

Thinking with and beyond Michael Burawoy: Labour and Ideology in the Age of Algorithmic Management

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Introduction

Michael Burawoy (1947-2025) is one of the most significant figures in labour process theory and sociology of labour, whose work reshaped the analysis of how work and ideology intertwine within the capitalist mode of production. His empirical work, underpinned by a historical account of the transformation of the capitalist workplace, demonstrated how consent is produced within the labour process through relations that coordinate the interests of workers and management.

Burawoy's work remains a central point of reference for labour sociologists till this day. In the following sections, Burawoy's key contribution to labour process theory will be outlined, and it will be asked whether his account of the interplay between consent and coercion remains relevant for understanding the algorithmic transformation of the contemporary workplace.

In broad terms, the introduction of AI in the workplace does not result in a "consent-driven" labour process of the kind Burawoy described in US factory production in the late 1970s. Instead, algorithmic management intensifies surveillance, operates through opaque decision-making processes, and increases work intensity and accident risks (Cant, 2020). More broadly, it deepens the separation between conception and execution, as it is built around the "originary accumulation of technical intelligence as the dispossession of knowledge from labour" (Pasquinelli, 2023: 94) through extensive data extraction. In this sense, it has been characterised as a form of digital Taylorism (Minotakis & Faras, 2024; Yilmaz, 2025), in which the coercive power of management is augmented by new technologies. However, this transformation unfolds within a historical conjuncture marked by the fragmentation and individualisation of the workforce (largely anticipated by Burawoy), giving rise to new forms of the "manufacturing of consent" that are largely grounded in these developments. As will be shown, it is precisely at this point that Burawoy's analytical framework retains its relevance. Furthermore, this presentation highlights the need to go beyond Burawoy's limitations and examine how transformations in the labour process are linked to broader ideological and cultural changes; to achieve this, media theory is brought into dialogue with labour process accounts.

Labour Process Theory and the Question of Control

At the heart of labour process theory lies the problem of control. Capital does not directly purchase labour but labour power, whose transformation into actual labour and surplus is inherently uncertain, carrying a degree of indeterminacy. Braverman (1998:39) highlights this contradiction in the heart of labour power in the following manner:

“The coin of labor has its *obverse side*: in purchasing labor power that can do much, he [the capitalist] is at the same time purchasing an undefined quality and quantity. What he buys is infinite in potential, but in its realization it is limited by the subjective state of the workers, by their previous history, by the general conditions under which they work as well as the particular conditions of the enterprise, and by the technical setting of their labor”.

As a result, capital must continuously develop mechanisms to direct, evaluate and discipline labour in order to achieve the desired rate of surplus value extraction in a steady manner. Control is therefore not a static condition but a contested and historically variable process, a constant point of contention between workers. Woodcock (2017:94) conceptualises control as a moving frontier, constituted through struggle.

“On one side is management, and on the opposing side workers. The ‘frontier of control’ is like the invisible border between the two. Skirmishes can push this border further onto one side or the other. Attempts to do this provoke a response, while gains in one area can be lost in others. The location of the frontier is not a given, rather it is in flux and constituted through struggle”

Historically, this control has taken different forms. Early 19th century capitalism relied heavily on direct coercion, what Burawoy later described as *despotic regimes* and Friedman (1977) described as *direct control*. These were characterised by close supervision, strict discipline, and the constant threat of unemployment. However, as workers’ struggles intensified, the capitalist mode of production adapted accordingly; institutional arrangements stabilised labour markets and control in the workplace became more complex. Coercion remained in the background but new, more elaborate forms of management were established in the postwar period. It is within this context that Burawoy developed his understanding of what he called *regimes of production*, historically determinate configurations of consent and coercion that mobilise workers. Burawoy proceeded to deliver seminal work in the regimes of production in factories in the USA, newly independent Zambia and in the socialist Poland in the early 1980s.

The Production of Consent

In *Manufacturing Consent* (1979) and *The Politics of Production* (1985), Burawoy argued that, as capitalist organisation of the labour process develops alongside class struggle, direct coercion becomes insufficient as a mechanism of control. Instead, it must be supplemented by ideological and organisational forms that actively secure workers’ participation. Noting the influence of labour market safeguard, Burawoy (1979:27) noted that “the wage becomes increasingly independent of the individual expenditure of effort. Accordingly, coercion must be supplemented by the organization of consent”.

In that vein, Burawoy was critical of Marx (1976) and Braverman (1998) for their focus on the despotic character of capital’s control in the workplace, arguing that in the postwar period, consent is the dominant form of control, while coercion persists but is less visible. Consent is produced and reproduced through the establishment of *ideological relations in production*; a variation of Althusser’s theory on ideological apparatuses, focused in the workplace. Through complex internal labour markers, workers are integrated into a bureaucratic-hierarchical organisation that, nonetheless, presents them with certain choices as well as individualised career paths and prospects. Within this context, ideology needs to

be understood as a “lived experience” and through concrete choices and potential variations in production, workers are interpellated as active subjects in the workplace and experience a relative autonomy from management (Burawoy, 1979:223).

To better exemplify this notion through his own research, Burawoy speaks of the “games” that workers play and how they are tied to the piece rate system; a method of payment where workers are paid according to the number of units they produce, rather than by the hour. Workers engaged with the piece rate system in the form of a game “in which operators attempt to achieve levels of production that earn incentive pay, in other words, anything over 100 percent. The precise target that each operator aims at is established on an individual basis, varying with job, machine, experience, and so on. Some are satisfied with 125 percent, while others are in a foul mood unless they achieve 140 percent — the ceiling imposed and recognized by all participants” (Burawoy, 1979:51); achieving the desired goal and respective bonus was called “making out” by the workers and was the parameters of this game were communicated to new workers, Burawoy himself included. Foremen participated as agents of the games, assisting workers to “make out”, while also engaging in output restriction when workers considered the defined rate untenable (Burawoy, 1979:80).

Therefore, workers took for granted the larger context (the capitalist organisation of production, the piece rate system, foremen’ surveillance) in a similar way as players accept the rules of a game and try to navigate and exercise their (limited) autonomy, by making decisions within a given environment. Through this process, an individualistic ideology of production is established and antagonism is displaced and transferred among workers, which discipline those which exceed the upper limit and sometimes antagonise among themselves for access to machines and posts that provide easier pathways to making out (Burawoy, 1979:70). In this context, exploitation and productive relations are obscured and interests between workers and foremen are coordinated. More importantly, the game of making-out is an ideological practice that generates consent in and of itself, regardless of economic incentives. As Burawoy (1979:85) notes:

“It is not so much the monetary incentive that concretely coordinates the interests of management and workers but rather the play of the game itself, which generates a common interest in the outcome and in the game’s continuity. Any game that provides distinctive rewards to the players establishes a common interest among the players...as games encompass the entire labor process, the value system to which they give rise, will prevail on the shop floor”.

Therefore, incentives that relate to relieving boredom, self-fulfillment and, overall, making work meaningful are introduced and workers, while cooperating in practice, simultaneously develop an individualistic ethos and exploitation is mystified.. This is the broader outline of the environment that Burawoy calls *hegemonic regime of production* where consent prevails.

Externally, institutions such as welfare systems, labour market regulation, and access to consumption reduce workers’ dependence on immediate coercion. Internally, workplace practices generate forms of engagement that make labour meaningful. Burawoy’s ethnographic research shows how workers participate in “games” structured around productivity targets and bonuses. These games create a sense of achievement and shared purpose, masking the exploitative nature of production.

Burawoy's Limitations

Burawoy's work carries certain limitations, as it partly reflects the Fordist–Taylorist configuration of the post-war period and the specific characteristics of the workplace in which his research was conducted.

In the first instance, Burawoy theorised the dynamics of an era just as it was coming to an end. By examining the stabilising effects of regulated external and internal labour markets, he concluded that consent had become the dominant form of control, with capital relying less on overt coercion. However, the post-1973 crisis environment and the subsequent rise of neoliberal politics introduced renewed pressures on labour, expressed through sustained attacks on trade unions and collective agreements. This shift, combined with the relocation of manufacturing overseas and the expansion of precarious employment, marked a re-emergence of coercion within the labour process. Burawoy (2012) himself later acknowledged this limitation, critically revisiting his earlier work:

I did not anticipate the political offensive against labor, marked by Reagan's election as President. In 1981 striking air-traffic controllers were dismissed by President Reagan and non-union employees were brought in to replace them. The attack on the air traffic controllers and their union coincided with Reagan appointees to the National Labor Relations Board, giving it a pro-management majority that legitimated offensives against unions.

Secondly, and perhaps more fundamentally, Burawoy leaves his project of linking ideology and labour incomplete. His framework is based on an understanding of the capitalist society as a “structured totality”, noting that the constitutive parts are linked while retaining a relative autonomy. Methodologically, he argues for a refocus on the workplace and its configuration as the starting point for any comprehensive analysis. As he states (Burawoy, 1979:202)

“the state, the school, the family, culture, and the personality are not unimportant, but their importance can be assessed only by taking the transformed labor process as one's point of departure”.

However, in practice he treats what he calls the “political and ideological *apparatuses of production*” (Burawoy, 1985:8) in isolation from other institutions and the corresponding ideological formations of his era; these connections are left underdeveloped. For example, if an individualistic ethos has been on the rise among workers since the 1970s, how does this relate to the broader ideological shift marked by the rise of the New Right in the 1980s? Burawoy thus appears as the other side of the coin of mainstream accounts of neoliberalism, which treat individualism as an abstract idea detached from transformations in the production process. Reframing the methodological hypothesis posed by Burawoy, one could argue that the “point of departure” is of limited importance, whether it is the media, the family, the educational system, or the labour process itself; what matters is making the journey in both directions, so that each side informs the other. A preliminary sketch of what that would look like, is provided in the following sections, examining neoliberal transformations and the rise of algorithmic management in the workplace.

From Fordism to Neoliberalism: Changing Regimes of Production

Following Harvey (2007:10,17) who suggested to treat neoliberalism as an effort by the capitalist class to relieve itself by the burdens of the postwar “class compromise between capital and labour” in order to achieve “the restoration of class power”, facilitates moving beyond accounts that understand neoliberalism as a set of ideas or seminal political figures.

As a “class power restoration project”, neoliberalism aimed to weaken organised labour, restructure production, deregulate markets, and reorient the state towards the promotion of competition and capital accumulation. Rather than signifying a retreat of the state, neoliberalism involved its active transformation into an institution geared towards creating and safeguarding market relations, while simultaneously restricting the capacity of subordinate classes to shape economic and political outcomes.

At the ideological and cultural level, neoliberalism advanced a parallel process of individualisation and fragmentation. Collective identities rooted in class, trade union membership and shared political projects were progressively displaced by an emphasis on individual responsibility and entrepreneurial self-realisation. Through “shocking” media representations of crime and disorder, social problems increasingly came to be interpreted as the result of individual choices (Hall et al., 1978). The fragmentation of society was both symbolic and practical (through the dismantling of post-war class compromises) and facilitated the establishment of the market as the primary organising principle not only of the economy but of society as a whole. As a result, institutions that had previously operated according to different social and political logics were increasingly reorganised around the imperatives of competition and efficiency (Brown, 2003).

In particular, the neoliberal transformation of the workplace entails a revival of coercion that, as noted above, lies beyond Burawoy’s analytical framework. This coercion is no longer associated with the figure of the foreman, but is instead embedded in the restructuring of capitalist production at the local, national, and international level. Through this process, the rise of precarious labour relations and flexible, just-in-time production is closely linked to the relocation of industrial activity, the deindustrialisation of former centres of production, and the industrialisation of the Global South. Moody (2016) describes the economic-political rationale behind this transformation as capital’s urge to “escape the huge urban concentrations that had fostered unionism and high labor costs”. Therefore, coercion returned through the threat of unemployment, exacerbated by the weakened state of organised labour.

Furthermore, and long before the advent of social media, the above transformations are facilitated by the rise of digital technologies which enable the international coordination of production and the development of targeted marketing campaigns based on product diversification, abandoning the “one-size-fits-all” approach (Schiller, 2000). As Mattelart (2000:79) notes

The rise of electronic commerce and the economic model of “mass individualization” that this model theoretically presupposes, requires the enterprise to follow closely the behavior of consumers and reconstitute the catalog of their purchases in order to identify the moment when, for reasons to be determined, they ceased being loyal to a given product and buy another.

Therefore, fragmentation and individualisation are not merely symbolic-discursive processes but are materially grounded in the networking of the world and the initial processes of datafication that media scholars identified as coterminous with neoliberalism. This is of particular importance in order to understand algorithmic management as an expansion and modification of pre-existing neoliberal trends.

Burawoy and neoliberalism

Despite the limitations of his framework regarding coercion in the workplace, Burawoy in some respects anticipated the neoliberal transformation of work. His early emphasis on workers' individualistic orientations and their pursuit of a sense of accomplishment (Burawoy, 1979:84–85) foreshadowed later managerial practices. As capital increasingly disengages from collective bargaining with organised labour, emerging techniques of mobilisation and incentivisation target workers at the individual level, aiming to imbue work with meaning and the promise of self-fulfilment. Lordon (2014:51-52), speaks of “regimes of mobilisation” (partly echoing Burawoy’s “regimes of production”), noting neoliberalism’s “quest for full alignment” of workers with capital’s desires which proceeds through “the production of *intrinsic joyful affects*...affects that are intransitive rather than ceded to objects outside the activity of wage labour itself”. Within this analytical framework, neoliberalism engages in production of desires (epithumogenesis), meaning

“The specific task of producing on a large scale desires that did not previously exist or that existed only in a minority of capitalist enclaves: desires for happy labour...desires for ‘fulfillment’ and ‘self-realisation’ in and through work” (Lordon, 2014:52).

While replacing the consent–coercion distinction with the binary of sad and joyful affects, Frédéric Lordon argues that neoliberal capitalism seeks to secure workers' energetic engagement with their tasks, granting limited forms of autonomy as part of a broader effort towards “full alignment”. Through a different trajectory, similar arguments have been advanced by theorists of culture and ideology who analyse contemporary work through the lens of media transformations.

Media scholars reach Lordon’s conclusions following a different trajectory, emphasising new forms of socialisation through digital media, pave the way to experience work as self realisation. Digitally mediated participation in differentiated and individualized consumption constitutes, at the same time, a condition for securing consent as well as a condition for enhancing workers' productivity. It habituates the working class to an individualized relationship with work, understood as a process of pursuing personal goals and satisfaction (Pleios, 2017). In the same vein, with regard to social media and platform labour in general, the logic of producing, using, and consuming content entails the combination of voluntary, creative work that provides satisfaction with waged and exploitative labor under new forms of surveillance (Briziarelli & Hoffmann 2019). In this sense, in the neoliberal era, the boundaries between consent and coercion become blurred, with neither pole disappearing entirely and, more importantly, the production of consent both presupposes and at the same time generates a fragmented, individualised workforce.

Algorithmic Management and the Transformation of the Labour Process

Algorithmic management represents an extension and transformation of the neoliberal regime of production. As Cant (2020:13) notes, algorithmic management refers to a process that seeks to “partially automate labour process supervision and coordination” (Cant, 2020: 13). In that sense, it relates to a quantitative transformation, foregrounding ‘new management models’ rooted in ‘hyper-connectedness’ where data plays a central role in decision making (Ponce Del Castillo, 2018). Finally, algorithmic surveillance is closely linked with pre-existing datafication and quantification processes; intensified surveillance is both a prerequisite and a result of integrating algorithms in the production process. What began as intensive data extraction from consumption patterns and broader production strategies now extends into the day-to-day labour process itself. By leveraging data-driven systems, algorithmic management intensifies individualisation and fragmentation, as workers are increasingly evaluated, and, in some cases, remunerated on an individual basis (Jarrett, 2022).

Contemporary literature often treats algorithmic management as co-terminous with platform labour. Unsurprisingly, platforms provide a fertile ground for the integration of algorithms as they are underpinned by a constant process of data collections, while actively seeking to evade labour law and minimise operational costs. Along with highly quantified workplaces like call centres, they represent ideal laboratories for capital to experiment with new forms of surveillance, evaluation and direction of the labour process (Woodcock, 2022).

However, algorithmic management is no longer confined to platform labour but is rapidly permeating labour processes across sectors. A 2025 OECD survey of over 6,000 firms reveals both the breadth and acceleration of its uptake, particularly in the United States and parts of Europe, while also exposing managerial anxieties around accountability, transparency, and worker wellbeing (Milanez et al., 2025). In a similar vein, the European Commission (2025) observes that, despite scarce data on affected workers in the EU-27, as many as a quarter of companies had already adopted such systems by 2023, primarily for surveillance and evaluation, with deployment expected to grow annually by 3% to 6% (European Commission, 2025: 6).

How is the interplay between consent and coercion transformed in the era of algorithms? Some preliminary directions can be explored so far, based on what has been discussed.

First of all, the notion of “games” (Burawoy, 1979) as a process that produces consent partly remains its importance. Algorithmically managed platform workers-riders, often try to “game the algorithm”, seeking, for example, the best position near a popular restaurant or trying to estimate different ratios of accepting/declining offers in order to get the best possible one (Cant, 2020). In this process, they enter a competition with their colleagues, trying to individually decipher the “system” governing their daily work. However, this opacity of the game is precisely what distinguishes this process from the games discussed by Burawoy, where workers engaged with transparent daily rates and clearly defined standards that structured the game itself. Moreover, algorithmic opacity and sudden changes in

remuneration can further intensify workers' frustration, particularly during periods of conflict with management (Minotakis & Faras, 2024; Woodcock, 2022). Consent in the algorithmic workplace is more precarious than it initially appears to be.

From a different perspective, and in an effort to situate algorithmic management within a broader media context, one could argue that practices of quantification and intensive surveillance are normalised through early socialisation on algorithmically mediated social media platforms. In this sense, the quantification of everyday life (often understood as a by-product of surveillance capitalism and data extraction, see Zuboff, 2019) extends beyond concerns about privacy and is closely tied to contemporary transformations of the labour process. Through smartwatches, smartphones, and other devices that monitor and seek to shape our sleep, diet, and exercise habits, individuals become habituated to a regime of "algorithmic supremacy," in which algorithms are treated as authoritative experts on our health and wellbeing as well as on evaluating our work performance; this represents a novel form of ideological mystification of exploitation.

Evidently, this process also needs to be treated as contradictory; trust in algorithmic decision-making, whether in the workplace or on social media platforms, is conditional and precarious, as users and workers come to realise that algorithms ultimately serve objectives that may diverge from their own.

In identifying the links between the "quantified worker" and the quantified and heavily surveilled social media user, research can bridge the gap between media and labour studies, relying on Burawoy's legacy while seeking to transcend it.

Conclusion

Burawoy's framework of regimes of production as historically specific configurations of consent and coercion in the workplace remains a useful, albeit limited, framework for understanding the capitalist labour process. The rise of algorithmic management introduces new dynamics that both extend and potentially destabilise the neoliberal regime of production built around promises of self-realisation through work and relative autonomy.

Surveillance and algorithmic opacity are the key issues in how consent and coercion are restructured. Underpinned by socialisation in an algorithmically moderated media environment, surveillance is potentially legitimised as algorithms claim to represent a superior form of knowledge in the workplace and beyond it. However, in periods of tension, algorithms are revealed to serve the objectives of management and they are also less adaptive than initially thought; this is exacerbated by their operation as "black boxes". In these cases, "algorithmic supremacy" may be turned on its head and surveillance experiences as a new form of digital despotism, as worker struggles in Amazon Fulfillment Centers often indicate (Struna & Reese, 2020). In this sense, consent and coercion may be best understood as a precarious continuum in the age of algorithmic management.

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