to one company (Smith, 2010). Therefore, businesses analyse and act on the expenses associated with the turnover of their highly qualified employees.

Mobility of labour is a subject that has gain momentum in recent years. Over the past few decades, the world has seen a massive transfer of production from the global North to the global South, a process known as deindustrialisation or reindustrialisation. In these regions, workers are compensated with lower pay and have less access to labour unions (see Kofman, 2016; Stewart and Garvey, 2016). Changes in the labour force have been linked to this capital transfer. When looking for work at a decent salary, workers have little choice but to go where the capital is, as Harvey (2017) puts it. Workers have been migrating from the countryside to the city, from the South of the globe to the Northern countries in Europe and America, and even from poor to rich countries in the South of the globe (Poster and Yolmo, 2016: 578).

### **6. Significance of the Labour Process to the Arab Gulf Workplace**

The labour process theory as outlined above, has the potential to offer detailed analysis to workplace relations in detail. This paper builds on the core principles of the labour process theory and engage the dimensions of neo-patriarchy and mobility power to build a conceptual framework for the analysis of worker-manager relations in the Arab Gulf context. The concepts of neo-patriarchal control and mobility power, as outlined in the table below, can be used along the core LPT dimensions to analyse workplace relations in the Arab Gulf context.

Table 1. Elements of neo-patriarchy and mobility power for analysing workplace relations in the Gulf context

Workplace Relations	Neo-patriarchal/Informal Managerial Control	Worker's Behaviour
Consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong personal ties between managers and workers.</li> <li>- Informal generous incentives and benefits</li> <li>- Personal appreciation and support</li> <li>- High retention of workers</li> <li>- Absence of formal policies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High attention to work</li> <li>- High working effort</li> <li>- Loyalty to the owner and managers not the organisation</li> <li>- Relationship extends to personal ties inside and outside the workplace</li> </ul>
Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Verbal abuse by managers</li> <li>- Extreme workload</li> <li>- Absence of incentives</li> <li>- Average or low pay</li> <li>- Threat of deportation for migrants and contract termination to nationals</li> <li>- Selective use of formal policies to penalise non obedient labour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chronic absence</li> <li>- Escape from the workplace during workday</li> <li>- Effort reduction at work</li> <li>- High turnover</li> <li>- Use of <i>wasta</i> to ensure contract renewal</li> <li>- Low quality of work outputs</li> <li>- Theft</li> </ul>

### 6.1 Neo-Patriarchal Control

Neo-patriarchal relationships include other aspects than women being subordinated (Habiba, Ali, & Ashfaq 2016). This specific social formation spans from the macro-societal level to the household and workplace levels (Adham, 2022). The foundation of the neo-patriarchal structure is made up of the patriarch's authority, the individual's submission, and the patronage system that secures the material interests of the individual through the use of the *wasta* (nepotism) mechanism (Sharabi, 1988). The Arabic word *wasta*, which means intermediary or mediation, describes interpersonal relationships grounded in family and kinship ties that human, acting through their relationships to circumvent formal governmental procedures and to ease the process of accomplishing the task (Ali & Weir, 2020, p. 658).

Our contribution to the labour process literature is through exploring and defining 'the informal mode of management', in 'neo-patriarchal' societies of the Arab world. This mode of management has a set of managerial techniques that are a direct result of the capitalist logic of wealth accumulation that is pervasive in Arab Societies (see Adham, 2022). With this kind of management, the management best maintains strong control over labour, takes use of the indeterminacy of labour power, and maintains the 'suitability' of the gender of the labour needed. As a result, the *wasta* practice, which is a key aspect of the informal mode of management, has proven to have three important effects on how manager-employee relations are shaped. First of all, it establishes a work environment where employees are rewarded and promoted in accordance with how submissive they are to their direct bosses. Second, it lessens the incentives for individuals to progress in their careers. Thirdly, it forces employees to concentrate on developing and maintaining their connections inside the company in order to maintain their job and obtain additional tangible advantages. The fieldwork shows that there are very few formal regulations in the neo-patriarchal workplace, therefore managers rely on informal control methods that is underpinned by the neo-patriarchal social formation in the society. The intentional removal of formal regulations like job descriptions and evaluation procedures increases the indeterminacy of labour power and improves the managerial position in work-effort-based negotiations with employees. Managers frequently have high expectations for the workload in these work environments. Workers may be purposefully asked to complete tasks that have nothing to do with their jobs, for instance. This strategy can also be perceived as a way for the company to keep just 'the compliant staff'. Because there are no defined boundaries in their work obligations, employees find it very difficult to refuse assignments that have been given to them by their direct bosses (ibid).

### 6.2 Mobility Power in the Gulf

The Arab Gulf states, rely heavily on the export of oil, gas, and petrochemicals, all of which are mostly extracted and manufactured by a migrant workforce originating from all over the world, but primarily from South Asia (Rahman, 2018). The creation of big corporations (including local and foreign-owned companies) in the Gulf region would have been inconceivable without the reliance on a majority of low-cost migrant labour, primarily imported from South and South East Asian nations (Hanieh, 2011). This dimension has critical impact on the nature of workplace relations. In all of the Arab Gulf countries, the Kafala system is primarily used by the governments to regulate the mobility of non-national workers. Under this sponsorship arrangement, migrant labourers are unable to switch employment, but sponsors can deport them after paying a minimal amount of

compensation. In an attempt to extend the work on mobility power, Hammer and Adham (2022) proposed the 'sponsored labour regime' in the Saudi context. Their contributions focus on identifying several types of mobility bargaining between labour, firms and the state. The kafala sponsorship system in the Gulf ensures that firms have the upper hand in controlling migrant labour's mobility within the labour market. However, some migrants can enhance their position in the negotiation process with their employers, especially highly skilled professionals. Elements of consent can be witnessed in behaviours such as, high retention of migrants, high attention to work and loyalty to the business owners. On the other hand, in the case of conflict, workers show signs such as, lack of attention of work, effort reduction and absenteeism.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper focused on notions within what is described as 'core' labour process theory (Thompson, 1990, 2010) to develop a conceptual framework for analysing workers-managers struggles in workplaces of the Arab Gulf countries. The paper examined the literature on the key principles of labour process theory in order to show its importance for analysing workers-managers conflicts in Arab Gulf workplaces. The author employs the aspects of neo-patriarchy and mobility power from previous empirical research to construct a conceptual framework for the investigation of workplace interactions in the setting of the Arab Gulf. Previous research indicates that the control-consent-resistance dialectic and the idea of mobility power are excellent tools for analysing how labour is organised in commercial organisations. Nonetheless, this paper contends that recognising the nature of 'neopatriarchal managerial control,' which is an 'informal method of management,' is essential for analysing the nature of power relations between management and labour in Arab Gulf workplaces. In addition, because the bulk of the labour force in the Arab Gulf nations consists of migrants, the concept of mobility power plays a crucial role in elucidating conflicts between management and migrant labour. The conceptual framework proposed in this paper could be used in future research to examine aspects of workers-managers relations in workplaces of the Arab Gulf countries which are still under exploration. The qualitative ethnographic case study methodology serves as an effective tool for labour process research, which is particularly needed to better understand the Arab Gulf context.

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