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Edwards, Paul; Hodder, Andy

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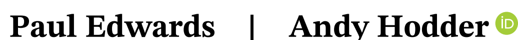
ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Conflict and control in the contemporary workplace: Structured antagonism revisited


Paul Edwards | **Andy Hodder**

Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

Correspondence
Andy Hodder, Reader in Employment Relations, Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK.
Email: a.j.hodder@bham.ac.uk

Abstract
The concept of a structured antagonism lying at the heart of the employment relationship is widely cited but also commonly misinterpreted. The paper firstly returns to the origin of the concept to locate its approach to workplace industrial relations. It forms part of labour process analysis, within which its distinct emphasis is two-fold: a focus on levels of analysis, such that the connections between the underlying antagonism and concrete behaviour can be interrogated; and a preference for comparative analysis, which allows the relevant processes to be identified. In this paper, we apply these themes to contemporary workplaces such as those in the gig economy. Recent research demonstrates substantial empirical and theoretical progress but can be taken further using the above two ideas. A methodological checklist emerges to guide a future programme of research.

> Without being aware of it himself, he was a thorough materialist. (Wilkie Collins, *The Haunted Hotel* [1889; Vintage edition, London, 2015, p. 138])

1 | INTRODUCTION

The concept of the 'structured antagonism' (SA) lying at the basis of the employment relationship was introduced in 1986, though its origin was in 1982 (Edwards, 1986; Edwards &

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Scullion, 1982). This paper reviews the usage of the concept since that time, for two reasons. Firstly, given widespread use of the term, we assess its application. We take the opportunity to spell out the core of the idea, for as pointed out elsewhere (Edwards, 2018) it has been misunderstood. A telling example of such misunderstanding is a Marxist-influenced treatment of power, which cites Edwards (1986) and also Burawoy (1979) as writers who address how class struggle is shaped by various specific forces, and not that struggle itself (Palermo, 2019). Burawoy of course went to great lengths to ground his ethnographic studies in a theory of the specificities of the capitalist labour relation, for example, its contrasts with feudalism; the SA concept (SAC) operated in a similar way. Secondly, we address the contemporary workplace and ask two questions. How far does the SAC, developed on the basis of manual jobs in factories, apply to very different settings such as the gig economy and help us to understand the nature of 'control' and 'resistance'? And how does it help us methodologically, that is, does it help us to ask specific questions in addition to saying that the SA is built into the labour relation as a constant?

The paper builds on extant labour process analysis (LPA). While LPA has led to vast amounts of research, two reviews in particular stand out. The first, by Thompson (2016), makes two main points. Firstly, he addresses accounts of control and resistance from a Foucauldian point of view, showing that they tend to treat any form of questioning of a current order as resistance so that 'too many things have been lumped and linked together' under the category (p. 107).[1] LPA, and within in the SAC, by contrast, locates resistance in the character of the employment relationship. Managers may in some sense resist what they are asked to do, but they are not engaged in struggle across the effort bargain, only in relation to the terms of their own role on one side of the divide. We thus treat resistance as some effort, not necessarily wholly conscious, to alter the terms of the reward-effort bargain in one's own favour, recognising that resistance is not a discrete 'thing' and that it emerges from a complex of work relations. Secondly, Thompson provides abundant evidence that contemporary workers engage in struggles over the terms of their labour and identifies new methods such as social media for organising to do so.[2] He does not, however, offer any heuristic methods to dissect specific cases. In other words, what questions should someone armed with the SAC ask in order to characterise and explain a workplace regime? We look at contemporary studies in light of this question.

The second review, by Joyce and Stuart (2021), lays out a labour process approach and provides a comprehensive survey of work in the gig or platform economy. They demonstrate, for example, how workers can respond to algorithmic control by deploying a form of output restriction—a long-noted practice (e.g., Lupton, 1963). They also draw out distinct features of control systems such as close methods of measurement and control and information asymmetries between workers and the platforms (e.g., Veen et al., 2020) and identify three forms of worker resistance. There are two limitations. Firstly, the authors say that LPA insists on a dynamic of control and resistance—a point that Foucauldians would gleefully identify as reflecting 'dualism'. In fact, as their empirical review shows, studies demonstrate that managers seek consent as well as control and that workers obey as well as resist, in a complex negotiation of order. Secondly, it is not the authors' intention to spell out the conditions that, for example, lead to informal collective action or more organised resistance. It may well be that a range of evidence is not yet available for such an analysis; generations of prior studies allowed, for example, some conclusions about the meaning and causes of output restriction while leaving unanswered questions (Edwards, 1986, pp. 269–278). We suggest below how analysis on these lines might proceed.

As to what the SAC says that is distinctive within a labour process perspective, we make three points. Firstly, it aims to spell out rigorously what it means to say that there is a dynamic of control and resistance. But for the purposes of workplace study, the second and third points are more salient, for it is not always necessary to return to first principles. Secondly, then, the SAC insists on levels of analysis, running from the fundamental SA through to day-to-day behaviour—in line with realism, though the realist grounding of the idea emerged only later (Edwards, 2005). The original point was to go beyond saying that some action represented 'resistance' by analysing at a concrete level where it fitted into a wider set of workplace practices, then considering more structurally the conditions for its existence and then asking how it connected to the SA. Thirdly, this approach implies a comparative and causal analysis of how resistance is manifested, as opposed to saying that it must in some way reflect the SA.

We firstly outline the essence of the SAC. Secondly, we address studies of contemporary workplaces to assess whether the idea continues to be valid.[3] We do this on the basis of a review of the studies analysed by Joyce and Stuart (2021) together with our own search of relevant journals. Thirdly, we offer some methodological pointers for ways in which studies can be conducted so as to provide evidence that can explain reasons for observed patterns. Finally, some specific topics for inquiry are outlined.

2 | THE STRUCTURED ANTAGONISM

The SAC was formally set out in 1986, but it derived from a study of workplace industrial relations (Edwards & Scullion, 1982) and was always intended to inform such relations, albeit in the context of capitalism as a whole. In that it is the shape of relations at the point of production which is the present focus, we follow this approach. The SAC continues to be referenced extensively, with one recent editorial outlining how the concept remains 'central' to current and future research in the areas of industrial sociology, industrial relations theory and HRM (Farndale et al., 2020, p. 4). Indeed, for many, it is a helpful starting point for understanding the nature of the employment relationship, and thus, Atzeni (2016, p. 247) has noted, 'Mainstream IR textbooks ... insist on the existence of a "structured antagonism"' (see, e.g., Blyton & Turnbull, 2004; Colling & Terry, 2010; Dundon et al., 2020).[4] Precisely tracking the usage of the SA is complicated. For example, it has often been misidentified as deriving from Paul Thompson (e.g., Laaser, 2016; Söderberg, 2019), termed 'structural antagonism' (e.g., Dundon et al., 2017, p. 5), or increasingly, used without citation (e.g., Atzeni, 2016; Claydon & Doyle, 1996; Woods et al., 2019). Within these constraints, it is however possible to see the influence of the SA. According to Google Scholar, at the time of writing, there are over 700 citations to *Conflict at Work*.[5] The SAC continues to receive extensive usage within journals in the fields of industrial relations and HRM, with over 40 articles directly using the term since 2015.[6] Much of these citations however make superficial reference to the SA, or misunderstand the core idea (see Edwards, 2018).[7]

The problematic of the initial study merits a brief restatement, for if the formal statement of the SAC has been misconstrued, then it is likely that the finer points of a study of the details of seven manufacturing sites in the English Midlands in the period 1978–1981 will have escaped attention. The central aim of Edwards and Scullion (1982) was to analyse in an integrated way the different possible 'forms' of industrial conflict that are commonly listed, from strikes to absenteeism and sabotage and even industrial accidents. The evident issue is that there is no simple thing, conflict, which manifests itself in one form or another. Just what is it about going

absent, and even more so sustaining an accident, that qualifies the behaviour as conflict, and why would we expect that it has essential features in common with a strike? The solution was two-fold.

Firstly, it was necessary to address social organisation, namely, 'the processes whereby specific practices gain significance within workplace relationships' (Edwards & Scullion, 1982, p. 2). Going absent could be a form of escape from the demands of work, and thus a self-conscious expression of conflict, but it could equally reflect more mundane considerations. Thus, the study found that, in two clothing factories, rates of absence were indeed high and that workers reported getting 'fed up' and needing to take a break. Hence, absence could be seen by the analyst as a reflection of conflict, in that it was not just a response to 'genuine' sickness and was in some way connected with dissatisfaction. But the connection was far from direct, for workers did not see absence as more than an immediate effort to deal with day-to-day frustrations; it was not intended to make any wider statement. Moreover, and crucially, it imposed few costs on management, for there was no sick pay for short absences, and managers could readily move workers between tasks without issues of demarcation between categories of labour. It could also mean that discontent was channelled into this form rather than something that might have posed more problems for managers, such as demands for some degree of control of the effort bargain.

Secondly, specific patterns of workplace control had to be located in wider structures. Edwards and Scullion (1982, pp. 278–282) directly critiqued the important studies by Batstone et al. (1977, 1978) for analysing workplace relations in their own terms, rather than discussing the structural conditions that allowed some forms of behaviour, such as overt effort bargaining, to arise. Thus, they noted that such bargaining, taken for granted in the Batstone et al. study and as notably characterised by a shop steward in their own study as 'the working man's birthright', was unknown in the clothing factories. Specific structural influences included technology and the product market, though Edwards and Scullion (1982) were at pains to point out that such influences did not have 'determinate' effects (p. 268). Underlying these influences was a deeper conflict or antagonism between management and labour. To assert merely that this is just a fact of the employment relationship was 'useless'. 'Conflict is implicit in the structure of the situation if there is a recognizable clash of interests and if specific reasons can be adduced to explain why this clash does not lead to an observable expression' (Edwards & Scullion, 1982, p. 13). Edwards (1986) elaborated on this idea by calling this clash of interests an SA and locating the antagonism in a theory of exploitation.

The theory says that the structured antagonism exists because workers are exploited in a very specific technical sense, namely, that they generate value in the labour process, and some of that value is taken from them. They are not the only source of value. .... [S]ome tasks performed by managers are productive because they co-ordinate the production process. [Entrepreneurs] create value in recognizing business opportunities and organizing the means of production to pursue them. Exploitation does not, that is, mean that there is a class that produces all the value and another class that appropriates some of the value. It means that the class of workers has as its primary function of producing value under the authority of others and enjoying only some of the fruits of that value. (Edwards, 2014, p. 12)

This approach has evident similarities with Marxist theories of the capital–labour relation. Marxist workplace studies tend to see a direct connection between the fundamental level of the SA and concrete practice. (And, it was argued, they need to do so if they are to maintain any claim to be specifically Marxist: Edwards, 1986, pp. 20–30.) Edwards and Scullion (1982, pp. 4, 8, 273) cited both workplace-level studies (e.g., Nichols & Beynon, 1977), which tended to make

a very direct link between some concrete phenomenon and class relations, and more macro studies (e.g., R. Edwards, 1979), which posited discrete types of management control and worker resistance without sufficiently addressing the organisation of consent or the ambiguities of worker behaviour. For example, the idea of direct control aims to capture workplace autocracy, whereas in real workplaces, even those where external conditions favour this, a degree of consent has to be created, and managerial control is far from automatic (see Edwards, 1986, pp. 288–296). That is to say, '[t]he basic antagonism does not determine actual events but has to be interpreted in practice: there is a negotiation of order but it takes place in a definite material context' (Edwards, 1988, p. 188).

As noted above, Edwards and Scullion stressed a 'clash of interests'. They objected to Lukes's (1974) well-known 'radical' model of power, which asserts that the deepest level of power entails the exercise by one party of some form of influence that denies the real interests of another party. The objection was that the approach was not radical enough, for it offered no way of saying what real interests are while eschewing any argument that 'there is a structural contradiction between the interests of particular groups' so that real interests are ungrounded (Edwards & Scullion, 1982, p. 8n; also 279n). The idea of the SA aims to establish what this contradiction is. It also stresses that people have different sets of interests and that it is not for the observer to say which are more important than others or to offer implied criticism if presumed real interests are not pursued. The task is to establish which interests are prioritised in what circumstances and to consider what alternatives might be feasible.[8] The theme was later developed in a discussion of the relationship between the researcher and practice, wherein a formal approach to identifying sets and levels of interests was offered (Edwards, 2015a, 2015b).

The argument as outlined by Edwards and Scullion (1982) has not been restricted to factories or to the classic instances of workplace struggle such as effort bargaining. It has been used to characterise front-line service work, a terrain which many scholars insist is qualitatively different from factories because of the trilateral relationship between employer, employee and customer, and because of the importance of emotional labour. Bélanger and Edwards (2013a) argued by contrast that the role of customers is not equivalent to that of employers, because what is fundamental is the generation of surplus value, with the demands of customers operating at a more concrete level. They also offered a framework to understand different types of service work. This is important in an SA-inspired project: it is not sufficient to trace workplace relations back to deeper contradictions, but also important to show how these contradictions take different forms in varying empirical contexts.

The SA thus exists within a wider social relationship between capital and labour. It is important to make this point because a common approach to the labour relation establishes only a necessary but not sufficient condition about the employment relationship. That condition is the indeterminacy of the labour contract: the fact that the exact amount of effort to be expended cannot be determined in advance. This is true, but it does not establish the key feature of the SA, for many contracts lack specificity, for example, just what quality of work a building contractor must supply to a customer. The labour relation also entails a system in which work is 'subject to the direction of employers' (Smith, 2006, p. 390). Workers, that is, are subject to discipline, surveillance and control; the relevant systems of the employer structure the terrain on which the labour contract is negotiated.

Smith (2006) himself notes that the above argument needs to be extended: there is a 'double indeterminacy' of labour power, embracing not only the labour process but also mobility, in particular the ability of the worker to quit a job—an ability which does not exist in other modes of production such as feudalism. Edwards and Scullion, says Smith (2006, p. 393), though

addressing labour turnover, gave insufficient attention to this latter aspect and saw quitting as inferior to voice within the labour process. It is certainly important to take account of quitting as one employee tactic, and by the same token employers' efforts to manage labour supply in terms of recruitment and retention. Yet, on the specific point about privileging actions other than quitting, the argument was not that quitting is inherently inferior. It was that in the settings where it was most significant, the two clothing factories, it was individualised, and it tended to remove from a workplace those who might be most likely to challenge the employer. It also had few indirect effects because in the short term managers could readily move other workers to cover the job of someone who quit and in the longer term could readily recruit new workers. If these conditions were absent, quitting could have become a more significant issue with concrete effects, such as higher wages or a less authoritarian style of management. More generally, labour mobility has of course long been an issue for employers, as exemplified by the celebrated case of Ford's $5 day, an effort to reduce massive quit rates (Lee, 1916). But it is just one part of capital's problem of securing and maintaining a work force.

A materialist view of the employment relationship insists, then, on different levels of analysis. Various assets such as 'human capital' operate on a terrain defined by the SA. They themselves help to structure concrete behaviour, for not all assets are deployed in practice. Workers may have skills and other power resources of which they may not be aware, or they may be aware of them but fear that using them will bring a reaction from employers that has unacceptable costs. The analytical task is to operate across these levels asking what sets of real interests a group of workers will have, how these may be observable in principle and what factors lead to their appearance or non-appearance in concrete behaviour. Real interests may thus include wages and voice. By 'observable in principle', we mean that, through comparison with some other group of workers or otherwise, we can say that, *ceteris paribus*, we expect the interest to appear in some guise, most obviously wage bargaining. We can then ask in what particular form this interest emerges, for example, a collective or individual pursuit of higher pay, and why it may or may not be actualised in practice. Workers in small firms, for example, have been found to be well aware that their wages are relatively low and that they could in principle bargain about this, while also thinking that they lack the means to pursue this idea in practice, or that the employer would not tolerate overt pay demands, or both (Tsai et al., 2007).

A final point concerns the precise focus of the SAC. It is specifically about the point of production, that is, the site where labour power is transformed into labour. It thus deploys ancillary concepts, notably the effort bargain. This bargain embraces the ways, both formal and informal, overt and tacit, in which workers and employers negotiate the terms of the labour contract. The terms of the bargain can never be wholly specified in advance, and just how much effort is put in for just what reward is determined daily (or even hourly). The SAC does not directly address wider aspects of capital–labour relations such as mobilisation around ideas of injustice (Kelly, 1998).[9] Nor does it pretend to deal with issues outside the employment relationship such as domestic labour, though it insists that the terrain of employment has distinct features which allow it to be analysed independently of domestic labour, ethnicity and so on.

3 | THE CONTEMPORARY WORKPLACE

Two ideas specific to the SAC have been identified above. The first is the tracing of the (contingent and variable) links between the SA and concrete behaviour. A subsidiary hypothesis here is that contemporary workplace regimes can be expected to display similarity with the past,

because there is indeed an SA of a distinctly capitalist kind. A central theme of *Conflict at Work* was the similarity of workplace practices across modes of production. It was pointed out, for example, that feudal serfs bargained over the terms of their obligations to the lord in ways that twentieth century shop stewards would recognise. The second idea is that comparative analysis can reveal, firstly, how behaviour is shaped by structural conditions such as technology and product markets and, secondly, the conditions allowing a deeper SA to become manifest. 'Comparison' does not necessarily mean an explicitly comparative study. It can also mean relating current evidence to the benchmark of the past, on the lines of Burawoy (1979), or otherwise linking a case to extant evidence, treating the case as a means to address structural conditions, as Ditton (1979) did in taking workers paid by time as a test of whether the fiddles observed under piecework in studies such as Burawoy's would also exist in this different context.

We now move to the contemporary relevance of these ideas and concepts. To be clear, we are not seeking to get into a debate as to whether recent developments such as the 'gig economy' truly represent new forms of work, not least due to the variety of practices discussed under broad conceptual headings (Duggan et al., 2020; Healy et al., 2017). Instead, we propose that contemporary workplaces, including the gig economy, have both distinctive features *and* continuity with the past (Bélanger & Edwards, 2013b; Joyce, 2020). We are not attempting a substantive synthesis of work relations as several of these already exist, and there is no need for repetition (see, e.g., Joyce & Stuart, 2021).[10] Rather, to assess the contemporary relevance of the SAC, a qualitative review of recent studies that connect with these ideas and concepts is generally sufficient. We counted 19 empirical studies of the platform economy in the chapter by Joyce and Stuart (2021) and reviewed them, together with some other relevant more recent works, for their bearing on the above themes. We also searched in 10 journals on terms including 'gig economy' and 'platform work' in conjunction with 'control', 'resistance', 'conflict' and 'labour process' and found 58 empirical papers that we assessed.[11] We now proceed thematically and draw out the theoretical implications and continued relevance of the SAC.

To begin with continuity with the past, four points stand out. Firstly, some studies argue that a labour process approach is either insufficient or incomplete. For example, Mears (2015) carried out a study in a context even further removed from factories: exclusive VIP clubs, where women worked unpaid, save for perks and freebies, to entertain guests. Consent was achieved through the ways in which the women were recruited, the provision of gifts, encouragement to perform in the ways expected and control, for example, of what to wear. Yet Mears argues that LPA studies focus on the site of work, neglecting wider relationships and social ties beyond the work site. In a study of Uber drivers in China, Wu et al. (2019, p. 578) insist that LPA is limited to the 'point of conflict', an approach that in their view works for wage labour but not in relation to the more flexible arrangements of the gig economy where 'workers with grievances would just offer fewer hours' (p. 578). Sallaz (2015) makes a similar point in an ethnography of a call centre.

While it may be true that some studies have been too narrow, others have recognised wider influences. Burawoy (1983), for example, specifically compared his study in the United States with one of Lupton's (1963) UK cases, using the contrasting pattern of the state regulation of the workplace to explain the differences. The account was not wholly convincing (Edwards, 1986, p. 146), in treating two factories as in some ways representative of countries and not addressing the complex ways in which states and workplace regimes are intertwined. But it clearly addressed links between the workplace and macro forces. Other studies linked to Lupton's looked at more meso-level factors such as the nature of markets and workers' backgrounds. Cunnison (1966), for example, explained patterns of workplace relations in a clothing

factory in terms of the external roles of the workers, notably in this case religion. As Emmett and Morgan (1982) put it, the factory walls were a semi-permeable membrane filtering and shaping external forces.[12] The SAC is certainly centred on the employment relationship but is not restricted to it; the authors cited above demonstrate the relevance of external conditions in specific contexts, but if they mean that the SAC approach is fatally flawed, they have not made the case.

The second point is the relevance of long-standing practices. This comes out strongly in the empirical evidence in the studies discussed above. Wu et al. (2019) demonstrate effectively how the managerial control system worked: there was a complex bonus system; customer evaluations were used as a disciplinary device; and the apparent flexibility of gig work was not as liberating as it appeared. Limiting hours is a time-honoured practice for many classes of worker. Analytically, LPA is well able to take account of different bargaining tactics but also the conditions that underpin them. The Uber drivers appeared to be able to bargain at the margins, but they still depended on the firm for their living. As a more recent study of the ride-hail industry concluded, workers are not their own bosses but are subject to the 'same power dynamics found in more traditional frontline service work' (Maffie, 2022). Sallaz (2015) demonstrates that in many ways the work in his call centre was not as Taylorised as images of the regime might lead one to expect; operating procedures were ignored, and workers were thrown in to manage an unpredictable and highly variable set of tasks. He concluded that the regime reflected neither Fordism nor a return to direct autocratic control. Instead, it was a 'permanent pedagogy' in which the firm harnessed 'external normative orders', namely, expectations about effort from outside the workplace, to meet its goals (p. 29). This has echoes of other studies of non-Taylorist regimes. Ram (1994) showed that, even in small firms in highly competitive markets, organising consent was much more nuanced that the model of simple or direct control can allow. It is not quite clear whether Sallaz thinks that permanent pedagogy is a wholly new concept, on the lines of the SAC, or a means to capture a particular empirical reality. We would argue that it is the latter.

An empirical study demonstrating continuity is Korczynski's (2014) rich and multi-layered ethnography of a factory making blinds in the English Midlands. Its particular focus is the 'meanings in the everyday', specifically the role of music in expressing a workplace culture. Yet it locates this focus in the politics of the workplace by describing and explaining such forms of workplace action as collective output controls and absenteeism. It also insists that the analyst must not simply celebrate 'resistance', still less see it as prototypical of some form of alternative. 'The idea of the culture putting forward an alternative social ideal is both overly romantic and rips the culture from its social and material roots. ...; [I]t was a dialectical culture that enacted the social order even as it expressed a spirit of resistance to it' (Korczynski, 2014, pp. 186, 187). While addressing mainly meanings and social processes, Korczynski gives careful attention to external structural conditions such as the product market in shaping the workplace regime. We would take this as an example of a largely non-Taylorised labour process, a form of work that remains in many contexts, and thus as connecting directly with previous analytical frames such as the SAC.

Korczynski and Wittel (2020) offer a broader view of continuity in addressing the contemporary meaning of collectivity using the lens of the 'commons' which, they show, has been widely discussed in sociology but not in relation to the workplace. Commons comprise shared resources administered by a community. Workplace norms of solidarity and friendship amply demonstrate the importance of the commons but also a tension between partial autonomy and vulnerability to attack (p. 712). The meaning of a practice depends on context. The authors thus

quote Willis (1977, p. 125): 'cultural forms may not say what they know, nor know what they say, but they mean what they do'. Or as Edwards and Scullion (1982, p. 3) put it, it is not what workers think but what they do that is crucial. Korczynski and Wittel argue that the idea of the commons has major contemporary significance, for example, in open source software and the digital commons. The relevant practices are non-hierarchical and they involve specific forms of collaboration.

Thirdly, there are studies of change and continuity as being intertwined. A good example is Jenkins and Blyton's (2017) analysis of clothing factories in Bangladesh. They unearth time debt, that is, the practice of paying workers for work yet to be completed so that they are in debt to managers who can then call on repayment of the debt at will. The authors draw careful parallels with 'dead horse' in the UK garment industry of the 1950s (Cunnison, 1966) but also spell out the differences, notably the non-rationalised production systems in the United Kingdom and the more formal structures in Bangladesh. We have, in short, variation on a theme.

Studies such as these suggest how the SAC can be used in contemporary settings. We might, for example, say that fitness instructors have a real interest in collective action, as indeed the idea of the commons implies. But we can see how this interest is not—at least in the context studied by Harvey et al. (2017)—expressed at the level of a latent sense of collectivity, still less organised collective action. It of course remains possible that collectivity will emerge if conditions alter. Korczynski (2014, pp. 167–168) is very clear on this where he shows that from time to time workers sensed that they were labouring for others and providing them with profits. In this case, workers were aware to a degree of the existence of an SA, but for reasons adduced by Korczynski such awareness did not translate into organised collective action. It is not always or even generally necessary to go to this depth, though the move is important if the concern is to show whether or not there was an explicit class divide. By the same token, if the analyst wishes to argue that consent was the dominant motif, it is necessary to say why, that is, how the SA remains wholly latent.

Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020) are particularly clear on the linkages between the SA and concrete behaviour, in a study of two mobilisation campaigns involving gig workers. They conclude with a three-level model of sources of antagonism in the labour process, factors shaping solidarity and the potential expression of solidarity. Studies such as this one exemplify the fundamentals of the SAC.

A useful tool here is the frontier of control: the line describing whether managers or workers decide on issues such as the pace of work, the allocation of jobs, discipline and recruitment, as well as reward. The studies discussed above touch on different aspects of the frontier, for example, the operation of performance management systems in platform work. But as Joyce and Stuart (2021, p. 171) note, some key issues such as pay tend to be neglected. As Hughes and Dobbins (2020) point out, every workplace has a frontier, even though it may not be explicitly defined. In many contemporary workplaces, whom to recruit is a managerial right. But there may well be informal expectations as to how to exercise it. In small ethnic minority businesses, for example, it is common to recruit from a pool of co-ethnic people, in part because workers want to work with people like themselves, so that more open recruitment might upset a tacit balance of consent (Edwards et al., 2006). The frontier exists at one level deeper than directly observable behaviour, and it summarises where control of a set of issues lies. This is 'detailed' control (Edwards, 1986), that is, in relation to concrete issues, and often of a zero-sum kind: if managers have complete control of recruitment, then workers have none. But it is not always zero-sum. For example, if discipline is handled through agreed procedures, the

result may be practice that benefits workers, through the limitation of arbitrary punishment, and managers, through a predictable process that leads to few complaints. Considering the frontier of control has two benefits: it invites the analyst to take account of the empirics of the effort bargain; and it begins to draw attention to the conditions explaining why the frontier is where it is.

Turning then to the conditions explaining variations in concrete behaviour and the frontier, we noted above that aspects of contemporary work are new and hence that research first needs to capture its essentials. Several LPA-inspired accounts of platform work do this, for example, the studies by Gandini (2019) and Moore and Joyce (2020). Others point to the need to study variation, for example, Veen et al.'s (2020) recognition that they address only one kind of platform. Maffie (2020) develops a model of types of platform that may help here. In terms of substantive analysis, Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020) make the interesting observation that their study was unable to address in detail gig workers' individual circumstances and how far these shaped solidarity or individualism. Sallaz (2015) offers useful pointers. His call centre workers had low skills and many hoped that this job would be better than previous ones, for example, because of its white-collar feeling. Sallaz (2017, p. 575) later pointed out that pay was good compared with the local labour market. He then goes on to explain—with links to Smith's (2006) stress on mobility strategies—why many workers left and a few stayed; the latter group tended to be family breadwinners or to have grown resigned to the work. In short, expectations and labour market experiences can help to explain why the SA's effects can be limited or neutralised.

Developing the theme of different types of platform, Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021) studied remote platform work such as data entry or other tasks where workers are self-employed and can choose their jobs across three countries. As they insist, some platforms are pure information exchanges, and in such cases, we would say, there is no SA but standard market bargaining between buyers and sellers. These authors find what they term ‘subordinated agency’: workers have freedom in relation to customers but are controlled by platforms through mechanisms after including the dependence of workers on a platform, for they secure jobs through reputation, and this depends on building up links within a particular platform; the fees charged by platforms and their ability to change fees at will; and the difficulty of expressing voice against a structure that is distant and depersonalised. Workers thus tries to engage in voice against platforms and not clients. All this is again consistent with the SAC.[13]

4 | TOOLS FOR COMPARISON

The studies discussed above, together of course with many others, reflect a rich and developing tradition of research. As we have argued, however, they tend to address separate kinds of regime so that the causal conditions generating one situation rather than another are not always clear. The role of workers' labour market power, for example, sometimes appears, but, firstly, in some studies, it is mentioned rather than interrogated and, secondly, it is not necessarily addressed in other studies. It thus makes sense to ask what the frontier of control looks like, to explore the meanings given to parts of it at the everyday level and to explain why it has the form it does. This does not of course mean directly asking about the frontier. When Armstrong and Goodman (1979) told managers in non-union firms that they were interested in custom and practice, they were enjoined not to use this term for fear that might excite workers.

In the same way, one would ask indirectly about the frontier and then identify possible areas of contest. For example, in a zero-hours context just who gets called in to work, and who gets the best shifts? It may well be that managers are influenced by ideas of fairness or obligations to certain workers, as Wood (2020) has shown.

Edwards and Bélanger (2008), in their analysis of generalisation from workplace ethnographies, accordingly made three methodological suggestions. The first was to ask what a case exemplified, for example, by considering levels of wages and the labour market experience of workers; using the frontier idea is a structured way of using this suggestion. As part of the point, they encouraged researchers to provide appendices to published reports that summarise relevant data. We might add that there are benefits from seeking 'hard' data. Thus, the Workplace Ethnography scholars (see especially Hodson, 2001) often had to infer from studies whether, for example, absence rates were high or low; specific numbers would clearly help. Secondly, it is possible to offer comparative insights without directly doing a full-scale case study. If, for example, we think that a lack of labour market power may have constrained worker resistance in some case, we can review other research to seek relevant information and possibly do a specific new study in some other context. Thirdly, directly comparative designs were advocated.

Within this broad approach, we offer a checklist of themes and pose various questions. In line with realism, this checklist is structured in three levels. Realism distinguishes between the empirical, the actual and the real (O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014, pp. 9–10). The empirical is what is experienced directly, for example, the falling of an apple to the ground. The 'actual' refers to underlying but reasonably apparent influences on the empirical, leading to possible explanations for a tendency of objects to fall to the ground. The real is the realm of mechanisms that underlie the actual, together with sets of influences that may interact. Thus, the falling of an object is affected by gravity but also the object's surface area, wind resistance and so on. Each of the three levels will have varying depth; for example, Newtonian physics discovered the laws of gravity, but underlying these laws are still unresolved issues about how gravity exerts its effects. In a workplace context, particular institutions and practices can operate across levels. For example, a gender division of labour may be treated as natural, and thus as being at the level of the actual rather than the empirical, but if this becomes challenged, the relevant processes will become contested at the day-to-day, empirical, level.

At the level of the empirical, what is the shape of the frontier of control between workers and managers? In other words, who decides on the organisation and allocation of work and on how this work is rewarded? Specific questions include:

- How are workloads set, and how can they be varied? How tightly or loosely are jobs defined and hence how easily can workers be moved between tasks?
- How is pay determined, and how transparent are the relevant processes? Are extra rewards available, and if so to whom and when?
- How is performance measured and assessed? How salient are formal assessment processes in determining immediate reward and longer term prospects, be they for promotion or dismissal?
- How is discipline handled? How strictly are rules on attendance enforced?
- Do workers handle their side of the bargain largely individually, or collectively, and what is the balance between the two? As per Korczynski and Wittel (2020), what kinds of collectivity are drawn on, for example, those based on gender or other identities?

In relation to the actual:

- A generation of workplace studies testifies to the influence of product and labour markets at the point of production. With regard to the product market, we would include here the nature of relationships with customers. In the classic workplace studies (e.g., Cunnison, 1966; Lupton, 1963), the customer featured only in so far as the product market was affected, for example, the intensity of price competition. In front-line service work, by contrast, interaction with the customer is often direct (see Bélanger & Edwards, 2013a; Korczynski, 2009). The same can be said for some types of gig work (see Duggan et al., 2020). What are the expectations for dealing with customers, for example, the degree to which interaction is scripted, and what constraints and opportunities are generated for workers to affect the effort bargain? Similarly, what potential sources of solidarity, for example, those based on gender or local community traditions, exist and how far do they gain traction at the empirical level?
- To these established forces, we would need to add financial markets and their influence together with the supply chain and, in a multinational context, the ways in which a particular subsidiary is located in a company's control system. What are the effects of these things? How far are actors directly or indirectly aware of them? How far can local managers ignore, moderate or indeed amplify the effects? By amplify, we mean a situation in which some external threat is used in a workplace to exert bargaining pressure through the choice of local actors rather than it being imposed on them.
- How are the factory walls constituted? That is, a factory or a call centre is a defined workplace with rules, to say nothing of surveillance systems that define who may be there. Many other contexts have no such boundaries. There is a point, or there are several points, of production, with rewards for performance and sanctions for failures to deliver, as the Uber example shows. But what are the boundaries between work and non-work, for example, how far can non-work activities be fitted within spaces in the flow of work? Alternatively, in an era of increased flexible scheduling (Wood, 2020), how far do work demands impinge on 'leisure' time, for example, when workers have to be available to work at any time? These points are particularly pertinent in relation to the growing interest in the location of work and wider employment relations issues, heightened by the Covid-19 pandemic (see Hodder, 2020; Hodder & Martínez Lucio, 2021).
- How does the technical division of labour constrain or enable effort bargaining, for example, by separating workers into discrete operations or integrating them into teams? In a gig context, what is the structure of a platform? Maffie (2020) points out that similar specific mechanisms of control operate in very different environments, so that in examples of local platform work, Uber and Deliveroo, for example, both use customer evaluations. Consistently with realism, he argues that control is layered within different systems architectures, and he offers a framework, based on the degree to which a platform entails hierarchy or market relations and the extent to which either labour or capital or both are involved. Contrasting effects in the workplace might be disentangled.
- To what extent do institutions such as trade unions shape interests (see Heery, 2010; Hodder & Edwards, 2015, p. 848), for example, by making explicit the existence of a frontier of control? By the same token, what managerial practices challenge the idea of an opposition of interests? Linking the actual to the real is the issue of what kinds of power resources the parties have. As Runciman (1999) argues, there are three and only three dimensions of power: the economic, the political and the ideological (for discussion, see Edwards & Wajcman, 2005, pp. 117–118). What then is the balance between these?

Analysis at the level of the real is necessarily the most difficult. Questions are most likely to shape a study rather than be used directly, but issues include:

- How far do actors explicitly recognise their power resources, and how far are their aware of others' resources?
- What sorts of interests do workers and managers identify with? How far do first-line managers, for example, see divisions between themselves and more senior managers? How are different sets of interests, for example, those based on class or gender, prioritised? Workers and managers share common interests in terms of the development of the forces of production, as well as interests that are opposed. What factors lead to the prioritisation of one set of interests rather than another?
- How far do actors recognise that they have common interests, for example, in the development of the forces of production? Do they have a theory to explain the balance between shared and competing interests?
- To what extent do workers make explicit references to class relations or the appropriation of profit? How commonly do they do this? Do they use any sense of class division to affect day-to-day relations, or is such a sense more to do with broader observations with little or no influence on behaviour?

It is important to consider these questions in relation to the methods of interest representation, the structure of interest representation and the types of interests (Gooberman et al., 2018). Consulting Heery's (2010) 'interest framework' would yield useful insights when undertaking analyses at the level of the real (see also Edwards, 2015a, 2015b).

5 | CONCLUSIONS: DEVELOPING THE THEORY AND THE APPLICATION

Conclusions lie in two areas. Firstly, what of the SAC as a theory? Does it need to be modified, extended or replaced? Secondly, given that we argue that the theory holds up, what concrete research issues stand out?

In relation to the first theme, Edwards (2018) argues that the SAC needs development in two ways. The first is that a sharp divide between producers, who are exploited, and owners and managers, who do the exploiting, is too stark. Some of what owners do is productive. This does not mean that they share their position with workers. Edwards drew on Armstrong's (1983) classic study of factory supervisors, which showed that, though they carried out productive work and shared some interests with workers, their fundamental (structured) position was as part of capital. This theme might be extended theoretically to address the differing functions of owners and managers and applied as indicated below. The second development is to place the SA more clearly within wider structures of ownership and control. The key theoretical point here, as Smith (2006), for example, notes, is that the indeterminacy of the labour contract at the point of production does not in itself establish the central nature of the capital–labour relation; the rights of owners to direct and control labour are also key. The ways in which these rights are established and maintained would warrant revisiting. We would add a third theme. As noted above, the SAC says that workers and managers have interests that arise from their respective positions but that these interests are not necessarily, or indeed usually, evident at the level of

the empirical. Further inquiry might consider what it means to say that real interests exist, together with what these might be, and how they interact with people's other interests in the market, the family and so on.

Thus, such developments aside, the SAC continues to be, we have argued, flexible enough to address contemporary work. We have demonstrated that while there are a number of distinctive features of different forms of contemporary work, there is clearly continuity with the past (Bélanger & Edwards, 2013b). The SAC insisted, for example, that 'control' cannot be reduced to a single mechanism: 'simple control' (R. Edwards, 1979) was not simple. Amongst others, Wood (2019), Barratt et al. (2020), Heiland (2021) and McDonald et al. (2021) give evidence of the complexities of control across different forms of gig work.

Turning to issues of application, the functions of owners and managers can be addressed by returning to the old question of the tasks carried out by managers. There are many studies of managerial work, addressing such themes as long hours, insecurity and distance from the centres of corporate decision-making (e.g., Foster et al., 2019; Hassard & Morris, 2018). A SAC-inspired view would focus specifically on the functions of controlling the work process, co-ordinating activities and carrying out directly productive tasks. In large sites such as retail stores, established ethnographic methods are likely to be useful (Wood, 2020). In situations where work is more dispersed and/or where organisational boundaries are fluid, methods using daily diaries or asking managers to represent pictorially their work relationships and responsibilities might add value (see Cassell et al., 2016; Radcliffe, 2018). Such a study could also pick up on the theme of ownership rights by asking managers about their right to manage and how they convey to workers the effects of corporate decision-making. As Vicki Smith (1990) found, managers tend to face a situation of 'coercive autonomy' whereby they are expected to use discretion while meeting tightening corporate performance targets: in her study, they could to a degree interpret these pressures to staff but only within limits. Finally, the real interests of managers, and the degree to which these reflect the actual and the empirical, for example, the structuring of job responsibilities and day-to-day perceptions of relations with workers, merit attention. In short, a study of class relationships at work, in the manner of Armstrong (1983), would pay dividends.

Though much has been learned from recent studies, they have not always reflected a research programme. By a programme, we mean a connected set of inquiries that addresses patterns of and causes of variation in the phenomena of interest. Classic studies of 'effort restriction' had an implicit programme in considering, for example, individual as well as collective forms and motives of workers who did not practise restriction. Cunnison (1982), for example, explained the logic of a set of ethnographies by saying that three had suggested certain explanations for behaviour, which led to a choice of a further two. And Ditton (1979) asked about such practices when workers were paid by time rather than by the piece, the latter being the usual focus for studies of this kind. But interest in the phenomenon waned, and there were no substantial studies of, for example, effort restriction outside factories or in countries other than the United States and the United Kingdom. Contemporary studies might address this point.

A programme operationalising the above checklist would be very demanding, and we are not suggesting that every part of it is needed in every case. It acts as a guide. For example, we have seen that Sallaz argued that prior labour market experience shaped workers' consent in the call centre that he studied. A very different case is the well-known

one of VoiceTel, where workers were generally content for reasons to do with relatively high wages and the autonomy that they were granted (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2014). Part of this satisfaction rested on a contrast with a local high volume and apparently traditional call centre. In addition to direct contrasts between such centres, a research programme might examine labour market experience over time and just how prior experience shapes attitudes to a current situation. Similarly, studies of gig workers attest to the importance of choice as to when and where to work—something many more workers may now wish for, due to the changes to working practices brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic (Hodder, 2020). How is this preference constituted, and does it last over time or, as some studies suggest, do workers have to follow other interests when they seek longer term income and security?

A programme might also refer back to extant explanatory frameworks to see how far they can be applied or developed. As noted above, Cunnison (1982) offered one model, while Mars (1982) developed another in relation to specific forms of effort bargain such as pilfering. Bélanger and Edwards (2007) produced a more formal model in relation to types of interest of capital and labour. We might consider what forms of behaviour these frameworks aim to explain, the explanatory factors deployed and the extent to which the frameworks are similar or different. We can then see where they have gaps or where they raise further questions, and the answer would then shape the design of future projects.

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ORCID

Andy Hodder https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1506-1151

ENDNOTES

[1] We say no more about this critique but note one recent study of the gig economy (Tirapani & Willmott, 2022) which criticises LPA for 'structuralist proclivities' and advocates a critical management studies approach that gives more emphasis to subjectivities and multiple identities. It then deploys the idea of 'logics' as a post-structuralist way to address social order. Now, firstly, labour process studies such as Burawoy's did not ignore subjectivity, as per his analysis of ideology; adding in further attention may or may not be a useful complement. Secondly, attention to structures is not structuralist. We must either take post-structuralism at its word and deny that there are structures outside agency or address structure directly, which is what the SAC aims to do. Thirdly, 'logics' is not a new idea; the 'logic of the situation', developed by the anthropologist Jarvie, was used extensively by Edwards and Wajcman (2005, p. 181) to analyse failures in decision-making. Finally, Tirapani and Willmott offer only very broad ideas as to how the gig economy can generate responses from workers without considering the concrete issues of work experience and control systems that are central to the SAC.

[2] One reasonably objective measure comes from the more than 200 cases, over many years, collected in the Workplace Ethnography project; using four indicators of concrete conflict, Edwards and Bélanger (2008, p. 310, n1) found that only 11% recorded no instances of conflict.

[3] Throughout this paper, we use the term workplace, but we acknowledge that those working from home, or gig workers (for example), are often spatially outside of a fixed organisation in terms of a workplace.

[4] We acknowledge that the SAC is not beyond criticism (e.g., Spencer, 2000) but do not seek to repeat these here as these criticisms have been addressed elsewhere (Edwards, 2018).

[5] We recognise that subsequent authors may have referenced a range of other works when discussing the SAC (e.g., Edwards, 1986, 1988, 1990a, 2014, 2018). However, as academic convention is usually to cite the original source (Gall, 2018, p. 686), analysis has focused on *Conflict at Work*.

[6] Information is correct as of March 2022. The journals are as follows: *British Journal of Industrial Relations*; *British Journal of Management*; *Capital and Class*; *Economic and Industrial Democracy*; *Employee Relations*; *European Journal of Industrial Relations*; *Human Resource Management Journal*; *Human Resource Management Review*; *Industrial Relations*; *Industrial Relations Journal*; *International Journal of Human Resource Management*; *Journal of Industrial Relations*; *Management Learning*; *New Technology, Work and Employment*; *Scandinavian Journal of Management*; *Work, Employment and Society*; and *Work and Occupations*. Citation information is only based on journals published in English and does not include citations of the Spanish edition of Conflict at Work (Edwards, 1990b).

[7] Notable exceptions to this include Dundon and Dobbins (2015), Hughes et al. (2022) and Dobbins et al. (2021).

[8] As outlined elsewhere (Edwards, 1986, p. 55; Edwards, 1990a, p. 140), 'the language of interest can be avoided' but, 'the fundamental point' is 'that the analyst must be willing to identify structural conditions which may or may not be translated into articulated interests according to a range of contingent influences, and that a grounded account of class relations can be produced' (Edwards, 1983, p. 466).

[9] Although see Kirk (2018) for an account on the connections of mobilisation and labour process analysis.

[10] For overviews of the scope, development and impact of gig work, algorithmic management and platform capitalism, see Duggan et al. (2020), Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn (2019), Kaine and Josserand (2019) and Liang et al. (2022).

[11] We recognise the limitations of only reviewing journals and undertaking key word searches, but such an approach is increasingly common practice in employment relations. For a similar approach, see Kaine and Josserand (2019). The 10 journals were as follows: *British Journal of Industrial Relations*; *Capital and Class*; *Human Resource Management Journal*; *Human Relations*; *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*; *Industrial Relations*; *Industrial Relations Journal*; *Journal of Industrial Relations*; *New Technology, Work and Employment*; and *Work, Employment and Society*. Information is correct as of March 2022.

[12] Cunnison's work was one of a set of workplace ethnographies applying the extended case, which was developed by the anthropologist Max Gluckman and then taken up in a work context by Burawoy (1979). Emmett and Morgan (1982) discuss some of the implications. Cunnison (1982) herself reviewed the set of five studies and offered a framework of analysis anticipating the indicative checklist below. Importantly, she stressed the importance of gender, class and other identities in society and the ways in which these played out in the workplace. On the extended case method, see further Edwards (forthcoming).

[13] We acknowledge that 'platform labour' (whether local or remote) is said to be a grey area between employment and self-employment. The centralities of the SAC to the employment relationship may result in some dismissing its relevance to the gig economy. However, while the ambiguities between the employed and the self-employed have been well documented, we note for the field of industrial relations, that '[t]heoretically, we need to establish only the right of one person to exercise authority over another in the performance of productive labour' (Edwards, 2003, p. 338). Thus, despite the fact that there is technically no employer, and often no direct employment relationship or workplace, we argue that the concept of structured antagonism is still relevant to gig workers.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Paul Edwards is Emeritus Professor of Employment Relations at Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham. He is a Fellow of the British Academy. He was previously Professor of Industrial Relations and Director of the Industrial Relations Research Unit at Warwick University. His research interests include workplace industrial relations and employment relations in small firms. He edited two editions of Warwick's text Industrial Relations and has published very widely in the field for over 40 years.

Andy Hodder is Reader in Employment Relations at Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham. He is Secretary of the British Universities Industrial Relations Association (2019–2022). His work has appeared in journals including the following: *British Journal of Industrial Relations*; *New Technology, Work and Employment*; *Work, Employment and Society*; and *Work and Occupations*.

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