Conclusion:
an international political economy of work

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, we are living in an era of social transformation that has been defined by the concept of globalisation, just as it has been shaped by programmes of restructuring carried out in the name of globalisation. Yet, our era is also one in which people's concrete experiences of transformation are diverse and contradictory. While for some, living in a GPE means holding and managing a portfolio of shares, business travel for a MNC, and increased prosperity and security, for others it means redundancy as a share price falls, contract work for a MNC, and increased risk and insecurity. Despite the rise of globalisation as a 'dominant discourse … which produces truth about individuals and their environment' (Penttinen, 2000: 203), multiple meanings and diverse concrete experiences persist that make this a debated and contested set of truths. The primary task of this book has been to offer a route into the revealing of these multiple meanings, experiences and contests.

A rethinking of our dominant mode of knowledge of social change is needed if everyday spheres such as work, family, consumption and leisure are to be understood as key realms of globalising social relations. Orthodox IPE perspectives – conceiving of opposed realms of state and market, domestic and international, and of power and knowledge as resources – have rendered invisible precisely those realms of social life where the meanings of globalisation are constituted. This book has engaged in some reflection on the dominant ways of thinking that have shaped IPE's research agenda. I have asked how particular readings of global social change have achieved 'common sense' status, and how they have been discursively employed to enable particular interventions to be made. This has primarily been an exercise in the politicisation of global restructuring, and the understanding of social change on which it is predicated. A first step in such an exercise involves the opening up of space for the discussion of alternative forms of political representation and, I have argued, this step can be taken via an exploration of the webs of power, tensions and contradictions that grip contemporary restructuring. In the spirit of this discussion, my concluding remarks should not be read as closing comments. Rather, I am seeking to open up some of the potential terrain for alternative

modes of knowledge of social change, and a discussion of the utility of the social practice perspective on work and related spheres of life.

Problematising global social change

Global social transformation has predominantly been communicated to us in processual terms. That is to say, the common-sense accounts of 'what global-isation is' tend to make appeals to a *process* that is driven by technological and economic externalities. It is a short step from this inevitabilist image to the construction of 'imperatives', towards which all state-societies, firms and people must restructure. In such a reading, historical difference, political con-flict and social contestation are extracted from a pure drive for global trans-formation. There is a hungry market for such representations of a process of global change, precisely because if one can simplify, codify and explain the dynamics of transformation in this way, it becomes possible to make prescribed neo-liberal interventions. When represented as an irrevocable and essential process, that can nonetheless be managed, globalisation becomes a powerful meaning-generating concept that accounts for 'what is happening' at the same time as it draws the parameters of 'what should be done about it'.

This book has explored one such representation of globalisation 'as pro-cess' – the widespread propagation of a discourse of labour flexibility, on which deregulatory interventions are founded. Representing globalisation in a deter-ministic and apolitical way, I have argued, decisively enables the restructuring of work to be ordered, disciplined, prescribed and depoliticised. It becomes possible for a range of international economic institutions, governments and corporate strategists to confine debate to an instrumental discussion of reforms, as seen in the World Bank's (1995; 2001) and the OECD's (1996; 1997) policy interventions. In many ways the sphere of flexibility in working practices does not serve simply as a 'case-study' of flexibilisation, but is pivotal in the trans-formation of social life. Work represents a governmental inroad to the restructuring of the spheres of home, welfare, family and household. In its broadest sense, flexibility defines the properties of a society that has embraced the imperatives of risk, self-responsibility and immediacy and is pervasive throughout the layers of social life, and across the presumed boundaries of global and local, public and private.

An alternative set of understandings of global social transformation has sought to restore the agency and power that is denied by process-centred readings. This book has depicted these accounts as grouped around a view of globalisation as a *project* that is shaped and directed by identifiable individual and collective agents. In one such representation, globalisation is 'put back in its box' by a restatement of the power of the state, and specifically the per-sistent role of 'national capitalisms' in shaping the parameters of global forces. In one sense, such accounts highlight difference and historical contingency within the globalisation debate. Yet, as I have argued in this book, the

distinctive meanings ascribed to national 'models' within the construction of globalisation are rarely problematised. Indeed, there is an assumption that the pressures of globalisation have heralded an undisputed victory for Anglo-Saxon neo-liberalism, and a defeat for social market corporatism. As I have shown, however, the making of a 'global Britain' has served a particular set of functions in the framing of the need to 'harness' globalisation via labour flexibilisation. Such representations extend beyond the terms of a bounded national debate into an international discourse on global restructuring.

In a second conceptualisation, globalisation is represented as a trans-national project that is furthered through the actions of MNCs, financiers, or a global class or resisted through the actions of new social movements and trade unions. Despite a clear reinvestment of politics, the political tends to be viewed as organised, formalised and institutionalised activity. In an era when labour flexibilisation is making efforts to deunionise and depoliticise the workplace, there is a danger that indirect, informal and interstitial modes of political activity will be overlooked. In seeking to problematise the terms of the contemporary debate on global social change, this book has presented a challenge to those engaged in exploring the project of global restructuring, whether identified as national or transnational: that is to raise the question of how those who are governed or defined by the project are also implicated in its reproduction. The assumed project must be opened up to reveal the concrete practices that enable, confound or contest its dictates.

Politicising global social change

An IPE perspective that is attuned to the diverse social practices that together underpin or transform world order, I have argued, can unmask the tensions and contradictions of global social change. Research that sets out to explore the restructuring of social practices that is carried out under the banner of globalisation brings the abstract concept into the concrete realms of political bargaining, governmental intervention, social accommodation and contestation. A focus on restructuring can offer a countervailing pressure in an environ-ment in which the mainstream media, political and academic commentaries construct an 'other worldly' globalisation – one that is unreachable, 'grander' than ourselves, and whose only link to everyday life is a top-down 'impact' on local practices. The multiple layers of the restructuring of work, when viewed from a practice perspective, are simultaneously undertaken in the name of global-isation, while they also interpret, contest and give meaning to that name. This book has sought to offer three preliminary steps towards an IPE of social practice.

Historicity, contingency, diversity

The critical potential of IPE, as Robert Cox has it, lies in its capacity to stand back from the prevailing world order, to ask how it came about (1981: 130),

and to consider 'the ways reality is defined for different people in different eras' (1995: 35). Such a position assumes that social structures and social transformation are not predetermined, or externally driven, but are historically constituted through the actions and reflections of people. Viewed in this way, the restructuring of work does not simply 'happen to' people – either as a result of an unstoppable techno-economic process, or as a strategic and calculated project. Rather, it is always experienced, reflected upon, interpreted and lived in the context of historically-specific spaces. As I argued with reference to the restructuring debates in British and German state-societies, the making of a particular representation of globalisation, and a concomitant programme of restructuring interventions, is historically contingent, and generates its own distinctive tensions, problematics and divisions. The thoughts and actions of those living in the fractured world of contemporary global production are at least as central to the furthering or undermining of restructuring as the states, firms and technologies that constrain and limit them. Overall, a historical mode of thought reminds us that the material restructuring of MNCs that has so preoccupied IPE inquiry, is intimately bound up with the everyday histories of workplaces, and with our received understandings of what these workplaces constitute.

Webs of power

A central problematic in the analysis of the politics of global social change is the question of how power is exercised in the shaping of practices. On the one hand, an overly structural conception of power may overstate 'control' and leave no space for agency, while on the other, an overly individualistic conception may overstate the capacity for agent to resist (Clegg, 2000: 78). This problematic is exacerbated in some IPE inquiry which commonly identifies power with an elite group of 'global actors' and a set of institutions that act as 'bearers' of structure. As a result, the webs of power that circulate via social relationships, creating and constraining spaces and opportunities for transformation, are rendered invisible by conceptions of power 'as resource'. This book has positioned power-knowledge relationships centrally in the exploration of the restructuring of work. I have argued that in order to understand the knowledge and governmental techniques that have made the flexibility discourse possible, it is necessary also to reveal the webs of power relations that suffuse the restructuring of work. Such an approach transcends bounded 'global', 'national' and 'local' levels of analysis. In my analysis of the firm, for example, I focused on the relationships between social groups, demonstrating that these cut across the ascribed boundaries of MNCs. The transnational activities of bankers, corporate managers and management consultants are taken out of the realm of an ethereal global market, to consider their relationships to the practices of non-elite groups such as unprotected labour, contract workers and homeworkers. These relationships, I have argued,

cannot be grasped by a simple opposition of the promotion of global restructuring versus the resistance to global restructuring.

The everyday

This book has argued that global social change is experienced, given meaning, reinforced and challenged through the everyday structured practices of individuals and social groups, such that the concept of globalisation should be understood through the contestation that takes place over its realities and representations. As Kaplan and Ross have it, 'the Political is hidden in the everyday, exactly where it is most obvious: in the contradictions of lived experience, in the most banal and repetitive gestures of everyday life' (1987: 3). Globalisation thus becomes one conceptual means of identifying and naming 'grand scale' social change, but is potentially also disguising the myriad of meanings and experiences that are translated in the networks of everyday life. As I have shown, the restructuring agendas of national governments, corporate actors or international institutions are never wholly predictable, linear and unproblematic. Interventions designed to transform working practices meet with ongoing social struggles and are translated in numerous ways. Out of the Anglo-Saxon drive for individualism in working practices has emerged a reforging of worker identities, with new patterns of alliance and division. Far from a benign and depoliticised workplace, the study of everyday working practices reveals a politics of direct experience that moves as fluidly as the MNC that moves to outsource and disperse production. To pronounce the 'death' of workplace politics is to neglect the ability of political life to transform itself.

Towards an international political economy of work

Having reconceptualised globalisation as an ongoing, non-linear and unpredictable transformation of social practices, this book opens up alternative routes into thinking about work within IPE.

First, I have challenged conceptions of work as merely a function of the global production process. The dynamics of the restructuring of work cannot be understood as an outcome of transformations in production, for this is to miss the diversity of experiences of working in a GPE. The restructuring of traditional paid production work, for example, is having significant implications for paid and unpaid domestic and care work. Indeed, an exploration of the roles and functions of unemployment in a GPE is also fundamental to thinking about work and the governmentality of work. As the ILO's 'Decent Work' agenda reminds us 'almost everyone works, but not everyone is employed' (1999b: 3). Societies face varied challenges and questions in their framing of future modes and forms of work. This will include necessary reflection on the function that unemployment or semi-employment may

serve in their political economy, the consequences of the casualisation of work and the growth of a relatively unregulated service sector, and the rethinking of the concept of 'work' these questions require. In most cases this will also reveal complex patterns of inequality, inclusion and exclusion. The durability of the hyperflexibility discourse is dependent upon its ability to continually adapt and metamorphose in order to conceal its social consequences. The early twenty-first century linking of labour flexibility to concepts of corporate social responsibility is almost certainly just such an attempt to ameliorate the effects of corporate restructuring and silence the critics. A conception of work that extends beyond an understanding of productive or class relations is essential if we are to maintain a critical gaze on the slippery concept of flexibility, even as it adopts the mantle of corporate responsibility and risk management.

Second, this book has urged IPE to extend its understanding of workers and their agency beyond a conception of organised labour, to consider the complexity of patterns of solidarity, collaboration, fragmentation and dissent. There seems to be some comfort taken in IPE from the idea that organised labour may be a 'voice' for global civil society. But, in normative terms, is a single channel or formal voice what is being looked for? Following E. P. Thompson, a unified body of collective consciousness must always be wrought from something, and will necessarily draw boundaries and exclude practices. The practices of 'insider' workers, of whatever form, will have their 'outsider' counterparts whose working practices may be in tension. To speak of a single collective voice of a global civil society of workers is highly problematic. Alternative prospects for workers' agency must be found, and these alternatives must acknowledge that the potential for politics at work rests upon a competing and contradictory array of agencies. It is in the tensions and contradictions of diverse working practices that the politics of the transformation of work lie. An exploration of the competing practices reveals some common ground in unexpected places. The disruption of the boundaries between work and home (public and private lives), for example, is an experience felt by elite workers and contingent workers alike, opening up the possibility for a societal debate on the consequences of such transformation. Similarly, future research could fruitfully focus on the deepening of tensions and divisions in spaces where historically one looked for solidarities, such as on the manufacturing line and within the trade union movement itself.

Finally, this book has sought to reveal the political potentialities that may lie in the interstices of everyday working practices. There are predominantly two aspects that come out of my analysis: one is the sketching of a potential political terrain in spaces where work takes place, the other concerns the implications of an IPE of social practice for other spheres of social activity. Seizing the political ground in the contemporary globalisation debate has tended to imply a direct resistance, exemplified by the so-called anti-globalisation campaigns. Yet, it is interesting that these resistance groups tend to be depicted as united 'against' a single foe, despite the manifest diversity of their agendas.

There are other problems associated with 'contesting globalisation' as though it were a clearly defined single entity. Does resistance to globalisation need to be conscious and planned? Are the small and everyday acts of footdragging, or acts of 'getting by', also acts of resistance? How should we understand the negotiated engagement with global restructuring undertaken by some trade unions? Is this tactical resistance or have the unions been co-opted into a restructuring discourse?

In order to push the boundaries of our understanding of resistance (whether by unionised labour, social movements or people going about their daily lives), it is necessary for us to cast our gaze on the practices that enable and further neo-liberal discourses, as well as those that confound or resist. The individual and collective 'acts of survival' seen in the support networks of contract workers in Britain, for example, could be interpreted as acts of resistance in the sense that they defy attempts to individualise workers. Yet they could also be read as enabling greater functional flexibility, for example in the mutual provision of childcare. Similarly the growing number of German workers in the informal economy are, on the one hand excluded from formal representation in the 'flexi-corporatist' debate, yet their practices are also plugging a gap in state and private enterprise provision.

The identification of emergent contradictions and tensions in restructured working practices raises questions that may apply beyond work, to other related spheres of social life. With regard to the financial sphere, for example, the proliferation of credit unions, local currencies and local exchange trading schemes, reveals practices conceived as countering financial globalisation, while also representing spaces that are excluded from 'insider' financial practices. So, these could either be conceived as alternative practices and political gestures, or as the 'mopping up' of social groups who are excluded from elite practices, and thereby enabling global finance. The debate surrounding the contradictory 'furthering' and 'opposing' of global restructuring is one that will be significant in future analysis of the GPE. The growth of interest in ethical investments and consumer responsibility, for example, is simultaneously concerned with an engagement with global capital and a discussion of political-economic and social alternatives. I am not proposing that such questions can be resolved here, but that an IPE of social practice makes the raising of these questions possible, and that the power relations, contradictions and tensions visible in the restructuring of work may be present elsewhere.

The 'contestedness' that forms the title and subject matter of this book is present in many forms. I have founded my IPE of work on a critical questioning of the mode of knowledge that has been framed by the master concept of globalisation. The meanings ascribed to globalisation; the representations that dominate globalisation; and the experiences that make globalisation concrete and 'real': all are contested on a daily basis. Globalisation does not exist independently of the meanings, practices and discourses that are made in

its name, nor is it confined to the elite global practices of states, multinationals and international institutions. In this book I have depicted an alternative image, and one that I argue reveals the power and politics of the making of globalisations. In my framing, globalisation stands alongside other master concepts used to render social transformation explainable, codifiable and manageable. We have seen industrialisation and modernisation function in similar ways. As mobile and empty concepts they become filled with meaning, and come to represent particular realities for individuals, states, societies and social groups.

Each chapter of this volume has addressed some aspect of the representations of globalisation that have given meaning to the flexibilisation of work. Once unpacked, the labour flexibility that is constructed as a panacea to globalisation, reveals a bundle of ideas and images that are appropriated and deployed to legitimate a range of interventions. There are other concepts worthy of exploration – risk, responsibility and mobility are also emerging within a lexicon of restructuring discourse. Ultimately, I have argued that the meanings of globalisation and flexibility directly engage with the everyday lives of people. They do so differentially, unevenly and contradictorily, as they simultaneously seek to remove the grounds for politics, while also redrawing the lines of shared experience, solidarity and identity. Bringing the rarefied restructuring practices of global corporate actors, financiers and governments into their concrete relationships with the everyday practices of work, renders the spaces of global restructuring reachable and open to debate. In this sense, our knowledge of global social change is itself subject to contestation, over how we have come to understand transformation, and who and what we have made visible and invisible.