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1

Servicing Societies? – Colonisation, Control, Contradiction and Contestation

Andrew Sturdy

The enlarged market has become at once more impersonal and more intimate. What is there that does not pass through the market? Science and love, virtue and conscience, friendliness, carefully nurtured skills and animosities? This is a time of venality (instrumentality).

(Mills, 1951:161)

Introduction

This quote is as relevant today as it was when first published, 50 years ago. Only now, its applicability stretches well beyond the US middle classes of the 1950s. Also, for Wright Mills, the focus was on sales; now this would be replaced or subsumed by the ostensibly less instrumental ethos of *customer service*. This is presented by many in business, the public sector and politics as of universal benefit or, at least, benign in its endeavours to tailor products to the needs ascribed to customers. The very idea of a critical approach to customer service, the aim of this volume, may then seem perverse to some – ‘we all want good service don’t we?’.¹ Indeed, we may well do, and increasingly so. However, this certainly does not preclude the need for critique.

The key questions addressed in this volume include the following. Who defines the nature and scope of ‘service’, ‘customer needs’ and ‘relationships’? Under whose terms is service/consumption organised? What are the consequences for individuals and societies? What alternative ways of understanding and organising service are there? As service language, values and practices spread to more and more activities and places, the importance of these questions increases. Their relevance extends way beyond how long one waits in a queue, or whether or not one receives ‘appropriate’ behaviour from service providers. How service is defined, organised, enacted and contested affects our lives, not only as employees, but as consumers and citizens.

The chapters in this volume *critically* explore the contemporary and changing organisation, representation and experience of paid service work. They reveal and constructively challenge both *how service is organised* and *how it is understood*. In doing so, they contribute to the development of theory by drawing on different critical perspectives (e.g. labour process theory, post-structuralism, critical realism, ethics, aesthetics and feminism) and expanding their boundaries. The chapters (many of which were first presented in the annual international labour process conference) generate insights from academic disciplines such as sociology/cultural studies as well as contributing to management subjects such as HRM, OB and marketing. In doing so, research is drawn on from a wide range of sectors (e.g. hospitals, airlines, financial services, call centres, hotels, shops, restaurants and parcel delivery) and geographical areas (e.g. Europe, North America and the Asia Pacific).

This chapter introduces some of the general issues and debates surrounding customer service. In particular, customer service discourse (ideas and practices) is shown to be: *colonising* new domains of work and life globally; *transforming* in terms of its emphasis on relationships; associated with invasive, but problematic forms of *control*; inherently *contradictory*, particularly in the context of capitalism; and, relatedly, *contested* in the sense that it may provoke resistance to controls and customers and inspire the development of alternative formulations and ethics of service. The chapter concludes with a short account of each of the contributions.

Colonisation

Service or, for some, servitude has a long and continuing history whether as paid or unpaid (e.g. domestic) work (see Glenn, 1996), a commercial/professional activity and/or a 'public service' (Pratchett and Wingfield, 1996).² Similarly, its pre-eminence over manufacturing in the emergence of 'post-industrial' societies has been much debated (e.g. Bell, 1973; Mills, 1951; Touraine, 1969; Wood, 1989), not least in terms of associated inequalities in the gendered and global division of labour. In Western societies, paid employment is now dominated by services. Many service jobs attract low pay, status and prospects and, relatedly, are performed mostly by women (see Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996a; Thompson *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, much service work has become increasingly standardised through the application of Tayloristic and/or bureaucratic principles (Braverman, 1974; Mills, 1951; Ritzer, 1993) as well as an associated requirement to perform emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), although these issues continue to be debated and developed theoretically (e.g. Bryman, 1999; Fineman, 2000; Smart, 1999a; see also below). Indeed, while probably still lagging behind the service explosion, it is increasingly implausible to complain that service

is neglected in the literature on paid work in favour of manufacturing sectors and jobs (e.g. Smith *et al.*, 1991; Sturdy *et al.*, 1992).

Given such long standing and increasing attention to service and service work, why the need for further and critical study? The answer is, in part, addressed in the following paragraphs and chapters. Essentially, it is that customer service is colonising more and more activities and ideas; it is changing in how it is practised, experienced and understood; and, its powerful effects in terms of subjectivity and structures of inequality tend to be obscured or neglected.

Customer (cf. public or professional) service is based on the largely flawed, but powerful, neo-liberal concept of the sovereign consumer and free markets. It is understood that consumers know what they want and that they are all powerful in being able to choose and switch suppliers. Therefore, in order to succeed or survive in increasingly competitive markets, organisations, it is argued, must identify customer needs and direct their activities on addressing them (profitably) (Knights *et al.*, 1994). Such a focus now informs most management ideas and prescriptions. Even 'manufacturing' activities and intra- and inter-organisational relationships are redefined as service oriented (e.g. TQM, BPR, HRM, supply chain management, internal marketing). At the same time, customer service has spread to public and professional services including health care and education (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Manley, this volume) and has been central to governmental regulatory and social programmes (see Hodgson, this volume). Such developments are extending beyond Western economies, across the globe in a form of neo-imperialism (Bauman, 1998a; Bierstecker, 1995; Sturdy, (forthcoming)) as the service smile and greeting, once almost exclusively associated with North America, is prescribed across the world³ – we are all consumers now, aren't we? Indeed, it is frequently claimed that consumption is overtaking occupation and family as the principal source of social identities, even if the unemployed might dispute this (see Bauman, 1998b). Certainly, in the West at least, people are more actively involved in consumption and aware of customer service ideas and practices (Sturdy, 1998; Taylor, 2000).

Such growing consumer awareness can be linked to an apparent shift in emphasis in the promotion and, to a lesser extent, practice of customer service. Although difficult to generalise, this concerns an increased interest in securing longer term relationships with consumers, an associated 'personalising' or stylising of human service interactions through 'empowerment' (see below) and/or the substitution of these interactions through technologies such as the internet (e.g. Electronic Virtual Assistants), television and telephone (see Baldry *et al.*, 1998; *Financial Times*, 2000; Ritzer and Stillman and Fitchett and McDonagh, both this volume). The 'empowerment' approach might be seen as an attempt to counter consumer antipathy to scripted service and to reconstruct 'traditional' forms of customer

interaction, albeit without the local community and employment/career structures of earlier times (e.g. local shops, branches). In retail banking for example, a shift from 'teller to seller/server to relater' is evident, whereby customer contact is ascribed higher status than previously. Moreover, new, albeit limited, career paths are emerging for some employees (Morgan and Sturdy, 2000). Elsewhere, in cases cited by service protagonists (e.g. FedEx and Scandinavian Airlines), organisational structures are flattened and notionally inverted with the customer at the top (cf. Ritzer and Stillman, in this volume). More recently, customer service has been repackaged as Customer Relationship Management with a new acronym, CRM, to accompany it:

Customer Relationship Management is all the rage at the moment but behind the hype lies a fundamental truth: the customer relationship is important to any company It is really about owning a customer base and managing and satisfying that base; looking after people better than anyone else [It] involves changing people, technology and processes. (Huntington, 2000:44; see Fitchett and McDonagh, this volume)

Of course, there are clear market-based rationales for such changes, beyond fuelling the management consultancy/ideas market. Notably, there is the attraction of cutting the costs of customer turnover; the concomitant selecting out of unprofitable market segments (i.e. excluding people) and services; and using 'relationships' to sell-on connected services to existing customers (Sturdy and Knights, 1996; Hodgson and Fitchett and McDonagh, this volume).

But, the significance of customer service is now seen to extend far beyond its economic or employment-based rationales and consequences. It feeds the symbolic world of consumption, the changing meanings and experiences of it. As the distinction between manufacturing and service breaks down, so too do those of production-consumption, economy-culture, worker-consumer and authentic-enacted self (Allen and du Gay, 1994). Here, post-structuralism has shifted critical attention away from essentialist concepts such as consumer alienation, needs and false consciousness, to the joys and aesthetics of consumption and service work (as well as to associated processes of subjectification). McDonald's, for example, is said to create pleasure and innovations in habits and culture (Finkelstein, 1999). Similarly, accounts that point to the loss of authenticity we may experience in consuming and providing standardised service are critiqued as reflecting middle class humanism (Munch, 1999; cf. Ritzer, 1999). Others also eschew negative judgements on new forms of service such as 'Disneyisation' (which coexists with the more modernist phenomenon of 'McDonaldisation') (Bryman, 1999; cf. Ritzer and Liska, 1997). Here, service is centred on explicit symbolism, 'themeing', merchandising and deep (cf. surface) emotional labour from service workers and consumers - 'a new experience

economy' (see Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2000; also Nickson *et al.*, this volume). The way in which such labour is prescribed, performed and experienced remains however, a question of power and/or control. But, even here, traditional divisions and relationships are becoming less clear, namely that of employer–employee, to which we now turn.

Control

The distinctions between service and manufacturing labour processes are sometimes overdrawn. For example, it is not only in service work that personal characteristics of employees, such as attitudes and, to a lesser extent, appearance have been important (Thompson, 1967; Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996b). This is especially true in current times where a customer service ethos has entered manufacturing, in terms of 'quality' and culture management. Nevertheless, there are important differences, which condition the nature, experience and problems of control. In particular, the role of the customer/supplier introduces a 'new' third party to the traditional employer–employee relationship that problematises both the practice and theorising of control in the labour process (Leidner, 1993; Weatherley and Tansik, 1993). Macdonald and Sirianni (1996a) note how, in theory, management influence customers through employees, but in practice management may join with employees to manipulate consumers (Leidner, 1996) or with customers to supervise employees (Fuller and Smith, 1991); workers too, may use their understanding of customers or service (i.e. 'customer first') discourse to influence management; and, customers may oversee or even override/replace management (Lopez, 1996). Of course, and as already intimated, management may also use others, through the development and use of technologies, to control customers remotely through phone data entry or service tills for example. Nevertheless, it is clear that the active role and increased profile of the customer/'outsider' opens up the possibility or even, necessity for studies of work and organisation to connect more directly with broader issues of culture and politics or, in more critical terms, the superstructure or governmentality (Sturdy, 1998; Hodgson, in this volume).⁴ This requirement is reinforced by the other key characteristic of service work, the perceived importance of the personal-cultural characteristics of employees.

It is often considered that managerial attention to employees' appearance, moods and attitudes was focused mostly on those with careers, rather than jobs, with 'white collar work'. As service work and ideas have expanded in scope, so too have these invasive forms of control since the producer, in many cases, *is* the product in services (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996a:15). This has led to continued and expanding standardisation and/or commodification of personal characteristics. This has a long history. For example, Wright Mills wrote of it in terms of the increased bureaucratic attention

given, since the early twentieth century, to controlling the gap between mass production and individual consumption.

In a society . . . dominated by the marketing mentality, it is inevitable that a personality market should arise. For in the great shift from manual skills to the art of 'handling' selling and servicing people, personal or even intimate traits of the employee are drawn into the sphere of exchange and become of commercial relevance, become commodities in the labour market (Mills, 1951:182; see also Nickson *et al.* and Sturdy and Fineman, both this volume)

More recently, Ritzer (1993), Hochschild (1983) and others have demonstrated how the 'personal' and 'emotional', in particular have become increasingly rationalised, in part through the help of social science (e.g. Rose, 1989), towards the creation of an 'emotional proletariat' (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996a:3; cf. Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). There is however, a limit to the manufacture of 'personality' by individual employers (Korczyński, forthcoming). It is also costly, with the result that employers seek to hire those who possess particular attributes. Thus, stereotyped and stratified characteristics of gender, sexuality, race, class, age and 'beauty' may be employed and reinforced in recruitment and advertising for example (Denzin, 1999; Filby, 1992; Tyler and Taylor and Nickson *et al.*, both this volume). In this way, skills are devalued, long standing inequalities are continued and new divisions emerge. Service becomes segregation.

The rationalisation, commodification and exploitation of personal characteristics is, of course, highly problematic, not least because of the primary role of the customer and her/his expectations of service employees. Indeed, even within managerial discourse, controlling service – intangibility – is considered challenging to the extent that it has become central to notions of 'competitive advantage'. While organisational structures, technologies and delivery channels may be readily duplicated, 'personalised' or tailored service is far less so (Rucci *et al.*, 1997; cf. Tyler and Taylor, this volume). Accordingly and as noted earlier, we have seen the growth of more 'empowering' and 'relationship-oriented' approaches to service management as employers seek to engage employees' acquired personal characteristics and self-discipline (Bowen and Lawler, 1992).

This development parallels tensions in the control of the labour process more generally in terms of alternative *and combined* approaches of 'responsible autonomy' and 'direct control' (Friedman, 1977) – 'Taylorism and/or Taylorism' (Korczyński, this volume). Studies are emerging that map out such variations and their contingencies, both within and across sectors/workplaces (Edwards *et al.*, 1998; Frenkel *et al.*, 1999; Rosenthal *et al.*, 1997; Wilkinson *et al.*, 1997). For example, the call centre has become an emblem for academics of both new, post-fordist 'empowered' service workplaces and barely disguised work intensification and technological and group

control – ‘bright satanic offices’ (e.g. Baldry *et al.*, 1998; Kinnie *et al.*, 1998; see also: Deery *et al.*, 2000; Taylor and Bain, 1999; Korczynski; Sturdy and Fineman; Wray-Bliss, all this volume). Notwithstanding the significance of variations in control regimes, not least for those who are subject to them, it is always important to recognise ‘empowerment’ as control – through invasive practices such as recruitment, training and delegated autonomy (Leidner, 1996). Thus, while attitudes to, and experiences of, the managerial requirements of service work may vary (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Sturdy, 1998), implementation is never straightforward. This is not simply a question of generic problems of labour control and/or measurement (Gouldner, 1954; Power, 1997; Manley, this volume) nor of role conflict (Weatherley and Tansik, 1993), but linked to ideational contradictions and competing forms of service discourse.

Contradiction and Contestation

It is remarkable how the notion of ‘consumer choice’ as a rationale for action and change continues to be heralded as if it is unproblematic. The neo-liberal concept of the ‘sovereign’, knowledgeable and mobile/active consumer is indeed powerful, but it obscures producer power, in distribution and advertising for example, and presents a view of human actors as undersocialised and yet omniscient (Keat *et al.*, 1994; Knights *et al.*, 1994; Hodgson, and Fitchett and McDonagh, this volume). Equally, there is a tension between the rhetoric of serving, or relating to, the customer (e.g. through ‘empowerment’) and managerial concerns over costs, sales, profitability and the control/standardisation of labour – a customer may want to talk for hours when making a one-off purchase of a ‘low margin’ product for example (Dixon, 1992; Knights and McCabe, 1997; see also Korczynski and Wray-Bliss, this volume). Constantly raising customers’ expectations also means that achieving ‘good’ service necessarily becomes problematic. Furthermore, there are wider tensions in that some customers (e.g. profitable, Western) are ‘served’ at the expense of others and, often, of the natural environment.

Clearly, there is not the scope here to discuss all these issues/tensions and their outcomes, although many are covered in the chapters that follow. Moreover, some tensions may be resolved or, at least, lessened. For example, economies may be achieved by getting or educating customers to perform some of the labour themselves (e.g. self-service through the Internet or telephone) while tailoring other services. Similarly, standardised services may be presented *as if* they are personalised – mass marketing to units (niches) of one. Indeed, this has been common practice for some time (Smith, 1956; Sturdy and Knights, 1996). However, as Wright Mills, again, observed, customers as well as employees are often aware of the manip-

ulative game being played and participate with a 'winking eye' (1951:188). Or, as Finkelstein (1999:81) argued more recently, there is a:

heightening of our understanding that we live in a semiotic universe. The ubiquity of messages such as Have a Nice Day has now been satirized enough to teach us to recognise and resist the fatuous and empty social exchange.

The extent to which customers do resist these practices is open to debate and further research although, as suggested earlier, organisational moves to require more 'genuine' behaviour from employees (e.g. CRM) might be seen as a reaction to this. Similarly, employees' responses to customer service discourse are often varied and unpredictable or paradoxical, complicated in part by the three-way nature of the service relationship. As intimated earlier, they may collude with management in controlling the customer, albeit for different ends (Leidner, 1993; cf. Burawoy, 1979). Alternatively, they may resist the demands of emotional labour, not so much as a form of management control, but because it is seen by heterosexual/masculine men as feminine (Pierce, 1996; see also Tyler and Taylor, and Wray-Bliss, this volume). Other forms of employee resistance are more clearly directed at opposing its symbolism as servility (Paules, 1996) and/or preserving pre-existing service discourses or ethics such as those of occupations and local communities (Mills, 1951:173). Similarly, in the UK, the public service ethic has shown some resilience in terms of managerial attitudes, despite the onslaught of customer service ideas and practices (Boyne *et al.*, 1999; Pratchett and Wingfield, 1996; Manley, this volume).

Other forms of responses can be seen slightly differently, as both resistance and as the development of alternative service ethics. For example, it is often reported that, partly in response to managerial service initiatives or emphasis, employees appear committed to serving customers. However, they are also frustrated by, and critical of, management and their focus on efficiency or sales *at the expense of the customer* (Burton, 1994; Fuller and Smith, 1991). In short, the instrumentality and contradictions of customer service (for profit) are exposed and seen as exploitative of customers. For Wright Mills, such employee concern merely reflects their internalisation of impersonal ceremonial or what we might now term 'deep acting' of corporate cretisms. This, he argues, has 'little to do psychologically with old fashioned "feeling for another"' (1951:183). However, Wray Bliss, and Tyler and Taylor (this volume) are critical of such a dismissive account of employees' actions and show how they represent alternative and potentially transformative ethics of service, of care or mutual recognition (Holtgrewe, 2000). Similarly, others present service in new ways, as a gift, rather than a commodity for example (Lander, 2000).

Such resistance may also occur in a conscious, organised and collective way, such as in the case of unions seeking to redefine and/or negotiate the

meaning of 'quality service' (Martinez Lucio, 1995; Holtgrewe, 2000). For example, Eaton describes a union's development of an alternative language of service - 'the customer is always *interesting*' - through employee/member training. This contradicts that of management and seeks to restore balance between employee and customer and a 'dignified and self respecting position' for the former (1996:305). Cobble (1996) too, explores these challenges, but at the broader societal level and points to the need for a 'public conversation' or debate around the 'kind of servants we want'. These issues and practices and their structural conditions and consequences are important if the neo-liberal variant of service and society and its dominance are to be challenged. The critical accounts of customer service that follow may make an albeit modest contribution to this project. However, they too should be subject to critique. As the opening chapters, in particular, demonstrate, academic representations of service and consumers are not neutral observations or explanations, but have power effects, not least in privileging service and consumption as an arena for debate.

The Book

With its proliferation both ideationally and in terms of paid employment, customer service has been the focus of considerable and growing academic attention, especially in the UK and USA and has acquired its own conferences and journals. This has led to its incorporation into (colonisation of/by?) existing management disciplines and courses (e.g. HRM, OB, organisation theory, marketing and public sector, retail and hospitality management) as well as sociology/cultural studies, and to the blurring of boundaries between them (see Leidner, 1996; Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2000). More critical attention is also growing, although there remain few texts beyond a number of key monographs (e.g. du Gay, 1996; Frenkel *et al.*, 1999; Hochschild, 1983; Leidner, 1993; Mills, 1951: Chapter 8; Ritzer, 1993; Whyte, 1948). In terms of edited collections, the critical field is only just emerging: in the sociology of work (e.g. Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996), marketing (Brownlie *et al.*, 1999) and cultural studies (e.g. Smart, 1999). The chapters in this volume blend elements of each of these areas as well as drawing on organisational and social theory more generally in assessing current theoretical and empirical developments in the management, experience, and researching of customer service. A brief summary of the chapters follows.

In Chapter 2, Rosenthal, Peccei and Hill provide a fascinating insight into one of the main themes of this volume by considering the ways in which 'the customer' is represented in the literature on management and organisations. They argue that tropes of 'customers' are far from homogeneous, ranging from sovereigns, spies, vampires, thieves, consumers of sexuality and quasi-employees to obsessions. Moreover, each of these, especially that

of the sovereign, may be deployed in different ways, with contrasting and conflicting meanings. The authors draw out the implications that such implicit and explicit metaphors have for understanding organisations. They also consider how such a multiplicity of consumer metaphors could be the product of an intellectual game, a post-modernist dance of signifiers in which academics seek to differentiate their work from that of their colleagues and establish an identity for themselves in the literature. Accordingly, they suggest that greater attention should be given to exploring how employees themselves conceptualise and experience consumers and service. A theme taken up in the following two chapters.

For Wray-Bliss, in Chapter 3, representing employees' experiences is not just a question of establishing the 'facts', but a highly political activity in that texts can be understood as (encouraging) particular forms of social relations. For example, it is argued that much academic work seeks to provide a singular, authoritative (i.e. privileging) account which subordinates relations *vis à vis* the researched such as employees. Indeed, this group might be seen as the ultimate 'customers' of critical research. The argument is explored by examining three different possible interpretations of service work from an account based on the author's observations as a call centre employee. First, du Gay and Salaman's (1992) study on the discourse of enterprise is drawn on but critiqued as a colonising representation which has the effect of denying human agency. Second and similarly, Knights and Collinson's (1987) gendered perspective on resistance is seen as leaving employees passive in relation to controls couched in ('feminine') terms of care for customers (cf. Collinson, 1992). Finally and by contrast, Bauman's (1989, 1993) work is used to argue that the clerks' identification with ideals of customer service can be represented as their construction and narration of *moral agency* and as a resistance to the increasing depersonalising quantification of their work. This is seen to open up the possibility of understanding clerks as constructing a potentially radical challenge to the (commercial) organisation of the call centre and as less easily subordinated to a containing and limiting 'expert' academic authority.

Chapter 4 continues with the theme of alternative and radical representations of service through a discussion of competing forms of ethics or morality. In particular, an objective and universal 'ethic of justice' is contrasted with a contextual, relational and contingent 'ethic of care'. Tyler and Taylor apply these frameworks to customer service work and its gendered nature by drawing on their studies of workers in the airline industry, flight attendants and telephone sales agents. In both cases, managerial service discourse resonates with an ethic of justice. 'The customer is always right' and should expect quality service as defined by numerous objective indicators. This contrasts with the workers' perspective on service *in practice* which is often highly contextual and personal/emotional, anticipating and responding to specific needs - an 'ethic of

care'. Furthermore, management increasingly expect employees to mediate between the two in achieving both service and efficiency. In the process, a natural propensity of women to put an ethics of care into practice is assumed, in recruitment and performance measurement for example. This, the authors argue, instrumentalises an ethics of care with potentially alienating consequences.

In Chapter 5, Korczynski also explores the tension and mediation between efficiency and service quality, but in relation to the construction of an ideal type of service work organisation as *customer-oriented bureaucracy* (COB). He draws on an extensive study of 'front-line' call centre work in Australia, Japan and the USA to challenge two dominant images of contemporary service work. Both the management rhetoric of empowerment offering a win:win:win scenario to workers, customers and managers as well as the critical view (associated with Ritzer and Hochschild) of service work as fake, demeaning and routinised are seen as inadequate. Rather, it is argued, in the COB, there is a dual principle operating of customer orientation *and* rationalisation – Taylorism is tailored, emotions are rationalised and the customer becomes 'our friend the enemy'. These deeply contradictory forces are shown to result in a number of managerial dilemmas or compromises and to help account for both the pleasures and pains for staff working in call centres.

By contrast, in Chapter 6, Ritzer and Stillman argue that customer service is in transition, from a person-oriented to a system-oriented component of consumption. The former, centred on attentive and individualised treatment, is seen to be increasingly restricted to elite market niches and services. Elsewhere, rationalisation and elements of McDonaldisation continue apace. In particular, the authors focus on how customer service is coming to act as an 'expert system' for consumer society by reducing the perception of risk for customers as consumption spreads, spatially and socially, to more and more areas of life and further into the home. They explore this thesis by studying the case of *FedEx* parcel service and its 'package tracking system' for customers. This system serves both to cut labour costs through self-service and to 'simulate transparency' of information in order to reassure customers. All this is located within a broader context of the time-space distantiating and flexible production and consumption associated with late-modernity.

In Chapter 7, Hodgson is also concerned with connecting transformations in customer service with broader social processes. However, his theoretical and empirical starting points are different – the Foucauldian concept of governmentality and the 'deregulated' context of personal financial services in the UK. He also focuses on consumers and argues that their much heralded increased sovereignty and sophistication is as much a form of manipulation as liberation. In doing so, the role of governments, (self-) regulatory organisations, the media and educational institutions as well as

corporate marketing and information systems is brought into play as consumer 'freedom' is heavily managed towards responsible self-discipline. Such scepticism over neo-liberal claims of consumer empowerment is important, for much of what comes under the label of customer service is grounded in such a discourse. However, it does not derive from a concept of power as simply oppressive or hegemonic, but as productive and seductive as well. Despite this, some negative implications of consumer 'empowerment' are outlined, including the likely impact on service employees such as labour intensification as (governed) consumer expectations increase.

The pressures of service work form part of the focus of Chapter 8 by Sturdy and Fineman. In particular, they are concerned with the ever increasing corporate commodification of emotion in service jobs as well as in consumption. For example, service training is shown to target the 'self-management' of employees' positive and negative feelings - 'fake it 'til you make it'. Of course, such *control of emotion* has received considerable academic attention elsewhere, in labour process literature for example. However, less emphasis has been given to the *emotions of control* - how feelings are important in experiencing and, in particular, resisting management controls. Accordingly, the emotional nature of three different forms of resistance is outlined - 'intrapyschic' (e.g. burnout), mental distancing (e.g. cynicism) and open challenge (e.g. 'smile strikes', whistle blowing). In doing so, the aim is to begin to emotionalise labour process theory as well as politicise the largely uncritical literature in the field of emotion in organisations.

Chapter 9 shifts the focus back towards forms of control with a study by Manley on the use of customer satisfaction surveys in professional service work in the hospital and health care sector. As one might expect in a US context, such surveys have been in place for some time. However, it is only quite recently that they have been used in this sector in an attempt to control, deskill and intensify work. The focus is on crude measures of medical skill and outcomes which are informed by a TQM discourse of 'performance improvement' and backed by the institutional pressure of a regulatory body. In this way, the idea of the consumer is deployed to the advantage of one occupational group, the hospital administrators, whose task it is to administer and interpret the surveys. However, the extent of legitimacy gained by this group and the impact of the controls varied. Lower level medical staff, including nurses, were less able to resist the bureaucratic process than the more powerful physicians who, in some cases simply avoided involvement.

By contrast, in Chapter 10, Nickson, Warhurst, Witz and Cullen explore a context where service staff often embrace or consume customer service or, at least, part of it. The authors develop the increasing interest in aesthetics in organisation theory through a discussion of *aesthetic labour*. Using

research conducted in the burgeoning service industry in Glasgow – call centres and ‘style’ bars, hotels and shops – they extend Hochschild’s (1983) notion of emotional labour to cover the physical and aural qualities of employees (e.g. appearance, clothing and accent). They argue that these are increasingly being viewed as differentiating ‘skills’ by employers in competitive markets, of greater value than more trainable ‘technical’ abilities. The main interest is in the ways in which employers recruit, mobilise, develop, commodify and monitor employee aesthetics and incorporate them into the business, the corporate ‘hardware’. At the same time, employees not sufficiently skilful (or gifted) in the presentation of an aesthetic were confined to behind the scenes work or made redundant. Indeed, the authors point to some policy implications of their research in terms of addressing unemployment in the region through training for the ‘style’ labour market.

Chapter 11 is a polemic which also explores emerging developments in customer service – relationship marketing (RM) and e-commerce – and, like Chapter 7, critiques popular claims of consumer emancipation. Fitchett and McDonagh argue that RM is emerging as a new and progressive paradigm in the field of marketing, replacing the (single) ‘transaction-based’ view of customer service with a supposedly ‘long term, mutually beneficial philosophy’. New technologies, such as the Internet will, according to this view, facilitate this process by opening up larger markets, ‘mass customisation’, repeat purchases, collapsed distribution channels and instant customer feedback. Having set out this discourse and its promises, the authors systematically critique it in terms of its failure to challenge or confront existing asymmetrical power relations between organisations and consumers. RM mediated by technologies is, like customer service before it, seen as a hegemonic practice. It is, for example, organisational agents who have chosen to describe interactions in the market as a relationship or collaboration, not the customer. Moreover, for the most part, they choose whom they have relationships with and on what terms. In theory then, RM seeks to redress power differentials. In practice it is mostly characterised by attempts to socialise and naturalise them.

Finally, in Chapter 12, du Gay presents a brief epilogue to the volume by setting out an important and challenging approach to researching ‘customer service’. Here, in common with a number of the other chapters, the importance of going beyond the traditional concerns of organisation-based theories and of locating service within broader dimensions of the social world and social theory is evident. In particular, through using examples of advertising and retail, financial and security services he shows how conventional categories of *economy* and *culture* are difficult to disentangle and mutually constitutive. Indeed, it is argued that the distinction is misleading and should be broken down. Furthermore, and in keeping with all the contributions, there is a concern to reveal and critique forms of

power and point, more or less explicitly, to the possibility of alternative social relations. Doing so is especially important in relation to customer service for, as noted earlier, it is so often presented in managerialist terms, as beneficial to all.

Notes

- 1 This question, along with 'What do you mean "critical about customer service"?', was posed to the author by friends on different occasions while compiling this volume. Its use here is to emphasise how we are *all* in part drawn into customer service discourse, but not unproblematically. For example, in her autobiographical account, Lander states: 'I am both caught up in and resist the market language of contractual *transactions* related to satisfying student *customers* in the provision and payment for knowledge and learning *services* as commodities.' (2000:142, original emphasis). For a discussion comparing and contrasting sales and service discourses and work, see Morgan and Sturdy (2000) and Frenkel *et al.* (1999) respectively.
- 2 Service is typically defined as an intangible 'commodity' produced and consumed simultaneously and, typically, interactively by both employee and customer. The traditional emphasis on relational activity through voice to voice or face to face interaction (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996b) does not however, incorporate 'invisible services' such as cleaning nor does it encompass the growing use of technology such as the internet (see Fitchett and McDonagh, this volume) or telephone.
- 3 For example, it was reported how smiling and verbal greetings have been prescribed for service encounters in Greenland, even though they clash with cultural norms (Jones, 1999).
- 4 The impact of inter-organisational relations such as those with suppliers and sub-contractors, has yet to be adequately explored in terms of developments in the organisation of the labour process. This is particularly important given the increasing fluidity of organisational boundaries in some sectors and the development of networked organisations.

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