1 Introduction

In 1923, on stage in New York City, for a white-collar worker named Mr. Zero, an entire world of work had been reduced to numbers and a job carefully mastered was being replaced by a profitable new "super-hyper-adding machine". In response he makes his first real choice in life. He takes extreme measures. He is sentenced to death and uttering his last earthly words to the jury he says, "Suppose you was me." In the after-life he is presented with yet another opportunity to make choices, and once again he is laid off. This time it is not for the reasons of profit. It is because of his refusal to make one choice rather than another: to accept rather than change the designs of his circumstance. Where exactly does a worker go when laid off from a job in the after-life? Why, back to earth. As his supervisor Lieutenant Charles explains to him carefully: Zero is to start all over again, to "learn all the wrong things and learn them all in the wrong way [and] about all the things you want to know, they'll tell you nothing at all".[1]

In terms of the human experience of contemporary occupational change there are many similarities to be found between Elmer Rice's play and the research on state welfare workers in this book. The introduction of a new "super-hyper" technology is one. A form of work reduced to a world of numbers, the disorienting sense of starting all over again, alienation, disbelief, confusion, anger, accommodation, consent, the possibilities of resistance (as well as the possibilities of resistance that are refused) are others. These are all themes defining the lives of the workers we will learn more about here. In doing so, we understand more about an occupation being re-made. Still, when compared to Mr. Zero, these welfare workers we meet do something very different. They make all forms of choices. They construct and solve an ocean of problems. Some consent, some accommodate,

some resist, and some do one and then the other. And, for both better and worse, they learn. At times, it seems they learn *all the wrong things in all the wrong ways*. At others, they struggle to learn things that they care deeply about, and about which they are *told nothing at all*. In either case, in times of radical change, these workers must make it up as they go.

It is likely no coincidence that the themes of work change and alienation emerged for Elmer Rice in the age of public and political fervour in America in the first decades of the twentieth century over Frederick Winslow Taylor's Scientific Management. Taylorism was, and I will argue still is, a force to be reckoned with, if, that is, we release it from the many caricatures it has regularly endured. Fundamental to seeing Taylorism in this way is recognizing that it is a force that has always had to contend with thinking, feeling, knowing, choice-making, and acting workers. And at the centre of this lay the skills, knowledge, and expertise workers inherit and create, which are at the same time those that management desperately needs to shape and control.

Demonstrating further parallels still, Rice's body of work might also be used to highlight one final feature of this book. Rice is actually credited with having introduced the *flashback* narrative structure to American theatre. Common to movies and theatre today, it is a technique through which we are made acutely aware how the present and future depend deeply on the past. I too rely on flashbacks – a type of *memory work* approach – of a kind.[2] Workers I spoke with recounted their work lives and work practices. In their stories are found topics that were boiling in their thoughts at that moment as well as the topics that were suspended just beneath the surface of their thoughts. The flashbacks contained in these stories – whether they were from the day before, a week, a year, or decades prior – provide a major resource for researching as well as accomplishing the learning of occupational life. A robust analysis of learning in occupational life can and must attend to the dynamic relationships among knowledge content, experience, space, as well as time in the structure of narratives. It is in this way that workers' stories are the foundation of this research. These stories cannot be separated from occupational biography and distinctive social standpoints. And, although these lives never reach the dystopian depths of Mr. Zero's, the stories and their implications are no less dramatic.

Purposes of the Book

This book comes at a time of dramatic changes to the nature of public sector occupations around the globe (cf. Seddon, Henriksson, and Niemeyer

2010). In the context of profound pressures for state austerity at virtually every turn, I argue that studying such occupations offers an ideal opportunity to explore how questions of *price*, *worth*, *human need*, *and purpose* bear on the re-organization of learning in occupational life. We discover further detail on how public sector workers' learning is accommodating, contesting, and floundering *in times of change* like these. It presents a sustained example of the analysis of *mind* not simply as a thoroughly cultural and historical phenomenon, but as a thoroughly political economic one as well. I argue that too many have forsaken the dense and often intimate fabrics of mind in political economy: the fact that in every instance of our participation in political economy, in every arrangement of work we encounter, in every single product or service we produce, and amid the minutiae of our working lives are found our opportunities to learn one thing, or to learn another.

Specifically I explore the complex machinations that define the struggle for the meaning, purpose, and soul of a vital occupation in Western capitalism: *state welfare work*. This is an occupation charged with administration of the fault-lines among the state, the economy, and poverty. In many ways, it is an occupation that is virtually definitive of the challenges – and indeed the failures – of advanced capitalist societies in their ongoing recreations of the relationship between notions of human welfare and the poor. And I claim that work design, the labour process, and mind in political economy are central to our understanding in this regard. Combining and extending the now-classic observations of Piven and Cloward (1971) and Lipsky (1980), in this book we can begin to see more clearly how the state has learned and re-learned an important lesson: *to discipline the poor requires the effective disciplining of those who administer the poor*. That is, there is no state law, legislation, program, or policy that ever becomes reality without being polished, perfumed, mis-interpreted, distorted, or otherwise filtered through the lives of public sector workers and their labouring/learning processes.

While the 1970s and 1980s produced particularly remarkable engagements with the challenges and possibilities of social services work of this kind, I suggest an extended re-engagement of the type offered here has an important place. Today, even amongst many of the researchers taking up critical social and political economic questions about state welfare, state welfare workers themselves are far too often depicted as automatons, cyphers of the state, or simply scapegoats. While refusing to white-wash the failures, tensions, and contradictions, this research is among those that continue to serve as a counter-weight to the straw-man portrayals that have

been made of the lives of these workers. The analysis shows how the job of state welfare work is charged with moral and ethical as well as financial implications (for workers, the poor, and the state itself). Deep within these working lives we find contested learning and an occupation that is more complex and more contradictory than even most of its practitioners themselves care to admit. In recognizing this we recover an interpretation of occupational knowledge as political economic struggle: an interpretation that, as Baines (2008) points out, links these forms of work and learning to something the political theorists Antonio Gramsci referred to as *trench warfare*.

In the most basic sense, I recover yet another story of workers struggling under *the pressures and the limits*, as the Marxist cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams used to say, of capitalism. However, it is the world of monopoly-finance capitalism, neo-liberalism, and austerity shrunk down to the everyday act of producing a welfare cheque. In the shrunk down beginnings of this analysis, we re-discover the agency and choice-making, but going further reveal an entry point into much broader processes that give new insights into how workers are faced with and face up to powerful techno-organizational and political economic machineries. We will see at times workers are thoroughly *engrossed* – even entranced – in the course of their near-manic search for the next technical fix on the job. At other times workers waver or shirk and drag their feet on the job and seem to wait on their own decisions about just what kind of welfare worker they will be. At still other times, facing the very same techno-organizational machineries, workers struggle to re-inherit a half-imagined tradition of welfare work which, like a train pulling away, seems to be a tradition getting smaller and smaller. To be sure, the dynamics of how these tendencies unfold are neither uncomplicated nor unrelated. I demonstrate the independencies of historical, political economic, sociological, and psychological dimensions of learning empirically. I demonstrate how and why it is that there is enormous variability in the trajectories of occupational knowledge construction. In this way certain claims about the stability and interpretability of working skill, knowledge, and expertise, too often presumed in research on learning, skill, and the labour process, are challenged. In their place, I make claims that the vicissitudes and contestations that make up workers' learning play a significant role in defining the meanings of skill and knowledge, as well as an occupation over time.

The details of *how* skill, knowledge, and learning unfold in the concrete and rapidly changing realities of contemporary public sector human services are central. In fact, the research presented in this book began at the

same time that a major public sector restructuring of welfare services in Ontario (Canada) was officially launched in 2002. It was a change initiative that affected general welfare as well as welfare benefits associated with the disabled. Central to this radical, new, legislatively supported labour process was the introduction of alternative divisions of labour, work rules and procedures, human resource practices, and, notably, a new intra-net based computer system called the Service Delivery Model Technology (SDMT). This was a transformation that at its birth in 2002 impacted the administration of more than $1.5B in social assistance (over $2B in 2011) at an operating cost of approximately $177M per year ($247M in 2011); it directly affected more than forty-seven municipalities across more than 290 separate offices, approximately one hundred First Nations (Aboriginal) sites, and more than seven thousand state welfare workers at the time (6800 in 2011); and it was a transformation that severely affected the lives of approximately 670,000 of Canada's poorest citizens (more than 800,000 in 2011). Notably, this was an initiative that would also depend upon a public/private partnership with the consulting firm who designed the SDMT system and work process, and who over the period of study would be associated with the surrender of certified accounting licences by its parent company in one of the largest public fraud cases in North American history (Enron). We will see that the financing of this scale of transformation depended upon issuing payments to the consulting firm vis-à-vis a system of accounting for welfare cost savings (cost avoidance) embedded in the technology and labour process design themselves. And, I argue, this transformation process utilized a high-tech, contemporary Taylorization of the occupation that brought with it new expressions of contradictions to the lives of front-line state welfare workers, as well as managers and the poor.

The research for this book lasted for the first seven years of the change process (2002–9) with the bulk of data gathering taking place in the first five years. Ironically, five years was the time-frame that Fredrick Winslow Taylor specifically named, in his testimony to the 1912 United States House of Representatives' investigation of the effects of Taylorism, as necessary to produce a successful transformation to his method of working. The data gathering and the level of access provided to the research team were made possible by working closely with the union representing these state welfare workers (the Canadian Union of Public Employees-Ontario [CUPE-Ontario]). Events I explore here, and the level of access this partnership with CUPE-Ontario provided, offer an ideal opportunity to analyze the processes of construction and re-construction of skill, knowledge, and expertise in the course of large-scale technological and labour process change in the public sector. It also offers an opportunity to glimpse – within

the dynamic relations of mind in political economy – the forms of consent, accommodation, and resistance that workers can undertake when an occupation is forcefully attacked.

I demonstrate the implications of the many layers and enormous variability in work skill within these change processes. The research tells of how thinking, feeling, knowing, and acting people *can* and *do* take many *divergent trajectories* within and towards forms of occupational expertise in the course of work activity itself. Workers cluster and are clustered together in groups, producing dynamics which regularly amplify their learning by way of distinctive *spheres of meaning and communication* and what are called *zones of proximal development*. Through these processes, they affirm and renew, alter and re-alter the trajectories of their learning. Not infrequently, they are learning across different trajectories of skill and knowledge development *at the same time*. Throughout we see how it is that they exercise distinctive forms of *agency*. They choose to focus their learning at some points in time and in some places, on some things rather than others, but this involves a struggle over the establishment of *horizons* of agency and choice. According to the theoretical traditions used in this book, I argue that these horizons are shaped deeply by the unfolding of activity and work space design conceived under the auspices of Taylorism. I show these horizons are shaped by an occupational heritage of past symbolic and material artefacts, and configurations of these artefacts, of state welfare work activity. And I explore how these horizons of possibility – horizons linked to a shifting landscape of key or leading forms of activity – are also shaped by an even more fundamental struggle over the contradiction among the needs of capitalism, the capitalist state, and the human use-values in the lives of clients and workers. We discover new insights into the structure of activity that explain the *processes* as well as the *limits* of control in occupational learning.

Labour Process Theory (LPT) and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) are the two primary points of departure for the analytic approach I use here. Respectively, I will show that the tradition of LPT initiated by Harry Braverman – widely and divergently developed since – with its focus on the contradictions of divisions of labour, autonomy, control, and skill remains essential. However, I will also argue there are limits to the assistance that LPT can provide, on its own, in terms of realizing the research goals of the book. As I explain later, this is the case for several reasons. Despite the persistent concern for the dynamics of skill, knowledge, and control, in even the most penetrating studies of work, difficulties emerge in analyses of the dynamics of learning themselves. LPT studies increasingly

recognize the importance of context, social and collective skill, knowledge formation, and even something called knowledgeability but then struggle to conceptualize them in close empirical study. Although it is a broad criticism, I nevertheless suggest that it is difficult to side-step the fact that too much labour process research depends upon, defaults to, or otherwise suffers from the persistent influence of reductionist models of human learning and development. Offered few other viable options, much LPT research continues to trade in proxies for learning and skill rather than practices (Warhurst and Thompson 2006).

Equally, there are also limitations to be found in the bulk of studies focusing specifically on work-based learning itself. Again, this is a very broad criticism. By way of introduction only, in the first instance, amongst those who research in the growing sub-field of work and learning generally, few researchers consistently draw on the rich findings and theories of labour process, sociology of work, and organizational and technological design. Only a select number adequately address the historical, political, and economic mediations that shape practice (see Sawchuk 2010a, b). Too often the character of the workplace is taken as pre-ordained even while, as it is so often remarked, work and employment are in a constant process of change. Even amongst the most robust studies of work-based learning – in fixating on worker *adaptation* – we only ever find half of the story of workers' learning lives. In reality, workers create as well as adapt. At the absolute minimum, they create the conditions of their own adaptation. Thus, conceptualizations of transformation – frustrated, limited, or realized expansively – must be addressed, but are regularly given short shrift. This point is hardly insignificant to the theorization of learning, and it summarizes the rationale for a turn toward CHAT in this case. However, even in this CHAT research tradition, the integration of critical perspectives that might inform a mind in political economy approach to the learning/labour process remains elusive.

Taken together, the types of limitations I allude to help explain why inquiry into conflict, cooperation, learning, and change languishes at a conceptual *impasse* on the question of work skill. As a contribution to breaking this impasse I claim that overcoming the limits within and across the two solitudes – of detailed studies of work, on the one hand, and detailed studies of work-based learning, on the other – is one of the first orders of business. It is in this context that I claim there is value to be found in introducing a CHAT approach into an empirically informed dialogue with the traditions of LPT research.

Outline of the Book

I emphasize here and elsewhere that understanding more deeply the human face of the *how* of workers' learning is likely a key stepping stone for developing new, robust theories of the labour process, and along the way issues related to social change as well. In these terms, cultivating the analytic means of balancing aggregated, proxy measures of occupational skill and attitudes with the details of the labour/learning process practices themselves is critical. This concern for the learning process has influenced both the research in this book and the sequence of presentation of findings. In fact, it is suggested that the quickest way to bury oneself at the skills impasse is to work from a traditional social science model that, for example, *begins* analysis with a pre-established set of social groups (e.g., based on work experience, gender, race, educational training) *and then* explores how learning and skill based on these groups emerge. Among other things, this type of imposition obscures the human agency and variability of lived practices (cf. Smith 1987). Indeed, learning produces group formation as well as unfolds from it; social as well as collective dynamics *are dimensions of* the learning process. My point is that a traditional social science model would make the mistake of using as a *resource for claims-making* (e.g., the existence of groups) the very things that should be the *objects of claims-making*.[3] If we are to take the active construction of human learning and along with it the active construction of the social world seriously, then we must proceed in a different way. In this book I purposively begin with the details of the occupational learning processes. I then proceed to test and extend findings with quantitative data.

In taking this approach I attempt to move decisively beyond descriptive accounts of on-the-job, informal, self-directed, or incidental learning that researchers have, by now, become less enthusiastic about given the limited answers they can actually provide on their own. Rather, by placing LPT and CHAT approaches into dialogue with one another, and supporting them with a small, selective range of additional conceptual resources, I attempt to sustain a series of claims about how skill formation, consent, control, and resistance unfold in diverse ways in the course of daily work life based on the agentive construction and re-construction of learning *within activity*. To be clear, state welfare workers we meet in this book are experiencing not only complex and contradictory work lives but also distinct and divergent trajectories of occupational development. While they are not ignored here, we nevertheless find that factors like educational attainment, workplace training participation, the use of advanced ICT, for

example, do not speak to occupational learning with the type of analytic power that is conventionally ascribed to them. Such factors offer only very limited explanations of performance, coping, flexibility, and occupational learning as such. They certainly do not allow us to decipher the existence of the thing referred to today as *knowledge work* (a term that I ignore going forward for reasons that will become obvious). However, in orienting to the dynamic nature of work-based *activity* as the basis for how the *machineries of knowledge construction* are themselves *constructed* (Knorr Cetina 1999), we can nevertheless understand these and many other factors as matters of contradictory forms of mediation.

It is against this backdrop that the book poses and answers the following types of questions:

- What contribution does the everyday knowledge production of workers make toward defining their occupation *in times of radical change*?
- What are the means of organizational *control and its limits* in the context of the machineries of knowledge construction, the shifting shapes of mediated activity, and the agentive learning of *consent, accommodation, and resistance* in occupational life?
- What role might *Taylorism* play in contemporary work change?
- In what ways do unique *biographies and broader social differences* such as those related to education, social class, gender, race, and disability continue to shape occupational learning lives?
- And what is the role of the *contradictions of capitalism* in occupational learning within and beyond capitalism?

No doubt the basic story of occupational change underlying this research is already recognizable (perhaps eerily so), and the preceding questions offer a basic indication of what is to come. Likewise, whether or not the concepts and themes gestured at so far are more or less familiar, several of the basic arguments I will attempt to make are discernible as well. However, the following chapter-by-chapter outline provides some final, introductory points of clarification concerning the material contained in the book and its order of presentation.

Chapter 2, 'The Skills Impasse and an Activity Approach', provides the basis for the uses of LPT and CHAT in the book. It is divided into two parts. In Part 1 I establish a key rationale for the book in terms of a critique of what I call the skills impasse. This involves a brief interrogation of the origins and contemporary status of this impasse across indicative samples from sociology of work with special emphasis on developments in the

LPT tradition. I discuss the relations between theory and socio-economic changes from the mid-twentieth century to the present. I summarize recent trends regarding the increasing number of skill types and learning processes that researchers are identifying which I claim foment rather than resolve the skills impasse. Within this, LPT is positioned as a key framework through which robust analysis of occupational learning and development in times of change might proceed. In Part 2 of this chapter I outline a rationale for and substance of a CHAT approach to occupational learning and knowledge construction within labour process activity. I define and interpret its terminologies, points of emphasis, and highlight a type of impasse it too faces related to the role of contradiction in learning and human development. I conclude with a summary explanation (and definition) of several key terms important to the study of state welfare work in the remainder of the book.

The controversial and enigmatic concept of *de-skilling* is an important concern within this book. It is a concept that has both lurked in the shadows and emerged boldly into the light at various points in scholarly debate over several decades. Linked tightly with historical changes in work design, it is a concept that rose to prominence in critical scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century and more recently has tended to recede. I argue that to understand how de-skilling may still matter a great deal today requires a fresh look back at the idea that, for the most part, inspired it. In Chapter 3: 'Taylorism –an Enduring Influence', I demonstrate why studies of past, present, or future work arrangements under capitalism benefit from a re-consideration of the unique strengths and weaknesses of Frederick Winslow Taylor's Scientific Management. My argument is for moving beyond the dismissal of Taylorism. I draw on some original writings by Taylor and early studies of his efforts at implementation, as well as offer a critical summary of contemporary perspectives that have attempted either to refute or to confirm Taylorism's character, implications, or existence. Contrary to both popular belief as well as much scholarly literature, I argue that the defining features of Taylorism revolve around his understanding of the over-arching powers of three inter-dependent elements: materiality, task design, and the independent nature of worker culture and learning. As powerful as they are contradictory and under-estimated, these are basic features from which all other specific aspects of his approach flow, which can and have been systematized in a host of ways, which have appeared at various times in various organizations and sectors, but which can still be readily recognized today.