Workplace regimes: A sociological defence and elaboration

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Abstract

This article defends and extends the concept of workplace regimes, understood as the existence of identifiable systematic patterns of managerial control. In doing so a conceptual framework is developed for explaining both patterns in control and the dynamics of workplace politics. Specifically, this article elaborates on the approach of Michael Burawoy and extends it through an engagement with Science and Technology Studies (also known as Science, Technology and Society Studies) (STS) and Economic Sociology. The core of Burawoy’s framework is identified as the use of ideal-typical ‘workplace regimes’ to represent historically distinct positions upon a continuum between legitimation and coercion. This core is defended and it is argued that granular firm-level variations in the use of legitimation and coercion would only invalidate the theory if they were to make the identification of shifts in historical tendencies at the macro level of world systems impossible. In fact, it is claimed that once fully elaborated the resultant framework is able to explain commonalities and regularities across seemingly divergent contexts as well as variations within regimes. In the course of making this argument, an important distinction, that has not previously been fully recognised, between workplace regimes and workplace politics is highlighted. Finally, the potential explanatory power of this workplace regime approach is illustrated by drawing on recent qualitative research in the retail sectors of the UK and the US.
Key words
Burawoy, embeddedness, managerial control, labour process theory, workplace regimes

Workplace regimes: a (brief) history
Attempts to uncover historical trends in the development of workplace regimes featured prominently in the writing of first- and second-generation labour process theorists. Michael Burawoy (1979) provided a particularly influential account, detailing how early capitalism constituted a workplace regime of ‘market despotism’ in which firm competition, the real subsumption of labour, worker dependency, and weak state regulation led to control through coercion. However, Burawoy argued that market despotism eventually gave way to a hegemonic regime that resulted from growing labour unrest, the Great Depression, and the growth of monopoly capitalism. This hegemonic regime was, according to Burawoy, cemented by the Second World War. Unlike market despotic regimes, Burawoy claimed that hegemonic regimes rely on consent rather than force. In such regimes consent is held to be achieved via the concrete coordination of capital and labour and the obscuring of exploitation through work games. Burawoy (1985) would later argue that the crisis of relative profitability which engulfed core capitalist countries in the 1970s led to the displacement of hegemonic regimes with hegemonic despotism, under which concession bargaining enabled the increased exploitation of labour on the basis of the relative profitability of firms within competitive global markets.

However, third-generation labour process scholars cast doubt upon these specific frameworks and even the desirability of such endeavours. For instance, Paul Edwards (1986) argued that Burawoy’s framework could not be sustained empirically due to variation between workplace regimes even within economic sectors, industries and even nominally similar firms. Thompson (1990: 98) highlighted that ‘Burawoy [along with Richard Edwards]
had replaced Braverman’s linear conception of the evolution of control strategies with their
own versions rather acknowledging that there are a number of dimensions and strategies,
often used in same time period and frequently in combination.’ Thompson (1990: 98) went
on to label Burawoy’s efforts a ‘fruitless search for all-embracing descriptive and analytical
category.’ This led Ackroyd and Thompson (1999: 23) to conclude that these frameworks
were ‘over-ambitious attempts to create overarching models which explain the sequence or
central characteristics of periods of capitalist production.’ Moreover, in their study of
Japanese owned factories in Britain, Elger and Smith (2005) stressed the empirical
complexity of workplace regimes and highlighted the importance of contextual effects in
shaping regimes at different enterprises. Elger and Smith argued workplace regime diversity
to be especially likely when firms are located in different sectors and deviate in size and
importance within supply chains.

Nevertheless, a number of researchers have continued to deploy Burawoy’s
framework and attempted to identify contemporary workplace regimes in the 21st century (for
example, Chun, 2001; Sallaz, 2004; 2009; 2015; Webster et al., 2008; Wood 2020). This
article seeks to reconcile the continuing utility of a Burawoy inspired approach in the face of
the above identification of diversity in workplace control. In order to do so, the hardcore of
Burawoy’s (1979; 1985; 2009; 2010) framework is identified and analytically clarified to
offer a theoretically informed defence of it. However, doing so requires that Burawoy’s
conceptual framework be considerably extended by drawing on Science and Technology
Studies (also known as Science, Technology and Society Studies) (STS) (Hutchby, 2001;
MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999; Wajcman, 2006) and Economic Sociology (Granovetter,
1985, 2017; Polanyi, 1944; 1957; Scott, 2014). Applying understandings of the social
shaping technology and embeddedness from these fields provides a means of explaining
commonalities in control as well as accounting for variations in workplace regimes and
workplace politics.\textsuperscript{1} The article concludes by outlining a framework or conceptual menu for explaining both patterns in control and the dynamics of workplace politics. The elements that make up this menu can be understood as the analytical building blocks that shape legitimation, coercion, conflict and quiescence at work.

**Despotism and hegemony**

Burawoy’s (1979; 1985) approach has been invoked in numerous ways, often to highlight the role of ideology or work games in generating consent at work or the role of political-economic context in shaping particular control strategies. Often little consideration is given to the central tenets of the overall framework. In particular, Burawoy has frequently been invoked with little analytical consideration regarding his framework’s scope (i.e. what elements make up workplace regimes) or scale (i.e. what it seeks to explain – do regimes encompass a workplace, firm, industry, sector, national economy, variety of capitalism, or entire world system?).

What then is the core of this theoretical approach? Burawoy’s starting point was that paid work exists on a continuum between force and consent (or, in the language of the Economic Sociology that will be drawn on shortly, coercion and legitimation). It is then claimed that within a world system it is possible to identify historically dominant positions upon this continuum, with these dominant positions being stylised as ideal types of particular workplace regimes encountered by workers\textsuperscript{2} (Burawoy, 2010; 252). As with all ideal types some variation is to be expected when applied to the real world.

In developing this approach, Burawoy (1985) first drew on the writings of Marx (1976 [1867]) and Roy (1953) in order to identify the ideal type of workplace regime which Burawoy (1979; 1985) labelled ‘market despotic’. This regime was characterised by tightly controlled labour processes regulated by the overseers’ threats of fines, dismissals, and
blacklists (and, in some cases, even violence). Having identified this market despotic ideal
type, Burawoy (1979) then contrasted it to his ethnographic fieldwork undertaken at a
Chicago machine shop during 1974–1975. In doing so, Burawoy was able to identify the
existence of a workplace regime that differed markedly to that of market despotism, i.e. it
occupied a distinctive position upon the continuum between force and consent. Burawoy
(1979) termed this new type of regime ‘hegemonic’ and argued that it resulted from the
consolidation of monopoly capitalism. This hegemonic regime was characterised by the
granting of both rights and obligations to workers which were recognised in formal
employment contracts and grievance procedures. Additionally, managerial behaviour was
policed by recognised trade unions which also ‘concretely coordinated’ the interests of
capital and labour through collective bargaining enabling firm profits and productivity gains
to be passed onto workers via pay rises and improvements in terms and conditions. Burawoy
termed these processes the firm’s ‘internal state’ and highlighted how the internal state
complemented the development of internal labour markets. Internal labour markets consist of
administrative rules that govern the allocation of work, shielding workers from the external
labour market and, in turn, reducing insecurity and cultivating loyalty to the firm.

According to Burawoy, the greater security and predictability provided by internal
states and internal labour markets additionally enabled ‘work games’ to develop organically
within workplaces. Work games were entered into to make one’s work more enjoyable
through the provision of ‘relative satisfactions’. However, as workers became engrossed in
the game, winning was experienced as an end in itself, over and above the pay which workers
received for the work. In this way, work games provide a cultural-cognitive control function
as they produce consent by focusing workers’ attention away from their exploitation and onto
winning these games, with success being measured by profit produced for the employer. By
contrasting his fieldwork with the writings of Marx and Roy, Burawoy (1979) was then able
to identify the existence of two workplace regimes which differed in their reliance on coercion vs. legitimation; as Burawoy (2010: 252) puts it, these regimes had ‘moved along a continuum… That is to say, the balance of force and consent had shifted in the direction of consent.’ Beyond the core capitalist economies of the time, Burawoy (1972; 1985; with Lukács, 1992) also identified the operation of other workplace regimes in Zambia and the Eastern bloc which differed markedly from the hegemonic regimes of the West in terms of their use of coercion and legitimation. Importantly the hardcore of Burawoy’s framework does then allow for variation in both the dimensions and strategies of control at the granular level of individual firms so long as these divergent control mechanisms do not inhibit the identification of commonalities in the use of coercion and legitimation at the aggregate level of a world-system. For example, despite the much more conflictual workplace dynamics that Beynon (2013[1973]) uncovered at Ford’s Halewood plant, Burawoy (1985: 37) cites Beynon’s research as an example of how workers on assembly lines secure the space and control necessary for the generation of consent via work games. This game was termed ‘working back the line’ by Beynon (2013[1973]; 118) and entailed working faster than required by the assembly line, so that workers could ‘make their own time’ for rest and social interaction. In other words, Burawoy holds that despite control operating upon different dimensions and entailing divergent strategies across the individual firms, there were, nevertheless, identifiable commonalities in the use of legitimation and coercion at Ford’s Halewood plant and the machine shop where he conducted his own study i.e. the role of unions in creating the conditions for work games to produce consent by limiting managerial coercion and the resultant insecurity. Next we will consider why a continuum may exist between coercion and legitimation before considering which factors lead to different positions upon that continuum and why regularities across firms might arise.
Legitimation and Coercion

In developing this understanding of workplace regimes, Burawoy drew heavily on the writings of Gramsci (1971) who argued relations of domination were maintained in the US via workplace ‘compromise equilibrium’. Gramsci held that this compromise equilibrium acted to stabilise the capitalist social order without altering the overall exploitative basis of society. Specifically, Gramsci argued that employers made sacrifices and compromises – in the form of both higher wages and benefits and the acceptance of trade unions. Thus, Gramsci (1971: 310) argued that in hegemonic workplaces ‘coercion has, therefore, to be ingeniously combined with persuasion and consent’. Burawoy (1979; 2012) developed this idea further, arguing that capitalism entails not only the securing of exploitation but also the simultaneous obscuring of that exploitation, for ‘if workers’ exploitation was not obscured from their eyes, they would rationally resist it and thus threaten the reproduction of capitalism’ (Wood, 2020: 10). The potential for resistance (or exit where this is more feasible) then is one reason why employers may prefer to rely on consent rather than force.

Yet irrespective of the potential for resistance, Weber ([1922] 1978) stresses that coercion becomes progressively more difficult as the division of labour becomes more complex. This is because the monitoring and surveillance necessary for effective coercion become increasingly costly, meaning that a degree of legitimation is necessary. In a similar vein, Littler (1990) outlines four factors that constitute an observability problem for employers and increase the costs of monitoring. These factors are: the physical separation of management from workers; management’s limited knowledge/understanding of the tasks workers are undertaking and the skills they require; the inherent degree of task indeterminacy (how hard it is to specify what needs to be done in advance); and workers’ social insulation
from management within the workplace. Finally, Thompson (1990: 101) highlights that to remain profitable firms must ‘continually revolutionise production and labour’s role within it… [requiring] workers’ co-operation, creative and productive powers’. Therefore, even where workers have little ability to effectively resist or exit their exploitation, a blend of coercion and legitimation will usually be more effective than coercion alone.

These obstacles to the effective use of coercion have led economic sociologists to view organisations as requiring legitimacy if they are to survive (Scott, 2014). Legitimacy can be understood as the ‘generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions’ (Suchman, 1995; 574). Therefore, social stability and control not only result from institutions that enforce rules via coercive sanctions but also because institutions contain normative and cultural-cognitive elements that legitimise dominant practices (Scott, 2014). Granovetter and Tilly (1989: 202) argue that workplace institutions constitute systems of control that ‘fall along a [continuous] dimension indexing the extent of coercion experienced by workers’. At one end are ‘loyalty systems’ defined as ‘any system that builds worker commitment to the firm by means of positive incentives as well as symbolic devices’ and at the other end are systems ‘where the employer places little or no trust in the worker, allows the worker little or no autonomy, and drives the worker through close time-discipline.’ Thus we can think of workplace regimes as distinctive combinations of workplace institutions that taken together shift the general balance in a firm’s use of coercion and legitimation. Workplace institutions, like all institutions, can be broken down into their component parts. All institutions are made up of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements (Scott, 2014). Regulative institutional elements involve rule setting, monitoring, and sanctioning activities; workplace examples of these regulative elements include employment contracts, disciplinary and grievance procedures, trade unions
and collective agreements, and rules for internal labour allocation (such as those associated with internal labour markets). Normative institutional elements entail norms and values that give a prescriptive, evaluative and obligatory dimension to public life and, in the workplace, examples include pay expectations, constructions of gender and race, and roles (which themselves are often based upon conceptions of gender, race and class). Cultural-cognitive institutional elements include meaning-making practices; in the workplace examples can include rituals, propaganda, framing, work games, teamwork cultures, and schedule gifts. Therefore, it is the existence of normative and cultural-cognitive institutional elements in combination with regulative ones that enables, what Burawoy (1979) terms, the securing and obscuring of exploitation through a stable balance in the use of coercion and legitimation. However, these institutional elements can be blended together in different ways, resulting in distinctive workplace politics even where there exists a similar overall balance in coercion and legitimation. Before evidencing this point, it is necessary to first consider why patterns in the use of coercion and legitimation might develop.

**Technology and Embeddedness**

Burawoy (1979; 1985) argued that the operation of market despotic and hegemonic regimes were relatively autonomous to influences beyond the workplace but that their development and sustainability were, nevertheless, contingent on the configuration of labour processes with a number of external factors. In particular, market despotism was held to result from fragmented and mechanised labour processes located within an environment exhibiting high levels of competition among firms, where workers’ social reproduction was highly dependent on their employer, and where the state only regulated the external conditions of production by ensuring market competition without regulating the working conditions within production. In contrast, Burawoy (1979; 1985) contends that hegemonic regimes emerged from the growing
interdependence of the labour process which enhanced the effectiveness of strikes (see also Silver, 2003), the constriction of product market competition (which increased the sustainability of higher wages) and state interventions to expand consumption by boosting purchasing power to avoid crises of overproduction. These interventions took the form of social insurance that reduced workers dependence on their employer for social reproduction, and institutional support for unionisation and collective bargaining. Therefore, Burawoy (1985: 126-127) argues that the following four factors not only give rise to different types of workplace regimes but also explain variation within types: technology; competition; welfare states; and skill and resistance. Burawoy provides several examples of how these factors affect different workplace regimes in different places and times, but he never fully explains why these factors in particular should prove important in determining the balance of coercion and legitimation. It is, therefore, necessary to draw on STS and Economic Sociology to extend Burawoy’s account if we are to provide a satisfactory explanation.

Scripts and Affordances

Burawoy’s starting point is Marx’s (1976 [1867]) identification of the labour process as consisting of three elements: labour, raw materials and technology. In some places, such as The Poverty of Philosophy, Marx (1979 [1847]) clearly articulated a technological determinist view, however, as Harvey (2010) points out, Marx took a far less deterministic approach in Capital where he insists only that technology ‘lays bare the process of production of the social relations of… life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from those relations’ (Marx, 1976 [1867]: 493). In other words, here at least, Marx is simply stating that studying technology can be particularly revealing of how social relations and, therefore, mental conceptions are constructed, rather than asserting that technology acts as an independent determining factor upon them.
In STS, technology is understood to both shape and be shaped by social relations and mental conceptions (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). As Mackenzie and Wajcman (1999: 3) explain, ‘to say that technology’s social effects are complex and contingent is not to say that it has no social effects... technologies can be designed, consciously or unconsciously, to open certain social options and close others’ (see also Winner, 1999). In workplace regimes too, technology cannot be understood as neutral as it ‘offers a more or less favourable ground for [direct] control over work, job autonomy and power’ (Bélanger and Edwards, 2007: 717). Indeed STS understandings of technology resemble those often implicit in LPT inspired research (Thompson and Laaser’s (in this issue)). In fact, technologies are never neutral as during the design phase ‘scripts’ are imprinted into them (Wajcman, 2006) which give rise to a range of particular affordances that constrain the possible uses to which a given technology can be put (Hutchby, 2001). Therefore, once designed and implemented, a technology will enable and constrain the range of options available to employers and thus shape the balance of coercion and legitimation utilised by a firm. However, these scripts result from political struggles (Wajcman, 2006) and will be shaped by the networks and institutions in which technologies are embedded and thus determine the power resources available to different actors.

**Embeddedness**

In Economic Sociology the concept of embeddedness originates from the work of Polanyi (1944; 1957) and refers to his understanding of economic activity as always ‘embedded and enmeshed in institutions economic and noneconomic’ (Polanyi, 1957: 250); it also refers to his view that, to varying degrees, some institutions act to decommodify ‘fictitious commodities’ (i.e. labour, land and money) by insulating them from market exchange (see Wood et al., 2019). Granovetter (1985) elaborated the former aspect of Polanyi’s (1957) use
of embeddedness, highlighting the role of networks in regulating exchange via interpersonal relations. According to Granovetter (1985) interpersonal relations are central to enabling exchange as trust is necessary for overcoming bilateral information asymmetries regarding quality and skills (i.e. people prefer to do business with those they know or they have heard about via personal sources and communication). Granovetter’s (1985) approach to embeddedness is helpful for understanding workplace regimes as it provides a means to go beyond workplace relations and the labour processes, and locate them within the ‘full circuit of capital’ by which profit is realised via sales in the market (Kelly, 1985; Thompson, 1990: 103). Such a use of embeddedness also bears some resemblance to Thompson and Laaser’s (in this issue) call to understand control regimes as embedded within accumulation and regulatory regimes.

Granovetter’s (1985) approach to embeddedness forms the basis for what Global Production Network (GPN) researchers term network embeddedness, and highlights how exchange is shaped by the architecture, durability and stability of relations between networked actors (Bair, 2008; Hess, 2004; Hess and Coe, 2006; Smith et al., 2018). Moreover, these networks touch down and are anchored in specific places and, thus, come into contact with the social dynamics that already exist in those places, leading to societal embeddedness (the shaping of exchange by the institutional, social and cultural heritage and context in which it takes place). Wood et al. (2019), building on Polanyi (1944), use the term normative embeddedness to differentiate embeddedness within institutions that specifically decommodifies labour, the environment and money from societal embeddedness generally. Interestingly, while Granovetter’s account has become central to the field of social network analysis, it is actually Burawoy’s (1979; 1985) explication of workplace regimes which Granovetter identifies as a leading example of this approach. This is due to Burawoy’s analysis of networks being ‘informal, and… embedded in a much larger structure and
discussion about politics and the economy and the culture and the history of these systems’ (Granovetter in Krippner et al., 2004: 116). Networks are important as they act to connect micro and macro levels of analysis but ‘by themselves only have modest explanatory value in most situations’ (Granovetter, 2017: 5). Granovetter (2005) relates the embedding of workers within informal networks to systems of control based on legitimation. Meanwhile, Burawoy (2010) has also considered the normative (dis)embeddedness of workplace regimes.

The above then suggests that studying workplace regimes requires consideration of how technology is embedded within both inter-firm and inter-worker networks that touch down in places that anchor them within social institutions (especially institutions that have the potential to decommodify labour). Embeddedness shapes technological affordances because it determines the power resources available to different actors engaged in struggles over the design, implementation and use of technologies. An embedded understanding of technology also avoids deterministic reductionism whereby a particular type of embeddedness or level of analysis is privileged as an explanatory factory. As Granovetter (2017: 5) argues, a more complex and nuanced analysis is necessary which seeks to understand how different forms of embeddedness connect at micro, meso, and macro levels. There are two reasons why reductionism is ill suited for workplace regime analysis, the first is that path dependence means that a particular embeddedness can lead to contingencies that exercise lasting effects on technological affordances (Arthur, 1989; Granovetter, 2017; MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). The second is that embeddedness is relational rather than additive, this means that an outcome cannot be predicted by simply calculating the cumulative effects of embeddedness because the effects are altered by how different forms of embeddedness interact in combination with each other and particular technologies. In other words, the interaction of different forms of embeddedness and technology can have alternative consequences at different workplaces. For example, automated recruitment
technologies will have very different effects depending on the nature of the recruitment networks and social norms the technology is embedded within. For example, Edwards (in press) discusses the contrasting importance of Catholicism in shaping workplace regimes in 1970s Belfast and Liverpool.

To further illustrate the above conceptual discussion it is useful to consider some empirical examples of the embeddedness of technology in shaping workplace regimes. Let us begin with inter-firm network embeddedness. Bélanger and Edwards (2007: 725) highlight how the deployment of highly computerised smelter technology by a firm (see Sewell, 1998) had the potential to foster coercive workplace relations but actually gave rise to practices related to legitimation (e.g. limited surveillance, union recognition and collective bargaining). This outcome is argued to be a result of the smelter technology requiring durable and stable network relations with other firms which insulated workers from competition. However, where firms lack strong durable ties with other firms in the supply chains or where those relations are asymmetrical and driven by a more powerful buyer firm, new technologies are more likely to give rise to coercive management practices as firms seek to rapidly respond to changes in customer demands (Anner, 2015; Bélanger and Edwards, 2007; Delbridge, 1998; Dörflinger et al., 2021; Mendonça and Adâscăliței 2020; Newsome et al., 2015; Pun et al. 2020). As Dörflinger et al., (2021: 132) summarise ‘where the… [firm] holds a weak position in relation to its customers, it must accept unfavourable terms, which it then passes on to workers.’ Additionally, when embedded in inter-firm networks marked by low-trust competitive market relations or within liberalised capital markets, firms will be reluctant to invest in expensive new machinery that reduce capital mobility and thus require greater use of legitimation (Bélanger and Edwards, 2007; Godard, 2004; Littler, 1990, Thompson, 2003).

Turning to the embeddedness of technology within inter-worker network relations. Dörflinger et al. (2021) demonstrate that significant associational power provided by trade
unions at a Belgian warehouse they studied resulted in greater use of legitimation relative to warehouses owned by the same firm and operating the same technical systems of lean logistics in the Netherlands and Germany. Additionally, inter-worker network relations can shape worker bargaining power by enhancing worker mobility power (Alberti, 2014; Smith, 2006; Smith and Pun, 2007) as information about job opportunities is diffused through social networks (Granovetter, 1974; 2017). Bélanger and Edwards (2007) underline the importance of a further aspect of worker network relations by demonstrating the potential for strong durable ethnic bonds in inter-worker/manager networks to insulate workers from market conditions. Pun and Smith (2007) emphasise the similar role of kinship networks in enabling neo-paternalistic control strategies. Furthermore, Granovetter and Tilly (1988) argue that in small firms family ties often distinguish those workers who face loyalty systems and those who face systems of coercion and surveillance. Finally, Wood et al. (2016) demonstrate the importance of network embeddedness for shedding light on how workplace technologies are shaped by household relations.

In addition to network embeddedness there are also numerous examples of the importance of societal embeddedness in explaining workplace regimes. Societal embeddedness refers to the ways in which actors are influenced and shaped by the institutional, social and cultural heritage and context in which they are located (Hess, 2004; Hess and Coe, 2006; Smith et al., 2018). From Dunlop (1958) to Burawoy (1985) and beyond, institutional regulation has been seen as a central factor shaping coercion and legitimation in the workplace. In particular, many researchers in the fields of industrial relations and labour sociology have highlighted the influence of ‘normative embeddedness’ (Wood et al., 2019); that is, the embeddedness of labour within institutions that have the potential to decommodify labour (welfare states, laws that support trade unions and enhance their strength, collective bargaining and minimum labour standards etc.). Bélanger and
Edwards (2007) underline the role of formal regulative institutions in creating the conditions for legitimation by protecting firms from pressures in the market. Likewise, Doellgast et al., (2016) highlight the importance of such institutions in taking labour costs out of competition and thus increasing the bargaining power of labour. Dörflinger et al. (2021) highlight the importance of regulatory institutions in shaping struggle over the use of technologies through enhancing the associational power of workers.

However, the use of technology in the labour process is not only embedded within formal institutions, but also within informal cultural rules, norms and meanings (Scott, 2014). For instance, Smith et al. (2018) demonstrate the influence of Soviet era wage setting norms and practices in shaping the workplace regimes found in Moldovan clothing production. Particularly important are gender norms that can shape bargaining power – sometimes in unexpected ways (Baglioni, 2016; 2021; Baglioni and Mezzadri, 2020; Burawoy, 1985; Bélanger and Edwards 2007; Ikeler, 2016; Milkman, 1987; Pun et al., 2020; Smith and Pun, 2007). Equally important, however, is the embeddedness of work within social constructions of race. For instance, Sallaz (2009) highlights the role of race in shaping workplace regimes in the Casino industries of Nevada and South Africa, while Burawoy (1972) examines the impact of race in shaping the workplace regime of the Zambian mining sector. Furthermore, normative constructions of gender and race are often intertwined with conceptions of skill (Cockburn, 1983; Wajcman, 2009) and thus influence workers’ bargaining power (Bélanger and Edwards 2007; Dörflinger et al., 2021; Granovetter and Tilly, 1988; Pun, 2005).

In summary, extant research emphasises that technologies have scripts and affordances that result from embedded political struggles over their design, implementation and use. Particularly important forms of network embeddedness are highlighted as being firm–firm relations (e.g. product markets, capital markets, supply chains) and worker–worker (including managers) relations, for example, trade unions, recruitment networks, kinship and
ethnic bonds, and households). Especially important forms of societal embeddedness are formal institutions that decommodify labour (e.g. welfare states, supports for trade unions, collective bargaining and minimum labour standards), as well as informal institutions (e.g. gender norms, constructions of race, conceptions of skill). While embedded technology shapes the balance of coercion and legitimation in a workplace by affording and constraining the agency of various actors, this balance can, nevertheless, be achieved via different blends of regulative, normative and cultural cognitive workplace institutions. As the next section demonstrates, however, a consequence of the use of different blends of workplace institutions to achieve the same balance of coercion and legitimation is that workplaces within the same regime (i.e. similar use of coercion and legitimation) can exhibit very different workplace politics (i.e. the processes and interactions by which actors within an organisation attempt to assert their interests through conflict, resistance, pragmatism and accommodation).

**Investigating workplace regimes at PartnershipCo and ConflictCo**

That the embeddedness of technology gives rise to workplace regimes can be further evidenced by drawing on a recent ethnographic study of the retail industry (Wood, 2016a; 2016b, 2018; 2020). The starting point for this research was the increasing prevalence of on-demand scheduling technology. This technology inputs weather forecasts, online traffic, public holidays, in-store promotions and previous sales, as well as real-time customer flows captured by sensors in shops and individual-level sales, to algorithmically predict shopper footfall. The sophisticated modelling of demand makes the close matching of labour supply (including real-time adjustments) to demand highly attractive to employers (see also, Wood, 2021).

This research investigated the impact of scheduling technology on the workplace regimes of two retail firms: ConflictCo in the US and PartnershipCo in the UK and
uncovered a workplace regime termed *flexible despotism*. In such regimes, control is achieved via workforce flexibility. In Chun’s (2001) original exposition of this regime type, flexibility was found to be achieved numerically via temporary and agency workers. Chun argued that the use of contingent workers enabled control to operate via the generation of insecurity. Importantly, Chun (2001) demonstrated that it was not only contingent workers themselves who were directly disciplined by their ease of replacement but also core workers who feared they might end up in a similar position to their temporary colleagues. However, at *ConflictCo* and *PartnershipCo* flexibility was mainly achieved temporally via flexible scheduling. Thus, control instead operated via the combination of two practices inherent to the on-demand scheduling of workers. The first practice was ‘flexible discipline’, whereby managers would arbitrarily discipline workers not deemed flexible, productive, or obedient enough by cutting their hours or altering their schedules. The second was the granting of ‘schedule gifts’, whereby workers were forced to beg managers for more hours and better schedules which created an emotional debt binding workers to work hard for their manager through a sense of gratitude and obligation.

However, the role of on-demand scheduling technology in enabling coercion and legitimation in this way resulted from the technology’s embeddedness. Both firms were embedded within similarly competitive domestic product markets (increasingly heightened by the growth of e-commerce and the resulting entry of new players into the industry). Additionally, the two firms had comparable dominant positions within buyer-led supply chains while both the US and UK economies were financialised with liberalised capital markets. However, *PartnershipCo* had, for many years, been insulated from competition by virtue of its vast landownership which restricted its competitors’ ability to build superstores. But by the time the fieldwork was undertaken, this advantage had largely eroded due to the growth of e-commerce radically reducing the benefits of large hypermarkets.
In terms of worker–worker network relations, union density was unusually high at PartnershipCo – over 60% nationally (compared to 13% across the retail sector). At ConflictCo, a small minority of workers had joined a worker association that had, nevertheless, been effective at challenging ConflictCo’s practices via social media-facilitated strikes, protests and civil disobedience, as well as legal campaigns. As a result, workers at both firms could draw on some associational power to limit control via conventional despotism i.e. threats to fire workers. In terms of ethnic and kinship bonds, ConflictCo ensured it had access to a large disposable pool of dependent workers by placing its stores in localities with high levels of underemployment. Given the dynamics of social disadvantage in California (where the US fieldwork was undertaken), this resulted in a highly ethnically diverse workforce with large numbers of African American, Latino and Filipino workers.

Turning to societal embeddedness, the UK welfare state was less restrictive than that in the US, which meant the dependency of workers at ConflictCo was significantly greater. Since the 1980s, trade unions in the UK have faced many institutional and legal hurdles, nevertheless, the US workers at ConflictCo faced an environment that was drastically more hostile to unions with workplace certification elections having become extremely one-sided – with just one in twenty union campaigns ending in the signing of a collective agreement (Lichtenstein, 2009). Indeed, US employers exhibit much greater cultural hostility towards trade unions than their UK counterparts (Friedman, 2013). Likewise, minimum labour standards were better in the UK, particularly with regards to the minimum wage – which was significantly lower for ConflictCo workers. Finally, work at both firms was heavily shaped by gender norms and conceptions of skill with a heavily gendered division of labour: checkouts were mainly staffed by older women while restocking was undertaken by male and younger workers. However, when the shops were busy this divide was blurred by functional flexibility. Indeed Ikeler’s (2016) detailed account of the gender division at Target in the US
demonstrates how retail is shaped by the continuing ‘sex-typing’ of emotional labour. Ikeler highlights that female workers tend to be allocated to clothes sales even when they request to work in other departments, such as electronics, or to more interactive roles such as the operation of checkouts. Male workers, on the other hand, tend to be allocated to the better paid manual work such as stock and logistics or departments such as electronics which are seen as requiring technical knowledge.

A consequence of on-demand scheduling technology being embedded within gendered norms of work was the increased problems that employer-driven flexible scheduling caused the many female workers with caring responsibilities. This heightened the effectiveness of employer-driven flexible scheduling as a disciplinary mechanism and created a workforce with an even greater need to plead for schedule gifts. As noted above, ConflictCo’s recruitment strategy led to an ethnically diverse workforce who were also embedded within a history marked by slavery, segregation, and the civil rights movement. As a result the idiom of slavery was drawn upon a number of times to describe control mechanisms and to frame perceived injustices. Ethnicity did not seemingly loom as large in the workplace dynamics at PartnershipCo despite ethnic minorities being over-represented in London sales and customer service jobs (Wood, 2016a). None of the black or Asian informants at PartnershipCo raised race as being central to control and idioms connected to slavery did not feature in descriptions of the workplace. However, the research approach was limited in its ability to uncover such dynamics by the researcher’s positionality and embodied biography (Wood, 2016a; 2020). Therefore, more research is needed to understand how embeddedness within constructions of race and ethnicity potentially shaped these workplace regimes. Such research is especially important as Storer et al. (2020) use survey data from over 30,000 US retail workers to document the racialised nature of flexible discipline.
Nevertheless, accepting that further research is needed to uncover the role of race in shaping these regimes, this research demonstrates how investigating the embeddedness of technology within networks and societal institutions can explain the use of coercion and legitimation in the workplace. At ConflictCo and PartnershipCo, control was achieved through similar patterns in the application of coercion (flexible discipline) and effective legitimation (schedule gifts). On the surface, these cases appeared very different but on closer investigation actually exhibited remarkable commonalities in their network embeddedness (in terms of position within product and capital markets, supply chains, and worker-worker relations) and societal embeddedness (i.e. limited institutional support for trade unions and gendered divisions of labour).

However, despite these commonalities, there were major differences in the workplace institutions that facilitated the similar use of coercion and legitimation. Again, an in-depth account of embeddedness and the resultant path dependence can explain why this was the case. PartnershipCo had insulated itself from competition for decades through the purchase and control of land. While this dominance had waned in recent years due to the growth of e-commerce, it had left a legacy in terms of a trade union. The company’s dominance in its supply chain and domestic market had made any adverse effect of a trade union on profits more tolerable and thus the company was supportive of a trade union as a means of improving management performance. At one point, the firm considered derecognition of its union but instead decided to pursue a ‘partnership’ approach with the existing union.

Interestingly, PartnershipCo’s US subsidiary was embedded in a far more competitive market and, in contrast, was very hostile to trade unions. In the UK, PartnershipCo’s toleration of a trade union had been reinforced over the previous decade by statutory labour standards (especially the introduction of a national minimum wage) that took some labour costs out of competition. These factors set the workplace regime at PartnershipCo upon a
path towards the use of regulative institutional elements provided by trade unions, employment contracts, and rationalised grievance and disciplinary procedures. It is important to note, however, that these regulative institutions did not alter the use of flexible discipline and schedule gifts as the main means of control at PartnershipCo.

In contrast, ConflictCo made much greater use of cultural-cognitive institutional elements, principally rituals, propaganda, and framing. While control was similarly achieved via the combination of flexible discipline and schedule gifts, these different workplace institutional elements gave rise to markedly different workplace politics at the two firms. ConflictCo having by far the more conflictual and reactionary workforce relations than PartnershipCo, which was more overtly progressive and harmonious. Therefore, while both regimes constituted flexible despotism the introduction of the modifiers progressive and reactionary are necessary in order to recognise the existence of differing workplace institutional elements and the divergent workplace politics this gives rise to. That workplace regimes may exhibit different workplace politics due to differing blends of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive workplace institutional elements has frequently been missed in the extant literature and mistakenly taken as evidence of different workplace regimes.

A further consequence of the understanding of workplace regimes outlined above is that firms within the same industry, sector, or even the same nation, will not necessarily share the same workplace regime if they differ significantly in the technology they use or the ways in which that technology is embedded in networks and societal institutions. Conversely, commonalities in workplace regimes may be found at firms in different industries, sectors, and countries, which resemble one another in their embedded use of technology. For example, Dörflinger et al. (2021) detail warehouses in the Netherlands and Germany in which the similar use of on-demand technology and embeddedness gives rise to workplace regimes.
that resemble those of PartnershipCo and ConflictCo. Meanwhile, Ikeler (2016) and Price (2016) also document comparable practices of flexible discipline at other retailers in the US and Australia, respectively (although they do not mention schedule gifts). Yet, O’Brady (2021) documents how two New York City (a market where ConflictCo did not operate) retailers differed from flexible despotism in providing workers with minimum weekly hour guarantees of 16 hours and 21 hours as well as rights to limited weekend work. The fact that O’Brady (2021) finds a less despotic regime than that characterised by ConflictCo operating within the same sector and country can be explained by the unusual manner in which the scheduling technology was embedded within worker-worker networks. Scheduling technology at O’Brady’s (2021: 13) cases was embedded within networks marked by very high levels of workplace trade union membership and ‘‘wall-to-wall’’ bargaining coverage’. The density of these relations was enhanced via the union’s use of a ‘sophisticated technological system to reach its members through social media and text messages’ (O’Brady, 2021: 13). Additionally, strong network connections existed with community groups, other unions and Non-Governmental Organisations. While workers at ConflictCo used similar technologies and were able to leverage some associational power in so doing, they were, nonetheless, embedded in much weaker inter-worker network relations to begin with. Thus, the effect upon the balance in coercion and legitimation was more limited. Likewise, O’Brady’s (2021) research also emphasises how societal embeddedness influences the balance of coercion and legitimation in retail regimes finding that the Ghent welfare system in Sweden significantly shifts the regimes towards legitimation by boosting workers’ bargaining power. Dörflinger et al. (2021) likewise find that the Belgian Ghent system has similar effect on warehouse regimes.

In summary, diversity in workplace regimes is expected when the embeddedness of technology within networks and institutions leads to different scripts being imprinted within a
shared technology. Therefore, the existence of variations to dominant regimes is an empirical question and exceptions to the norm are to be expected due to contingencies and path dependence inherent to technologies and embeddedness. As we have seen while flexible despotism may be widespread there are also exceptions to it but these can be explained with reference to the specificity of their embeddedness (see also Thompson and Laaser’s (in this issue) discussion of the global call centre industry). The existence of diversity in workplace regimes would only threaten the core of Burawoy’s framework if they made identification of historical tendencies in the use legitimation and coercion at the level of world system impossible. However, given that generally the capitalist core, with the possible exception of Scandinavia, has witnessed the growth of product market competition, lengthening of supply chains capital market liberalisation, increasingly restrictive welfare states, and declining trade union membership, we might well expect regularities in the use of coercion and legitimation to emerge in firms that deploy on-demand technologies that are becoming ubiquitous in many sectors. One example, being the tendency for similarly embedded on-demand scheduling technology to give rise to flexible despotism (Chun, 2001; Wood, 2020). The likelihood of commonalities in the use of legitimation and coercion is enhanced by the well-documented existence of coercive, mimetic and normative pressures towards organisational isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Indeed organisational isomorphism is recognised within Economic Sociology as resulting in ‘a remarkable similarity in the structural features of organisational forms operating within the same organisational field’ (Scott, 2014: 184).

Conclusion

In conclusion, by drawing upon theories of technology and embeddedness developed by STS scholars and economic sociologists, this article has elaborated and defended the value of Burawoy’s (1979; 1985; 2009; 2010; 2012) workplace regimes framework. However, the
argument presented above extends Burawoy’s framework by highlighting the role of embedded technology in generating patterns in legitimation and coercion in the workplace. In defending Burawoy’s framework the article maintains that the identification of granular differences in the use of legitimation and coercion by individual firms would only invalidate the core of Burawoy’s framework if these made it impossible to identify general historical shifts in the tendency of firms to use coercion vs. legitimation at the macro level of world system. In fact, variation in regimes is expected at the micro level due to the contingencies and path dependency inherent to an embedded understandings of technological scripts and affordances. In line with this argument the article introduces an important distinction that has not previously been fully realised: within the same regime type, different blends of workplace institutional elements (regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive) can be used to achieve the same balance in coercion and legitimation, and this has the potential to give rise to divergent workplace politics.

The article has, therefore, sought to develop a conceptual menu for understanding both patterns in control and the dynamics of workplace politics. The elements that make up this menu can be understood as the analytical building blocks that shape legitimation, coercion, conflict and quiescence at work. Based on extant research this conceptual menu includes the following elements: the technology used in the labour process; the embeddedness of that technology in networks (inter-firm, that is, product markets, capital markets, supply chains and worker–worker relations, that is labour movements, recruitment networks, kinship and ethnic bonds, and households); as well as both formal institutions (such as, welfare states, supports for trade unions, collective bargaining and minimum labour standards) and informal institutions (such as gender norms, constructions of race, conceptions of skill) that shape the design, implementation and use of technology. It is held that doing so enables researchers to reveal how control is achieved through the combination of coercion
and legitimation but alone it is insufficient for explaining the dynamics that give rise to workplace politics. Understand the dynamics of workplace politics requires bringing regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive institutional workplace elements into the analysis so as to account for the practices and meaning-making that animate politics on the shopfloor. This requires investigating workplace institutional elements, such as employment contracts, disciplinary and grievance procedures, trade unions and collective agreements, and rules for internal labour allocation, pay expectations, gender and racial dynamics, roles, rituals, propaganda, framing, work games, teamwork cultures, and schedule gifts. These elements all act as social facts in the workplace and as such shape organisational life. Only when the interaction of these various elements are accounted for is it possible to fully understand the specific political practices and processes that emerge daily as people go about making their living.

Notes

1) The approach developed in this article intersects with efforts in Economic Geography to identify ‘labour control regimes’. This work is invaluable in demonstrating that labour control is shaped by embeddedness (Anner, 2015; Baglioni, 2018; 2021; Smith et al., 2018). However, as a consequence of attempting to move the analytical focus away from internal workplace dynamics (Baglioni and Mezzadri, 2020) the labour control regime literature tends to under-appreciate the role of technology and the role of workplace institutions in shaping relatively autonomous workplace politics.

2) It is sometimes missed that Burawoy (1979) is articulating a Marxist theory that seeks to account for working class quiescence. As Marxist accounts of class hold that classes are defined relationally by their distinctive relations to the means of production, by definition, different classes will experience divergent workplace
regimes. In this article we focus upon the workplace regimes faced by the working class, understood as workers lacking scarce skills and expertise or managerial authority (Wright, 2000). However, doing so does not mean that understanding managerial and middle class regimes is unimportant. But as Granovetter and Tilly (1988) point out such employees are usually integrated into systems of control that are far more loyalty based than those of their subordinates or colleagues who are easier or cheaper to replace.

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