

Assessing the Merits of Post-Fordism from a Gendered IPE Approach

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LUCAS ARNDELL, APR 2 2018

Post Fordism denotes the economic era of production that can be described of contemporary society. In order to provide a valid definition of Post Fordism, one must first be familiarised with the concept of Fordism. Fordism was the main method of production during the early and mid 20th century and was appropriately named after the creator of large production lines, Henry Ford. Fordism was comprised of assembly line work conducted by semi-skilled workers, thus creating a production line of mass produced products (O'Brien & Williams, 2016:136). The Fordist era saw consumer market's such as that of the USA's as nationally protected in nature, resulting in the lack of competition between international and domestic markets. However, the cultural turn within International Political Economics (hereafter IPE) signalled a shift in both the production of goods and the characteristics of the consumer market. It can, therefore, be said that the cultural turn and Post-Fordism are consequent of one another. The transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism can be described as: 'the putative transition from one dominant phase of capitalist development ... to another thirty to fifty year cycle of development based upon very different economic, societal and political norms.' (Amin, 1994:3).

Post-Fordism entails an evolution in many aspects of IPE, primarily the methods of production, but also the labour force and the consumer market. The new era saw the methods of production shift from the production line approach adopted by the Henry Ford, and move towards the use of skilled workers whom produced specialised products. Such a shift also resulted in the introduction of the use of women within the labour force and the feminization of the products these labour forces created. The introduction of the influence of gender displays the importance of a gendered approach to the topic. The post fordist model of production signalled a move from the conceptualisation of the consumer market as a whole and towards the idea of the market as being built up of individuals, compromised of different ideas and opinions. The shift from broad conceptualisations of the population and towards an individual approach is mirrored in the literature's focus on the role of women following the fordist era. The impact of Post-Fordism on women is explored further in the latter section of this paper.

Therefore, this paper is split into three sections. Firstly, I will provide contextual information regarding Post-Fordism and an explanation of the corresponding theories of the French Regulation School and Flexible Specialisation. Secondly, I will present the impact that the cultural shift within IPE had on the labour force and the consumer market, of which changed from the concept of the market as a single unit to the concept of multiple sub categories of consumer creating the broader market. Third, I will use a gendered approach to analyse the role of women in the Post-Fordist era. Lastly, I will come to the conclusion that the main merits of the Post-Fordist era are displayed in the removal of both the hierarchic and patriarchal systems that were previously present within the Fordist era. However, it must be noted that the Post-Fordist era is not without its faults, of which are highlighted in the remaining female struggle within the workplace as 'Women's entry into wage labour in this period was not, however, on equal terms with men' (McDowell, 1991:402).

Theoretical approaches

Following the first and second world war, firms intended to manufacture products through methods of mass production in order to 'capture economies of scale' (Gartman, 1998:124). The methods of mass production were

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adopted predominantly in the automobile business and were praised for their ability to produce large volumes of goods for relatively low cost. Manufacturers such as Henry Ford were able to keep their expenditure at low levels due to their ability to offset spending, such as factory investment, against the vast number of products that were produced. Therefore, the Fordist era's approach to economies of scale was the intention to supply the large and homogeneous nature of the consumer market with steadfast commodities, created by production lines of which were home to repetitive and stationary labour.

The unwavering solidarity of the Fordist model of production was, however, challenged by the introduction of the technological advancements of the late 20th century and the cultural turn within IPE. David Harvey describes the introduction of contemporary technology as the 'annihilation of space through time that has always lain centre of the capitalist dynamic' (Harvey, 1991:293). Therefore, the second half of the 20th century saw the perception of the consumer market shift, from a single homogenous unit, to a collection of heterogeneous sub units. As the nature of the consumer markets began to change, the Fordist era and Fordist methods of production were presented with a need to revise their mechanisms. Ash Amin notes the introduction of 'new epithets' that signify the need for change within 'the emerging age of capitalism' (Amin, 1994:1). Thus, the rapidly changing economic climate began to see the defining nouns of the era require the addition of revisionist prefixes, as Fordism became Post-Fordism.

There are two main schools of thought within the theoretical approach to the era: The French Regulation school and The Flexible Specialisation school (IBID :7). Both aim to offer description and analysis of the transition that capitalist methods of production were subjected to, however both differ in their theoretical approach to the subject. Scholars of the regulationist approach such as Bob Jessop, state that the school offers 'a way to analyse the interconnections between the institutional forms and dynamic regularities of capitalist economics' (Jessop: 2001:2). The regulation school, therefore, provides an analysis of the economic state as a process of two concepts of which progress asymmetrically in nature. These two main components of the theory are: 'the mode of regulation' and 'the regime of accumulation' (Gartman, 1998: 122). The concept of a regime of accumulation can be defined as a 'systematic relation between mass production and mass consumption', whereas a mode of regulation denotes the set of governing 'rules and procedures ... through which the accumulation regime is secured' (Steinmetz, 1994:188). In accordance with these definitions, a regulationist approach would suggest that: as the dynamics within the sphere of the regime of accumulation begin to change, the rules and norms of the regulatory sphere, of which are fundamental to the security of the prior, become obsolete. Therefore, it can be said that the debilitating nature of the regime of accumulation towards the mode of regulation is the stimulus for a period of crisis, of which the capitalist model has been subjected to. It is due to these proponents of the theory that the regulation school is able to effectively explain the periods of success that the capitalist economy was able to present, as the need for change is catalysed by the state of dissatisfaction with the present working model. However, notably, the regulation school also provides a third concept of its theoretical approach: the 'mode of societalization' (Jessop, 1994:252). This third concept presented by Jessop focuses on the 'mass integration and social cohesion', of which, 'underwrite and stabilize a given development path' (Amin, 1994:8). Therefore, the third concept of the regulation school displays the effect that the capitalist methods of production have on the social factors of the consumer market, as the cyclical nature of the three concepts progress. It is due to the regulation school's inclusion of the social sphere that has lead scholars such as Linda McDowell to favour their approach towards the Fordist – Post-Fordist debate, as it allows the analysis of the 'gender relations and the role of women in the two periods' (McDowell, 1991:402).

However, alternative approaches towards the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism, turn their focus away from the structural impacts of the capitalist economy and towards the impact of flexibility across a range of sectors within both the production process and the consumer market. Scholars of the school such as Charles Sabel state the changes of which capitalism was subjected to, following its era of solidarity, as the 'redefinition of markets, technologies, and industrial hierarchies' (Sabel, 1982:231). Therefore, as opposed to the normative approach of the regulation school of which concentrates on norms and the relationship between methods of production and governing rules, the flexible specialisation approach is centred around the distinction between mass production and flexible specialisation (MacDonald, 1991:179). The approach aims to explain how both mass production and flexible methods coexist within the capitalist model but depending on the climate of the consumer market and 'political factors', one will be favoured over the other (IBID). The primary concept of the approach displays the profit that was originally only feasible due to the mass production methods of the Fordist era, now had the ability to be created through the

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production of individualistic goods. The profitability of small goods was made possible through the introduction of 'highly flexible manufacturing technologies and flexible work practices' (Amin, 1994:15). However, this approach has been criticised as being comprised of 'little more than a methodology of exemplars' due to its lack of both: normative discussion and inclusion of spheres outside that of production methods (Vallas, 1999:69).

Post-Fordism, Production and the Labour Force

The capitalist economy's shift from mass production to the production of increasingly individualistic goods, had a large impact on the methods of production of the mid to late 20th century. The cultural turn within international political economy saw both the regimes of accumulation and the modes of regulation take on different characteristics as opposed to their Fordist counterparts. The regimes of accumulation that were stereotypical of the Fordist era, such as that of mass production whereby products showed little variation, were replaced by contemporary regimes of accumulation. The cultural turn by definition also signifies a shift in the regulationist spheres of both the modes of: regulation and societalization, as 'culture is constitutive of social relations' (Nash, 2001:77).

The cultural turn was a shift that was seen throughout the social sciences during the mid 20th century, and it had a significant effect on the capitalist economy of the period as production began to display the importance of art, culture and imagery. Methods of mass production of which produced large amounts of uniform goods began to produce ephemeral products with increasingly short life spans. The shift of the methods of production from the Fordist era to Post-Fordist saw the occurrences of drastic changes in the physical components of the workplace. The cultural turn denoted the closing of gaps within the regimes of accumulation that were previously created by the constraints of space and time. Nigel Thrift explains this as the 'pivotal role of space and time as not merely metrics but also as resources' (Thrift, 2001: 377). The reduction in the constraining nature of spatial boundaries saw firms within the Post-Fordist era, diverge from the manufacturing of goods from raw materials to the finished product. Primary materials were now obtained from specialised firms, thus, allowing the regimes of accumulation to focus on the finished product that was being produced. Whereas the Fordist methods of production created goods with the hope that it would provide a timeless satisfaction to the consumer market, the Post-Fordist era sought to 'accentuate volatility and ephemerality of fashions, products, production techniques, labour processes, ideas and ideologies, values and established practices.' (Harvey, 1991:285). The increasingly shorter lifetime of the goods produced within the Post-Fordist era was due to the influence that culture and imagery had on the consumer market, and as Harvey explains the volatility of goods was also mirrored within all aspects of the capitalist economy.

Due to the new methods of production's ability to satisfy the consumer temporarily, the Post-Fordist era capitalised on the contemporary nature of the consumer market, through the use of advertisement and well-established semiotics (IBID: 288). Goods such as clothing, homewares and technology were advertised through contemporary technological advancements of the era, such as television, using means that were generally not associated with the product itself. Through the new means of advertisement, it was now possible for a firm to mould the consumer's needs and effectively provide the consumer market with the products it so desperately desired. However, the Post-Fordist nature of the methods of production and the consumer market have lead scholars such as David Gartman to argue that Post-Fordism, in fact, 'undermines' culture (Gartman, 1998: 125). The commodification of goods through the use of advertising has created an increasingly materialistic consumer market, whereby firms have capitalised on the consumer's material desires.

The shift from the Fordism to the Post-Fordism also had a large impact on the labour force of the era. The stagnate labour force that was stereotypical of the Fordist era was swapped for an increasingly flexible and contemporary counterpart of Post-Fordism. The new characteristics that were displayed in the labour force of the Post-Fordist regimes of accumulation allowed a myriad of changes to occur within its structure of employment. Most notably the introduction of a 'post hierarchical model of work' resulted in firm's success relying on 'their ability to forge new organizational structures that are capable of fully engaging in the skills of their employees' (Vallas, 1999:70). Post-Fordism's lack of micromanagement paired with the new-found confidence in the labour force thus lead to the dismissal of the hierarchic nature of the Fordist regimes of accumulation, as workers were now given the opportunity to progress within their careers. The success that was displayed in the post-hierarchic workplace contrasted greatly with the motionless characteristics of the Fordist counterpart as the dissatisfaction of workers within the Fordist era

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resulted in the stagnation of the labour force both physically, mentally and within the organisational structure. Therefore, Alain Lipietz presents that the involvement of the labour force within the management sphere of production resulted in a 'solution by negotiation' of the dissatisfaction that was found in the stagnate methods of employment that were found within the Fordist methods of mass production (Lipietz, 1996:116-117).

The contemporary characteristics of the labour force paired with globalization and the Post-Fordist regimes of accumulation resulted in the revision of the defining boundaries of class segmentation within the era. The commodification of products such as fashion and luxury goods gave members of the Post-Fordist consumer market the ability to invest in products that were not typically associated with their position within society, as high-end commodities were no longer reservedly elitist (Harvey, 1991:285). Gartman further reinforces this revision of the consumer market as he states, 'Unlike the relatively egalitarian Fordist market, aimed at broad, middle income groups, the Post-Fordist market is fragmented and unequal. Higher income groups buy the upscale goods, while lower-income continue to purchase cheaper goods from abroad' (Gartman, 1998: 125).

Women within the Labour Market

The changes that were seen in the Post-Fordist methods of production and the labour force had a significant impact on the division of labour, as it became 'less rigid' concerning gender separation (Van Den Berg, 2017:104). Similarly, to the removal of the Fordist hierarchic management methods, the male filled workplace began to break down into a 'service-based economy with room for female workers' with the introduction of 'gender equal task sharing' (IBID). The reduction in the patriarchal approach to employment lead to the much-needed revision of the early 20th century's attitude, towards the role of women within contemporary society. Due to the ephemeral nature of the Post-Fordist era, women were no longer seen as solely inhabitants of the domestic and reproduction spheres, as Post-Fordism offered a contrasting narrative for women. Opposed to the neoliberal system of society that is displayed in the Post-Fordist economy, the welfare state confined women to 'traditional subservience' of the 'family centred orthodoxy' (Davis, ND:NP). The increase of gender variation within the labour force gave the female population the ability to become financially autonomous and thus free from society's male economic grip.

Women were freed from the male dominated economic environment as a result of the nature of goods that the Post-Fordist regimes of accumulation were beginning to produce. The 'targeting of consumers by lifestyle, taste and culture' paired with an 'emphasis on choice and product differentiation', resulted in the production of increasingly feminized goods such as textiles and fashionable clothing (Hall, 1988:24). The change in nature of the methods of production towards the production of feminine products thus lead to an increase in the employment of females within the era.

The female autonomy that was displayed in the shift from an era of Fordism to Post-Fordism was also displayed in the revision of multiple pieces of legislation in the UK. As the capitalist economy began to see the beginning of the cultural turn's influence on the economic climate, regulatory legislation, such as that which defined women's property, began to change. 1964 saw the revision of the Married Women's Property Act, of which revisions denoted that women were now entitled to an 'equal' share of their husband's earnings (legislation.gov, 2018:np). As the economy began to reach the Post-Fordist end of the spectrum following its crisis as described by the regulation school, legislative revisions began to have more of a direct impact on women within the labour force. The crux of the Fordist – Post-Fordist shift witnessed the introduction of the Employment Protection Act in 1975. The purpose of the introduction of this particular legislation, concerned with the labour force, was to 'amend the law relating to worker' rights and otherwise to amend the law relating to workers, employers, trade unions and employers' associations' and 'to provide for the establishment and operation of a Maternity Pay Fund' (Employment Protection Act, 1975:1). Therefore, this act provided women with the right to paid maternity leave whilst also making the dismissal of a worker on the basis of pregnancy, a punishable offence. However, it must be noted that although both of the preceding pieces of legislation aided women of the domestic and reproductive sphere, they did very little to increase the economic autonomy of the contemporary independent woman.

The post-hierarchical and post-patriarchal effects of Post-Fordism on the labour force has lead scholars to praise the contemporary capitalist system's 'emancipatory thrust' of which has fostered evolved forms of work (Vallas,

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1999:71). Steven P. Vallas has come to his emancipatory conclusion of the Post-Fordist era due to its increasingly inclusive methods of production, as opposed to those of Fordism. However, scholars such as Linda McDowell contend Vallas' emancipatory claims as she states that 'long held beliefs that women's entry into waged labour has emancipatory potential may have to be re-evaluated, at least until current labour market conditions are challenged' (McDowell, 1991:401). Although the shift to Post-Fordism provided the labour force with revised rights and saw the inclusion of females, upon a deeper analysis it is apparent that apart from their inclusion in the workplace, women benefitted very little from the new economic climate.

The ephemerality of the feminized products that were produced in the Post-Fordist regimes of accumulation resulted in increased insecurity within employment. The new methods of production saw a rise in the number of hourly employees and zero-hour employees being contracted into the labour force (Vallas, 1999:73). These contemporary forms of employment displayed by the labour force were less stable when compared to their Fordist counterparts, as there was now little to guarantee workers with any job security. Scholars have critiqued the exploitative nature of these contractual forms of employment, and state that contracts such as the 'Zero-Hours' are seldom better than 'convenient shorthand for masking the explosive growth of precarious work for a highly fragmented workforce' (Adams, Freedland & Prassl, 2014:2). The male workforce of the Fordist era rested on the assured stability of their employment. The consumer market had no choice but to desire the goods that were produced by the Fordist methods of production and thus job security was guaranteed. Whereas the predominantly female labour force of the textile and fashion industries had no such assured stability to rely upon, due to the volatility displayed in the consumer market.

The labour force of the Post-Fordist era was also subjected to the reduction of wages as opposed to the Fordist era, as the 'family wage of the male breadwinner', became a concept of the past (McDowell, 1991:402). Gaps within wages related to the specification of gender removed the ability of a woman to support her family from her employment alone. Therefore, it is due to characteristics such as disparities within wages and the instability of hourly contracts that has in fact done little to reduce the overarching patriarchal nature of the era.

Conclusion

The shift that the capitalist economy underwent during the 20th century was one of great change and signalled 'evolutionary' steps for the climate of the methods of production and the labour force (Amin, 1994:3). The two main theoretical approaches that aim to describe the shift show success in their ability to differentiate between the two economic periods. However, in relation to a gendered approach towards the topic, the French Regulation School as presented by scholars such as Bob Jessop (1994), offers an analytical framework that is increasingly comprehensive as opposed to its theoretical counterparts. In addition to the spheres of regulation and accumulation, the regulation school also allows the discussion and analysis of social factors. Thus, the regulation school 'has the most to say about the nature of gender relations and the role of women in the two periods' (McDowell, 1991:402).

The shift from one economic era to the other had a drastic impact on both the methods of production and the characteristics of the labour force. Society's new desire for goods influenced by art and culture, reshaped the methods of production to include the use of new technology. The use of contemporary technology signalled the closing of spatial boundaries within the regimes of accumulation and ultimately resulted in the increased efficiency within the methods of production.

Post-Fordism's ability to engage in the skillset of the labour force allowed for the reduction in the stagnate characteristics of its preceding counterpart, of which saw employees without the opportunity to progress above entry level positions. However, an outcome that deserves more merit and recognition is that of the removal of the patriarchal nature of the Fordist era. The introduction of women into the labour force primarily tackled society's subservient ideologies of the female population, due to the Fordist placement of women solely within domestic and reproductive spheres. Yet the influx of a female labour force was host to multiple revisions of legislation concerning female economic independence, most notably the creation of the 1975 Employment Protection Act (Employment Protection Act, 1975:NP).

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Thus, this essay concludes that the main merits of the capitalist economy's shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism is the abatement of both the hierarchal, and patriarchal systems displayed within the workplace. However, through the use of a gendered lens to the topic, it must be noted that the emancipatory ability of Post-Fordism for women, falls short of the utopic model the aforementioned merits present.

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