Service Work
Critical Perspectives

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CHAPTER 1

Critical Perspectives on Service Work

An Introduction

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"Have a nice day," says the smiling fast food worker in a McDonald's advert. "Certainly, sir, I can sort that out for you straight away," says a call center worker, positively purring with contentment in a car insurance advert. "If there's anything else you need, just ask," says the smiling nurse to the patient in an advert for private health care.

Everyday, we are bombarded with images of smiling service workers, happy to be able to serve customers. There is also a managerial, quasi-academic, literature which seeks to peddle similar images of happy service workers creating happy customers. Here, we are told about how service work can be organized for a win:win:win scenario for customer, workers and managers. Zemke and Schaefer's discussion of Marriott Hotels captures this nicely (1989, p.118):

The current Mr. Marriott credits his father with the philosophy of taking care of employees as he wanted them to take care of the customer. "My father knew if he had happy employees, he would have happy customers and that would result in a good bottom line."

In order to study the realm of service work we need to pan beneath the surface of these fairy-tale images of the smiling customer service interaction. We need theoretical lenses to focus the camera to allow us to see the Disney employee stripped of his dignity and his job for having his hair too long (Van Maanen, 1991), to see the increasingly detailed managerial
instructions to employees regarding personal appearance in service jobs (Nickson et al., 2005), to see meter-tall signs saying “Smile” and “Be Friendly” in the staff-only space of a supermarket (Tolich, 1993), to see the tears of pain and resentment among call center employees who have been abused one too many times by customers on a given day (Korczynski, 2003), and to see the resistance among staff who have been told to sell more to customers, but who do not want to force products on customers (Korczynski et al., 2000).

Each of the authors in this book has taken up this challenge and uses a different theoretical lens with which to focus the camera upon the organization and experience of contemporary service work. The book can be thought of as a follow-up to Working in the Service Society, published in 1996, and edited by Cameron Lynne Macdonald and Carmen Sirianni. That book featured a series of micro-analyses of different forms of service work, from bank workers to fast food workers and from nannies to waitresses. By bringing those analyses of different service occupations in one place, that book played an important role in placing service work as central to a new sociology of work. The last decade has seen a burgeoning of research in similar areas. For instance, we have seen an explosion of research into the organization of, and experience of, call center work, hotel and resort work, and care work of all kinds (Adler and Adler, 2005; Sherman, 2007; Zimmerman et al. 2006).

Such a turn to unearth the nature of service jobs, within what after all is a service economy, is very much to be welcomed. However, while the empirical gap in our knowledge of service work is being filled, there is a lingering sense that our overall theoretical understanding of service work has not advanced in the same way. Hence, the need for this book. We may have a good deal of empirical research into emotional labor demands made of flight attendants, into control systems in call centers, into peer relations in hospitality jobs, and into the pains and pleasures of care work, but there have been few attempts to develop our theoretical understandings across various types of service work, across service work per se. Our primary aim, with this book, is to kick-start work at this theoretical level. And this level is a fundamentally important one. The book brings together authors with different perspectives to offer answers to the key questions: What types of service jobs do we have? With what implications for workers? The answers offered at the theoretical level seek to articulate key essential elements in contemporary service work across various types of service occupations. What is essential within the nature of contemporary service work, of course, is a contested issue. Different theoretical perspectives tend to highlight different aspects of jobs as capturing the essence of the jobs. While class, control and resistance are the essential aspects of jobs from a Marxist perspective, from a feminist perspective, essential elements in the nature of jobs are the ways in which gender is played out and reproduced. Different perspectives give different ways of looking at different points of focus and lead inevitably to different answers to the same core root question (Korczynski et al., 2006). Such differences are at the very heart of debate, and debate is what we need to take forward further our understanding of service work. If the book provokes such debate, then it will have served its purpose well. Yiannis Gabriel’s concluding chapter certainly offers some important pointers on how such a debate may usefully develop.

The rest of this introductory chapter sets out the context for the specific chapters in the book. It does this, first of all, by defining what we mean by service work, and by laying out how service work has historically been neglected with theoretical approaches to the sociology of work, and finally, by raising the critical questions that the chapters that follow will address.

Service Work and Its Analysis

When attempting to define service work, it is useful to take as a starting point the simple abstraction that all jobs involve work on materials, information or people. Service work can be defined as work that involves working on people. The presence of the service-recipient within the labor process is the central definitional element of service work. Sometimes, such jobs involving direct contact with a service-recipient are labeled front line, or customer-contact, service jobs, and are distinguished from back-of-house, or back-office workers. The latter may work in service organizations but have no direct contact with service-recipients. The main, but not exclusive, focus of the chapters in this book is upon the service jobs involving direct contact with service-recipients. Service work in this sense involves intangibility, perishability (service work cannot be stored), variability (of service recipient expectations and actions), simultaneous production and consumption and inseparability of production from consumption. Scholars have taken one or more these aspects and drawn up sub-categories of service work against them, giving rise to such categories of mass services, service shops and professional services (see Korczynski, 2002). For instance, Leidner (1993) has charted three types of service work against the dimension of inseparability (of the service interaction from the product being sold). First, there are jobs with a weak degree of inseparability such that the service interaction has little bearing on what is sold and consumed. Fast food jobs are good examples here. Second, there are jobs where “a product exists apart from the interaction, but a particular type of experience is an important part of the service. For example ... airline passengers who buy tickets primarily to get from one place to another are promised friendly service on their journey.” Finally, there are
jobs where “the interaction is inseparable from the product being sold or delivered – for instance, in psychotherapy . . . or teaching.” This book’s main focus is on the first two types of service jobs – jobs which are mainly occupied by the “emotional proletariat,” to use Macdonald and Merrill’s phrase from this volume. Macdonald and Merrill estimate that 29 percent of workers in the US labor force work in the emotional proletariat.

Whyte has pointed out that “when workers and customers meet . . . that relationship adds a new dimension to the pattern of human relations in industry” (1946, p.123). At the very least, then, the worker-service recipient relationship constitutes an aspect unique to the sociology of service work. Within studies of specific service jobs and occupations, the worker-service recipient relationship has been examined in terms of sexualization, of degrees of worker or service-recipient servility, of who controls the interaction, and of degrees of social embeddedness and economic instrumentalism. More profoundly, it has been argued that the addition of this “new dimension to the pattern of human relations” has crucial knock-on effects upon key aspects of work organization, such as the labor process, division of labor, nature of control and forms of authority, and upon the subjective experience of work (Korczynski, 2002). Hochschild’s The Managed Heart (1983), with its exploration of emotional labor within service occupations, constituted the first important step in this direction. Hochschild alerted us directly to a key unexplored aspect of the service labor process, but also indirectly to how emotional labor demands have important implications for forms of management control and peer relations.

More recently, the emerging literature on aesthetic labor (Warhurst et al., 2003) has also signaled the need to study a previously unexplored part of the labor process that while not unique to service work is likely to be more salient for service work than for work on information and materials. The recognition of the impact of the service-recipient within the labor process upon the wider organization of work has also led some authors to suggest the need to move away from a focus on a management-labor dyad within employment towards to a conceptualization based around a customer-worker-management triangle (Leidner, 1993). Such an approach may necessitate a rethinking of such core sociology of work concepts as conflict, resistance, control and perhaps, by implication, class.

**Service Work and Social Theory: Chapter Outlines**

The terrain for social theory’s analysis of work, and the neglect of service work within this, was set by Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Readers hoping for a serious consideration of service work in any of the writings of these founding fathers will be disappointed. Each, in his own way, was concerned with the internal logic of work organizations, and with articulating the best way to conceptualize the dyadic relationship between employer and worker. We may forgive their neglect in the sense that their theorizing was primarily informed by the key ruptures in society and in work organizations that occurred during the time of their writing. The rise of the factory system and the development of a civil service bureaucracy stood before Marx and Weber as the two emblematic developments of their time. But, of course, during all this time, forms of service work continued to be key sites of employment.

If social theorists did not turn their eyes to service work, at least some artists did. For instance, we can think of the unsettling picture of the young woman serving behind the bar in Manet’s (1882) *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. And there is Charlie Chaplin’s depiction of a singing waiter in his classic *Modern Times* (1936). It has been our historical blinkers that have cast his mocking of factory work as the key motif of this film. Refreshingly, Janet Sayers and Nanette Monin in the second chapter of this book remind us that an important part of the film actually involves Chaplin and his sweetheart involved in service work at the Red Moon Café. Sayers and Monin argue that there is much that is prescient in the scenes at the Red Moon Café. They focus their analysis on the scene in which Chaplin, laughably, has to perform as a singing waiter – just after he has flung off the lyrics to the song that were written on his shirt cuffs. For Sayers and Monin, however, there is nothing laughable in the underlying message that Chaplin is articulating about service work as a commercialization of humanity.

Some of the first theoretical formulations of the implications of the shift to a service-based economy came from George Ritzer and Alan Bryan. Ritzer’s McDonaldization hypothesis extended Max Weber’s famous theory of rationalization and of the ultimate instrument of rational organization, bureaucracy. He argued that the increasing pervasiveness of rationalization can best be conceptualized in terms of McDonaldization. He sees McDonald’s as a clear and easily recognizable manifestation of how far rationalization has gone in contemporary societies. McDonald’s epitomizes the process of McDonaldization, but for Ritzer, this process applies to many spheres of life other than just a popular fast food chain. Ritzer defined McDonaldization as encompassing the process of rationalization along four dimensions: efficiency, calculability (or the emphasis on measurement), predictability and control. Wherever there is an emphasis on these four dimensions, the process of McDonaldization can be said to be in motion. At McDonald’s the emphasis on these dimensions has been such that a Big Mac is prepared and served in precisely the same way anywhere in the world, accompanied by the compulsory cross-selling garnish, “would you like fries with that?” The fact that the consumer knows exactly what kind of interaction to expect and how to interface with
workers in every chain, be it in a fast-food restaurant, a nail salon, or a phone sex service, creates uniform quality for the consumer, economic success for the owner and spiritually deadening interactions for the service worker. Ritzer (1998) has also explicitly argued that McDonaldization can be seen as a dominant force in the service sector of economies. Although the McDonaldization thesis has come under sustained criticism, not least from writers from other critical perspectives (Smart, 1999; Korczynski, 2002; Warhurst et al. this volume), it did set an important benchmark in the need for social theory to critically engage with the service economy.

In Chapter 3, Ritzer (with co-author, Craig D. Lair) applies both his McDonaldization thesis and the argument presented in The Globalization of Nothing (2004), to understand key trends in the nature of contemporary service work, epitomized by the trend towards outsourced call center work in India. The concept of “nothing” refers to the proliferation of interactions, products, and concepts that are centrally conceived and controlled, and therefore devoid of any distinctive content. Ritzer advances this concept in opposition to that of “something,” that is locally specific, culturally rich, and indigenously controlled social forms. Ritzer, previously, has articulated the concept of “nothing” with reference to consumption. In this chapter, he extends the argument towards service and he centers his analysis on the global call center work as an example of a content-free job. Interactions are carefully scripted and the worker is expected to erase all aspects of the local and specific from the customer service interaction to the extent of masking his or her geographic location.

In Chapter 4, we reprint Alan Bryman’s 1999 original statement of his thesis of the Disneyization of society. He extends Ritzer’s McDonaldization hypothesis to apply aspects of postmodern theory to consumer culture and the service organizations that organize it. Here the author emphasizes how theming, the defragmentation of consumption, merchandising, and the extraction of emotional labor from workers combine to create a distinctly inauthentic and hypercapitalist workplace. As Bryman points out, “the ever-smiling Disney theme park employee has become a stereotype of modern culture.” One need only visit the newly-sanitized corporate-branded theme park that is New York’s Times Square to see how far Disneyization has penetrated into consumer culture, and thus service interactions.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer a glimpse of what Weber and Marx might have theorized had they lived to see service-based economies. Marek Korczynski explores the contradictions that emerge when bureaucratic principles of efficiency and impersonality are joined with the service organization’s need to provide the customer with an enchanting sense of sovereignty. Korczynski argues that service organizations seek to not only create profit by emphasizing efficiency, but also by appealing to customers’ sense of service quality, or enchantment. He examines the way in which service work is organized along dual principles of bureaucratization and customer-orientation. Implicitly, service work is organized as a customer-oriented bureaucracy. It is this contradictory structure of the organization of service work that gives rise to the common finding from research that service workers’ lived experience of their jobs is a contradictory one. The customer, for instance, is often conceived of as “our friend, the enemy.”

Chris Warhurst, Paul Thompson, and Dennis Nickson apply labor process theorizing, originally rooted in Marxist analysis, to service work in Chapter 6. They argue against those who posit service work as the production and consumption of “nothing” and service economies as based predominantly on consumption rather than production. For these authors, claims about qualitative breaks associated with service work, or particular aspects of it, are over-stated and labor process theory offers a vital source of critique of such claims. They point out that service is still focused on the provision and preparation for sale to customers of materiality – beds, burgers and handbags for example. Research within the labor process tradition, from Braverman on, has long had a focus on service work. Indeed, they point out that some of the key developments in the analysis of aesthetic labor and emotional labor within service work have come from research informed by the labor process tradition.

Cameron Lynne Macdonald and David Merrill turn in Chapter 7 from the process of service production to the equally important question, “Who fills what service jobs and why?” Focusing on jobs in the “Emotional Proletariat,” they apply theories of intersectionality to explore how and why the emotional proletariat is a gendered ghetto that is simultaneously segmented by ethnicity and social class. Applying feminist theories of intersectionality to discrimination in hiring practices, they demonstrate how the complexities of the service interaction – the implications of customer “preferences” in the service triangle, the investment of the service worker’s gendered or ethnic identity as both a selling tool and an inextricable aspect of the service itself – create new and more intractable forms of discrimination in hiring.

Rhacel Salazar Parreñas takes this understanding of gendered service work further in Chapter 8 by pointing to the theoretical significance of the thousands of women who migrate from poor countries to rich ones to provide caring labor. As she points out, the international market in care work leads to an unequal distribution of care resources in the global economy, affecting not only the economies of sending and receiving countries, but also the families left behind by care workers and the lower-tier care workers who care for them. Caring work is after all, women’s work, once provided gratis by wives and mothers to their families. This “reproductive
labor" now must be replaced in rich countries where women find economic opportunities outside the home and must outsource or replace their housework, childcare, and elderly care. Parrentas makes a convincing case for the role of the state in the unequal distribution of care work, not only in migration policies, but in the extent and nature of welfare provisions and the degree to which families must privately contract for care.

Dorothy Sue Cobble and Michael Merrill's chapter on the prospects for service sector unionism brings together aspects of the preceding chapters to indicate both the challenges and opportunities for the labor movement. As they point out, many governments (particularly the US), prevent service-sector organizing by legally forbidding a substantial percentage of service workers from forming unions. Relationships with customers can be an important lever in workers' attempts to mobilize broad support. On the other hand, the extent to which workers identify with their jobs means that workers may privilege self-images as altruistic carers over fair pay and working hours, for example. The extent to which service workers must bring aspects of the self to their work plays both an enabling and an inhibiting role in worker activism. Workers may organize collectively around ethnic, gender, and occupational identities, facilitation the creation of non-government organizations and other social support organizations. In this respect her conclusion brings us full circle to classical social theory, offering a vision of occupation-based solidarity that might make Emile Durkheim proud.

In the concluding chapter, Yiannis Gabriel takes up many of the themes outlined in the book to look in a new way at the "the tug of war between employees and employers" that has been reconfigured as a customer-worker-management triangle. He focuses particularly on the aspect of care, which he sees as a key dimension in many forms of service work. Care constitutes a key element in the distinctiveness of service work for it cannot be reduced to the enactment of different emotional scripts or resistance to such scripts. Applying psychoanalytic theory, he proposes that care work unleashes certain emotional dynamics that stem from early life experiences that all humans have when, in a state of infantile dependency, they must rely on others for their survival and well-being. This generates a deep ambivalence both for service workers and their customers and this leads to a process of "splitting" to cope with such ambivalence. The psychological process of splitting itself implies a key role for the unleashing of fantasies within service work encounters. He argues that the likelihood of the playing out of fantasies from both customer and worker means that there is a considerable degree of unpredictability and even unmanageability at the service interface. Attempts to theorize this interface must address this unpredictability and unmanageability.

It is apt indeed that the concluding chapter seeks to explore and draw out the importance of ambivalence in service work, for, as these chapter summaries suggest, taken together, the various theoretical perspectives that comprise the critical analysis of service work do not leave us with pat answers. While individual chapters throw up key insights, there appears, on the surface, to be little in the way of shared clear-cut conclusions among the authors. There are three main approaches that can be adopted in the face of such insights presented from multiple critical perspectives. The postmodern approach would be to accept such theoretical ambivalence as reflecting the ambivalence of social reality. Life is a collage and so social theory must also exist as a collage, in which disparate insights from disparate perspectives co-exist. This is the inevitable state of social theory and there is nothing to be gained in seeking to push such forms of knowledge into one frame, or meta-narrative, of contemporary service work. A second approach is to throw one's weight behind one perspective and to construct a case for the superiority of that perspective against others. There is certainly something of this approach within the spirited case put forward by Chris Warhurst and colleagues for labor process theory in this volume. A third approach, that, for us, is likely to be the most fruitful, is to seek to build analytical bridges between some of the perspectives put forward in this volume, to highlight the points of shared understandings that can drive forward a broad critical sociology of service work. Certainly, the approach of intersectionality, that underpins the chapter by Cameron Lynne Macdonald and David Merrill, is embedded in the need for dialogue between analytical approaches. Similarly, the conclusion of Marek Korczynski's chapter on understanding service work through the ideal type of a customer-oriented bureaucracy asks for the productive interplay between critical sociological perspectives. If this volume throws up ambivalence, we invite readers to take up the challenge to develop the critical sociology of service work so that future anthologies on service work can begin to construct synthesis from ambivalence.

References


**Chapter 2**

Chaplin's *Modern Times*

Service Work, Authenticity, and Nonsense at the Red Moon Café

JANET SAYERS AND NANETTE MONIN

**Introduction**

In *Modern Times*, Chaplin's masterpiece about work, he discusses in depth and with much subtlety and humor, the effect of the relentless modernizing machine on the Self. The first factory scene of *Modern Times* is a very powerful allegorical statement about the effect of automation on the individual, but in the Red Moon Café and dance hall which is the final workplace for the Little Tramp, Chaplin also shows a sophisticated understanding of the challenges, ambiguities and contradictions that face the service worker. He shows service workers are even more pervasively controlled than those toiling in the factories.

Chaplin’s movie is prescient and still brilliant, and the issues he raises in this film have now been taken up in contemporary critical management literature. These issues include: the management of the body, emotional labor, aesthetic labor, the role of the customer as both co-producer and manager in service work, and the issue of authenticity, amongst others (Abercrombie, 1994; Hochschild, 1983; Korczynski, 2002; Leidner, 1993; Sturdy et al., 2001).

*Modern Times* is famous for its political and social polemic. Chaplin, in middle-age and at the height of his creative powers when this movie was made, was a political man with firmly held humanitarian views.