Non-Stop Inertia

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Introduction

Business at the warehouse was going downhill rapidly. There had already been meetings on the floor and warnings about dire times ahead. I'd only been taken on from the agency and made "permanent" a couple of months earlier, and already I was expecting to be got rid of. I'd been applying for new jobs continuously anyway since I had started there. But for others who were more attached to the place, its social and historical solidity was dissolving before their eyes. We knew that sooner or later there would be a huge cull which would eliminate about a third of the workforce; but in the meantime people were being given notice in dribs and drabs, two or three every month, mostly people like me who had only recently been employed. Every day could be the day you got the tap on the shoulder.

Meanwhile the managers strode along the aisles, on the lookout for people not keeping themselves occupied – the reductions in their own workloads presumably gave them more time for surveillance duties – and whenever one of them approached as I was dragging some pallet along or flattening a box I'd think, could this be my P45 moment? If I was being cynical I could suggest that some of the managers seemed to actually enjoy the tension that this atmosphere brought, and the extra power it gave them, even as they applied for other jobs themselves (interestingly, all the managers who seemed to embrace this role were also men). The disciplinary regime meant that no-one could stop working in the afternoon until one of the managers came out of the office and shouted at us that we could go. In the last few

minutes of the day, rather than wind down naturally, people would sneak nearer to the door to make a quick getaway when the call came, hide behind the racking like naughty school-children in order to have a conversation, or simply make gestures of looking busy, sweeping up invisible dirt or tidying shelves, even if the real work, and the will to do it, had long since dried up.

What did we have to look forward to? The sale of the company to a group of venture capitalists and the subsequent charade of a "consultation"; being scored by managers on our work performance and having to score ourselves, and then discuss the disparity between these two ratings in an interview; re-applying for our jobs and being encouraged to sell ourselves back to the company in competition with our colleagues, even as we suspected that the decisions had already been made. The temptation to refuse to take part in this bleak pantomime was overruled by the impulse for survival. Many hard-working and experienced staff were shocked by the brutality of these exercises, which seemed designed to systematically attack their self-esteem. Again, while redundancies were inevitable considering the state of the company, the way the process was conducted, compounded by the pretence of openness and fairness, was almost deliberately humiliating.

One day, after we had been let out of the building many of us would soon be leaving forever, I overheard two colleagues talking a few seats behind me on the bus. Discussing the situation, a clever and sensitive man whose wry sense of humour helped make the place tolerable remarked to his friend that the best solution for all concerned would be for the North Koreans to drop a nuclear bomb on the place. His companion responded with a roar of laughter.

The fleeting image of obliteration summed up our own daily tasks of emotional fission: the ambivalence which irradiated the building, piercing our most mundane gestures with ridiculous

unspoken fear, and the immense energy involved in splitting our real selves off from our work identities. We hated the place and despised everything it had come to stand for, and yet we were terrified of being "set free" into an economic vacuum where we would struggle to find work and have to present ourselves indiscriminately to other potential employers as similarly enthusiastic, compliant and flexible. I often arrived at the warehouse in the mornings with a mixture of relief that I still had a job and disappointment that the place had not been somehow swept away during the night, or hoping that the managers, knowing that their time was up, had deserted their posts like guards leaving a camp, so at last we could roam the aisles and offices freely without fear of reprimand until an executive somewhere remembered to phone a temp and order her to press a button and delete us all.

In a way, these contradictory but taken-for-granted feelings – a fear of imminent destruction and at the same time a wish for this corrupted and imprisoning system to collapse – form the starting point for this book. There is a sense of overwhelming precariousness, in work, in matters of money, and in culture generally; a feeling of being kept in suspense which appears like a law of nature, rather than something human-made. For many people the current economic "crisis" has arguably only validated this already-existing precariousness, and made it seem even more unchallengeable.

By exploring various aspects of culture, concentrating especially on the workplace and its related settings, I argue that this state of insecurity – which taps into our deepest fears and desires, much as neurosis draws on and distorts the unconscious – is artificially maintained, while being presented as inevitable, just a fact of life. A continual restless movement towards the next job, commodity or identity means that this reality never really comes into focus: our vision is always too blurred to orientate ourselves or see how things might be changed. Whether literally

or figuratively, by way of temporary work and perpetual jobseeking or mobile media and aspirational consumption, this superficial movement conceals a deep paralysis of thought and action. Undercurrents of resentment at our enforced participation are suppressed by a daily deluge of positive language: interactivity, progress, opportunity, choice. For evidence of this one need look no further than the anxiety and depression lurking beneath the upbeat discourse of career flexibility, or the increasing amounts of time routinely spent job searching and commuting at the expense of interests outside work.

Although theoretical sources are used to back up its arguments, this book is not a detached academic study. It is written from within the debt-driven jobseeking subjectivity which it describes. Neither is it framed by a journalistic sabbatical after which the author returns to normal life; this *is* normal life, a predicament which is, in the current parlance of work, wars and crises, “ongoing”. Theory is used to try to interpret various aspects of this everyday reality. In this way, I hope to bring into focus a social structure which at times seems both taken-for-granted and wilfully incomprehensible. To do this from inside, as it were, is a battle which has shaped the content of this book. Attempting to make sense of this absurd situation whilst in the grip of its demands is like trying to solve a Rubik’s Cube at gunpoint; the gradual annexing of mental territory is arguably both the main source of conflict between the co-ordinators of work and their flexible operatives, and the means of its suppression. Some ideas are raised here about how to try to achieve a minimal critical distance from the arbitrarily assigned and tightly regulated role of precarious worker/jobseeker. If such opportunities for stability or space were already freely available then the book itself would not need to be written.

The book is organised as follows: chapters two, three and four are concerned with issues of context, outlining this culture of flexibility and asking whether it has provided opportunities to

overturn the established order or just created new means of control. Here I also explore the concepts of “precarity” – a theoretical formulation of the work-related precariousness just described – and “emotional labour”, a term pertaining to the widespread production of *feelings* in contemporary work. The next two chapters look at the transient “non-places” of commerce, transport and communication which frame so much of today’s work and leisure, and challenge the conventional view that technological mobility has liberated the virtual worker. After this I deal with the blurring of boundaries between work and non-work, specifically through the movement from unemployment to “jobseeking”, the privatised self-help discourse which is imposed on jobseekers, and the idea that as work been destabilised, jobseeking has become a career in itself. Chapters ten and eleven illustrate these interconnected themes by concentrating on a few of my own encounters with temporary work and its social effects; and finally, as mentioned above, I speculate upon some possible forms of resistance to this system which seems to pre-empt and neutralise traditional forms of opposition.

It will be seen, then, that the content of the book moves from a theoretical perspective informed by personal experience towards an account of personal experience informed by theory.

Non-Stop Inertia

From street level, among the debris of spent lottery tickets and crumpled talent show contestants staring up from the covers of discarded free newspapers, the period of apparent change and upheaval through which we are currently living seems to signify not the disintegration of the old forms of social inequality but the consolidation of them. Just as the "war on terror" has been used as a pretext for military violence and police surveillance, the everyday language of insecurity has been put to the service of maintaining structural security. The state of emergency seems to have been made permanent. Employers in the UK and elsewhere routinely impose competitive performance targets, use short-term contracts and rely on casual agency labour, and workers accept these arrangements along with their effects: continual stress, disrupted workplace relations and irregular income. Bank debts have been seamlessly transferred to the state while public services are squeezed; supermarket chains and energy companies rake in huge profits while their customers struggle to make ends meet. And the more individuals and communities are pulverised by these pressures, the more effective they become as raw material for re-pointing the capitalist brickwork.

How did things get to this stage, where such insecurities and anxieties are taken for granted, where opposition has been flattened and so many people's lives have been taken over by a zombie existence of debtworking and jobseeking? To begin to find out, it is instructive to go back to the time when such a situation really was new and strange. In 1988 cultural theorist

Stuart Hall attempted to come to terms with these "New Times", as they were briefly known. He offered a comprehensive list of the then emerging characteristics of this now all too familiar era, under the general heading of post-Fordism:

> more flexible, decentralised forms of labour process and work organisation; decline of the old manufacturing base and the growth of . . . computer-based industries; the hiving-off or contracting out of functions and services; a greater emphasis on choice and product differentiation, on marketing, packaging and design, on the 'targeting' of consumers by lifestyle, taste and culture rather than . . . social class; a decline in the . . . skilled, male, manual working class, the rise of the service and white-collar classes and the 'feminisation' of the workforce; an economy dominated by multinationals . . . the 'globalisation' of the new financial markets . . . greater fragmentation and pluralism, the weakening of older collective solidarities . . . the emergence of new identities associated with greater work flexibility, the maximisation of individual choices through personal consumption.[1]

These changes were mirrored, for Hall, by a reconfiguration of ourselves as subjects: the New Times "are both 'out there', changing our conditions of life, and in 'in here', working on us. In part, it is *us* who are being re-made." Challenging the traditional tactics of the socialist opposition as much as the governing strategies of capitalism, Hall argued that in this new climate a return to the old Fordist production line organisation of politics was impossible: society must instead strive to turn post-Fordism "inside out", appropriating new technology and embracing these "new social movements", finding "new points of antagonism" through "a politics of the family, of health, of food, of sexuality, of the body".[2]

This somewhat optimistic view of the possibilities of the new

flexible era must itself be read in the historical context of a growing discourse of diversity, which was then beginning to challenge the old institutional structures of race and gender prejudice. The argument for a move from macro- to micro-politics represented an effort to divert the flow of the new liquefied culture, to claim the new politics of identity for those whose everyday lives had been routinely crushed by patriarchal-colonial capital.

Looking back on these New Times, however, it appears that the hopes of a new equality have not materialised. The endlessly innovative dimensions of post-Fordism mean that its inside-out version has proved to be just a logical progression of its dominant interests. In the UK, the new subjective politics anticipated the seamless transition from Thatcherism to New Labour's lifestyle marketplace: the hollowing out of the public sector by the fake corporate language of "choice", the convergence of politics and media, a postmodernised menu of values dictated by consumption. Twenty years on, the rhetoric of diversity and empowerment has been largely incorporated into the business portfolio.

What is more, those same dominant interests which harvested the profits of the new flexibility have since succeeded in marketing fragmentation as a positive social aim, a quasi-Olympic project to which all citizens are required to contribute; so the contradictory logic of the micro-political New Times has been internalised. As Arlie Russell Hochschild notes, the ongoing capitalist project to commercialize intimate life expands not only globally, but also into the "local geographies of emotion".[3] The machinery has gone inside (literally in the case of the mood-regulating drugs so widely prescribed today).

Hall also looked forward to a new feminism, anticipating a move towards a "feminisation of the social";[4] however, one of the main achievements of the new lifestyle-politics has been to create a postfeminist subjectivity defined by consumerism, a

position of what Nina Power has called “perky passivity”.[5] Meanwhile the “soft skills” of negotiation and communication traditionally associated with feminised work have been reformatted by the cut and thrust discourse of business. (As a former NHS nurse I was somewhat taken aback during an interview, while going through my employment history, to hear the pinstriped recruitment agent describe nursing as a potentially “lucrative” profession.) Managers have found that when adapted for commercial use such skills make the perfect contemporary giftwrapping for old-fashioned inequality. Many of the lowest paid, most insecure and least valued jobs are still done by women, who are now merely talked down to in a more self-aware and slippery language than before.

Unsurprisingly for such an inside-out, back-to-front society, consent to this newly liberated/indebted way of life is manufactured through consumption. We are now addressed as consumers first and foremost, rather than producers, even if we are penniless: the illusion of choice must be maintained at all costs. Even the Jobcentre calls its claimants “customers”. The role of unions in the public psyche has to a great extent been taken over by consumer rights groups. The globally positioned consumer-citizen is promised freedom and mobility through the wonders of the Internet, but this constant connectivity is in reality just another pressure. Digital consumption becomes an obligation, almost a form of self-care. Like unpaid technicians, we all obediently maintain our own media networks, and we are constantly contactable (especially by employers) through the miracle of the mobile phone, its de-yuppification another example of remote control disguised as liberation.

Permanent debt has come to shape this era of flexibility as much as insecure work, and the two are of course mutually supportive. Individual debt – due in many cases, including mine, to a combination of higher education and intermittent low-paid work, rather than the use of credit as a lifestyle-boosting steroid

– manoeuvres the individual into a position of complicity with the very system which is despised. A population submerged in debt is relatively easy to manage: most people cannot muster sufficient resources to maintain any real independence, while individual cases of financial or psychological disintegration are seen in corporate terms as an effective deterrent and a small price to pay for overall homeostasis.

Beneath the veneer of lifestyle choice, in reality most people cannot afford to accept or reject particular jobs according to their own ethical preferences or pursue outside interests which are not strictly "goal-oriented". Instead, both in and out of work one becomes a slave to one's own introjected boss, accepting even the most tenuous or unsuitable scraps of work, fulfilling one's duties of self-selling and availability, shopping at supermarket chains with unhealthy food and unhealthier employment practices and buying cheap Made In China goods. This suffocating indebtedness (along with the fear of terrorism) is the closest the UK population comes to having a collective identity. We hold our breath while a few oligarchs suck in the oxygen, even though we're supposedly "all in it together" ("it's up to all of us").

Such preoccupations divert attention away from wider abstract social or political concerns and onto a continual anxious self-surveillance. This constant precariousness and restless mobility, compounded by a dependence upon relentlessly updating market-driven technology and the scrolling CGI of digital media, together suggest a sort of cultural stagflation, a population revving up without getting anywhere. The result is a kind of frenetic inactivity: we are caught in a cycle of non-stop inertia.

From this vantage point, it is more important than ever to pull our gaze away from whatever new crisis/opportunity/spectacle is dangled in front of us and instead look for the reality which has re-installed itself in the digital/global network. Back in 1964 Herbert Marcuse described the "unfreedom" wrought by what

he called a "one-dimensional society": a culture where opposition cannot take root and negativity is taboo, a discourse of liberation which contains within itself a code for continuing domination. This unfreedom has since found new means of exerting its power through precarious work, accelerated consumption, rolling media and technological individualization. These are the "new forms of control"[6] into which the New Times have coalesced.

Marcuse's text now reads more like prophecy than history, a warning of a synthetically smoothed out society geared entirely towards preserving authority through the elimination of friction and the dampening of conflict. "Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour in which ideas, aspirations and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe."[7] Whether in politics, popular culture or academia, opportunities for real liberation today have indeed been largely repelled by market forces, or reduced to placatory simulations.

> When this point is reached, domination – in the guise of affluence and liberty – extends to all spheres of private and public existence, integrates all authentic opposition, absorbs all alternatives. Technological rationality reveals its political character as it becomes the great vehicle of better domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent mobilisation for the defence of this universe.[8]

We are permanently mobilised against change, recruited for the defence of the present economic universe. After a generation of New Times we are both exhausted by and inured to job insecurity and continuous availability, obligatory consumption and persistent debt; and we have become complicit in the system

which perpetuates and reproduces these situations. Even as we struggle resentfully under the burden of this arrangement – which is somehow both ever-changing and unchanging – we maintain and disseminate it, regarding it as unavoidable and, in many cases, as perfectly natural. To break this cycle of passivity it is necessary once again to find new points of antagonism.

Precarity 2.0

The rootless worker cannot be uprooted. In an environment where jobs (or "assignments") appear and disappear at such a rate as to seem unreal, mundane everyday worries – home insecurity, debt, bureaucracy – are regularly amplified into supernatural threats by those who co-ordinate this environment. The dread which lies behind such taken-for-granted stress cannot be clearly defined but nevertheless seems to be a constant background presence. Daily life becomes precarious. Planning ahead becomes difficult, routines are impossible to establish. Work, of whatever sort, might begin or end anywhere at a moment's notice, and the burden is always on the worker to create the next opportunity and to surf between roles. The individual must exist in a state of constant readiness. Predictable income, savings, the fixed category of "occupation": all belong to another historical world.

It seems vital, then, to give a name and a shape to this amorphous fear which presents itself to the post-Fordised subject as a force of nature or as something emanating from inside the individual rather than a deliberate external arrangement of power; and some theorists of contemporary work, including the philosopher Paolo Virno, have indeed named this particular constellation of insecurities as "Precarity":

> It is a fear in which two previously separate things become merged: on one hand, fear of concrete dangers, for example, losing one's job. On the other hand, a much more general fear,

> an anguish, which lacks a precise object, and this is the feeling of precarity itself. It is the relationship with the world as a whole as a source of danger. These two things normally were separated. Fear for a determinate reason was something socially governable while anguish over precarity, over finitude, was something that religions or philosophy tried to administer. Now, by contrast, with globalisation these two elements become one.[9]

Feelings of sudden existential vulnerability now come upon the individual as if from nowhere, in the midst of indifference, in the banal space of work; at the customer service counter, in a warehouse or call centre, as s/he services the remote needs of the globalised professional class in an almost colonial fashion. And this fear also follows the unanchored worker out of the nominal workplace and into the home: it fills gaps in conversations, is readable between the lines of emails, seeps into relationships and crevices of the mind. The precarious worker is then saddled with an additional duty: to *hide* these feelings.

Precarity is a term which has gained currency in the last decade through its use by various anti-globalisation and anti-capitalist protest networks, sometimes involving the appropriation of its religious associations (the word originates in Catholic terminology).[10] However the idea among some activists that post-Fordist capitalism must eventually topple under the weight of its own insecurities and liberate the so-called "precariat" seems less hopeful today, in the wake of a financial crisis which has resulted not in an ecstatic collapse but a new strength of authority imposed through the normalising of insecurity across work sectors. The recession of 2008/9 and the emerging era of mass institutionalised precarity might therefore prove to be a turning point for these movements.

In a particularly lucid critique of the discourse of precarity, Angela Mitropoulos questions both the convenient conflation of

different types of so-called precarious worker whose interests might actually be in conflict, and the supposed novelty of the category itself: "On a global scale and in its privatised and/or unpaid versions, precarity is and has always been the standard experience of work in capitalism." Precarity, Mitropoulos suggests, is an established historical dimension of domestic work, agriculture, sex work, hospitality, building and retail, and has been around since long before the arrival of the digital precariat.[11] Indeed, during the early years of large-scale factory production Marx noted the "temporary misery" of workers successively swallowed by industry only to be expelled by each new innovation: "The uncertainty and instability to which machinery subjects the employment, and consequently the living conditions, of the workers becomes a normal state of affairs." The more surplus-value the workers produce for the capitalist to re-invest in labour-saving machinery, "the more does their very function as a means for the valorization of capital become precarious".[12] Personal as well as social crisis has been a constant companion to capitalism throughout its successive stages of production.

The articulation of precarity in recent years is rather due to "its discovery among those who had not expected it"; those who might previously have been shielded by the relative stability of Fordism. As union support evaporates in the new flexible/virtual workplaces[13] it becomes apparent that, as Mitropoulos says, this stability was the exception, not the rule.[14] Further, there is a risk that the hypertextual discourse of precarity might merely reproduce and conceal the old divisions, with a tier of highly vocal media operators claiming to speak for the voiceless under-class of largely female and/or migrant casualised workers.

What does perhaps distinguish post-Fordist precarity from its previous models is the way it is positively re-packaged by mendacious politicians and cost-cutting bosses as an unprecedented form of liberation from a boring old job for life; work is

now supposedly both an empowering lifestyle choice and a matter of individual responsibility. This illusion is backed up by an ideology of consumerist aspiration, and by the liquidizing of the welfare state. Under the self-help dictum, if you find yourself caught in the quicksand of precarity it is up to you to haul yourself out, without relying on the employer or the state to offer a branch to cling to. Similarly, the emphasis upon self-promotion, the re-making of identity as CV material, and the masking of anxiety by an act of enthusiasm regarding whatever new generic role and costume is thrown at the individual, are also part of this new positive precarity.

Rather than a simple unity of interests, it might now make more sense to talk of a spectrum of precarity. In the UK, for instance, those at the sharp end include low paid migrant workers tied to unscrupulous agencies and gangmasters,[15] whose experiences only tend to reach public awareness through tragedies such as the deaths of 23 Chinese cockle pickers at Morecombe Bay in 2004; and those without financial back-up who are forced to navigate the border-zone between work and welfare, often while coping with the added burden of illness or disability. For these people the blending of economic and ontological anxiety, as described by Virno, is complete: the most tenuous work assignment or encounter with state bureaucracy can become a matter of life or death. These groups might actually have less in common with the freelance creatives arranging carnivalesque protests on their behalf than with people in formerly secure jobs, often in large organisations (including public services), who have been subjected over recent years to a gradual heating-up of anxiety through the imposition of temporary contracts, reconfigurations and performance reviews, and their outsourced colleagues in the agency hinterland. It is between these groups, with their hugely varying living conditions and social networks, that common resentments might be identified and useful alliances formed.

A sort of low-level or latent precarity, as experienced by myself and many others, is now a fixture of everyday life, both taken-for-granted and uncanny, immanent and untraceable; a vague electrical hum, hardly worth mentioning, too trivial to be worth complaining about ("it'll only be for a while", "at least I have a job", "it's the same for everyone", "that's just the way things are"). Especially with the guillotine poised over public services today, this repressed anxiety is fast becoming the norm; jobs dissolve into *Apprentice*-style compete-or-die self-marketing exercises, with the social purpose of the institution practically forgotten.

This set-up perpetuates itself by neutralising opposition. The spiking of the most trivial work tasks with micro-doses of anxiety drains the precarious worker of the energy to resist; the constant moves preclude insights into the wider context or co-operation between workers, and the worker who does not "help himself", even at the expense of others, is seen as deserving to fail and to suffer. This mental pressure encourages a sort of exhausted indifference, a "going with the flow" and acceptance of unfreedom. With labour infinitely replaceable, gestures of rebellion are anyway seemingly useless. The aberrant individual would only damage himself, ruining his own chances, and the system would go on just as smoothly as before.

The cold hard corporate frame of precarious work, on which its human subjects are hung like so many generic uniforms, must be exposed in order to be dismantled. Unsurprisingly though, given its generally unspeakable status, there is a conspicuous absence of discussion of precarity in mainstream politics and a wilful denial of its reality in debates on employment issues; to address the detrimental effects of irregular low paid work would mean jeopardising the flexible labour flow upon which the state hopes to float its economic recovery. Media coverage, meanwhile, understandably tends to focus on blatantly unfair cases rather than the less sensational exploitation which

routinely occurs "within the rules". Similarly, despite some reported successes,[16] unions often seem (again, understandably) ambivalent towards agency workers, perhaps tending to view them more as a threat to the security of their own members than as potential allies.

Precarity is like the dirty laundry of large organisations: chief executives and productivity gurus avert their nostrils from its negative consequences. It is hidden away from visitors, just as the company distances itself from its outsourced labour, even if it is conducted onsite. There is no attempt to address the issue, for example, in Alain de Botton's *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, which sticks resolutely, even quaintly, to its discrete occupational format. The topic does not impinge upon the glacial narratives of de Botton's scientists, engineers, accountants and entrepreneurs: work is presented here as an eternal process of honing and specialisation rather than a game of generic musical chairs, a vehicle by which individuals pursue their dreams to absurd perfection, whether in the form of a biscuit or a painting or a balance sheet, rather than a nameless phantom which stalks them through dingy corridors, threatening to erase their identities.

The closest de Botton comes to confronting the sheer emptiness of contemporary work is in his time following a career counsellor, whose motivational therapy sessions with soon-to-be-redundant employees reveal a terrible bleakness in their sentimental positivity.[17] Generally, however, rather than offering a romantic and reassuring continuation of the mythic tradition of the noble craftsman into the age of globalised flexibility, de Botton's researches would have yielded a far more realistic picture of 21st century work through an observation over the same time period of one person doing just as many different jobs, regardless of personal interest or aptitude, while applying for twice as many more, for a fraction of the pay and none of the social status.

As de Botton and his specialists travel though a landscape of

warehouses, offices and corporate fairs, the low paid jobs which keep these non-places running so smoothly for their professional managers and customers are only ever mentioned in passing, and are never subjected to sustained examination. See for instance the philosopher's chance meeting with a Turkish lorry driver in a Belgian car park, his furtive glimpse of two cleaners "laughing animatedly while they worked" in a hotel room, or his brief encounter with a Brazilian waiter whose visa is soon due to expire in the staff restaurant of a City of London accountancy office.[18] Precarity can only be detected between the lines of his text as a repressed theme, enacted by a supporting cast of logistical and hospitality staff who provide a mere human backdrop for the ensemble of star performers.

The façade of work as a place of fulfilment and a source of continuity and stability detracts attention both from its fundamental placelessness and from the true insecurity of its transient workers/non-workers. The force of this repression suggests a widely held if unconscious fear; that an acknowledgment of the real situation would break the illusion and bring the whole stage-set crashing down.

Emotional Labour

Through observing the flight attendants employed by a US airline in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in her book *The Managed Heart* Arlie Russell Hochschild arrived at a theory of "emotional labour", meaning "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display". The emotional labourer is required to "induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others".[19] Hochschild's argument, informed by Marx's critique of capitalist production, is that the construction of the persona of the emotional labourer through training, supervision and customer expectations draws upon the personal material of relationships and domestic life and transforms this into a profitable commodity, in the same way that the worker was historically alienated from his physical labour-power by the factory owner.

The transformation of the worker into the caring, cheerful or sexy flight attendant (or conversely the harsh, uncaring debt collector) therefore constitutes a form of labour in itself, whether through the external "surface acting" of gesture, language and facial expression, or the "deep acting" which involves immersing oneself in the role, a process akin to the technique of method acting.[20] In these ways the worker-performer manufactures the final product: the desired emotional state in the customer. A large part of the effort of emotional labour is taken up with creating the impression that the act is itself natural and effortless, because to show that it is contrived would invalidate the

exchange and spoil the product.

Hochschild's analysis of customer service work anticipates later critiques of post-Fordist employment, particularly that sub-category of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's "immaterial labour" concerned with what they call "the creation and manipulation of affect".[21] The performative element also connects it to Virno's concept of "virtuosity": the worker as a "performing artist".[22] As such the idea of emotional labour, with its interiorising of production and re-making of identity, as well as its view of the workplace as stage set or theatre, might be usefully updated and expanded in discussing the experience of the immaterialized precarious worker.

As Hochschild notes in her 2003 afterword to *The Managed Heart*, emotional labour has developed in two divergent ways since her original study. On the one hand, automation has reduced many interpersonal exchanges to computerised simulations (a cashpoint or website "thanks" the customer, a digitally patched together voice "apologises" for a delay). On the other hand, she suggests, looking at the US labour market, jobs relating to the outsourcing of personal and family responsibilities (and the outsourcing of emotions?) have increased.[23] To these new outlets I would add the proliferation of what I would call remote emotional labour – media work, advertising and marketing etc., especially using digital technology – during the same period. These form a sort of virtual network of indirect emotional production.

Through automation and the parcelling out to other countries of the manufacturing of physical goods, and a corresponding increase in new immaterial products (the interior colonisation of identity and relationships alongside the expansion of the capitalist empire into new territories), post-Fordism has arguably outlived the traditional customer-facing model of emotional labour. Its scripts have become generalised, insinuating their way into the very fabric of everyday life. Explicit claims over the

bodies of individual workers have been curtailed (one cannot imagine, for instance, an airline today getting away with submitting its attendants to the demeaning weigh-ins and "girdle checks" common in the 1960s and 70s[24]), just as the formulaic fictions of sales-talk are rarely believed any more, either by actors or audience, being replaced by a postmodern knowingness on both sides. But at the same time the implicit burden of emotional labour has extended far beyond the traditional spheres of sales or corporate hospitality. As consumers, feelings are foisted upon us whether we want them or not, and accumulate in our consciousnesses like psychic junk, so that eventually it becomes impossible to differentiate between the real memories and the corporate implants; and through work we are asked, as responsible citizens, to recycle and reproduce these emotion-commodities, to sell them on to others.

So there has been a diffusion of such affective labour: it functions as a sort of plug-in air-freshener to cover up the stench of precarity in every office and retail outlet, and has also spread into those areas such as health, education and welfare which had previously cultivated a "sincere", not-for-profit form of emotional labour distinct from the synthetic demands of business. In the flexible workplace the manager increasingly comes to take the position of the customer who must be satisfied, and to whom one has to continuously sell oneself. For the temporary agency worker the old distinction between employer and customer is practically eliminated.

Back in 1983 Hochschild defined emotional labour as predominantly female and, perhaps more problematically, middle class (while acknowledging the emotional duties assigned, for instance, to supermarket cashiers);[25] but these demarcations, if they ever really existed, have since dissolved, enabling the tasks of emotional labour to percolate throughout society and conjure a convenient illusion of a genderless, classless workplace. Performative elements are now integral to

jobs which would not be thought of in themselves as particularly emotionally laborious. Even warehouse assistants and data enterers have to present themselves as aspirational and dynamic, to be "effective communicators" and to identify personally with the interests of the organisation. So regardless of whether the work itself is directly concerned with the production of affect, it contains elements of emotion management and virtuosity, both in covering over true anxieties and hostilities and in summoning a contrived enthusiasm and commitment.

Illustrating this move towards communicational production, Virno suggests in *A Grammar of the Multitude* that the old Fordist production line with its sign "Silence, men at work!" has been superseded by a new post-Fordist cognitive imperative: "Men [and Women?] at work here. Talk!"[26] But it should be added, this talk is strictly regulated so as to maintain the correct "mindset". Consequently *not talking* becomes as potentially disruptive as talking used to be. Indeed, under the flexible conformity of precarity, there is no end to the personal resources of the worker upon which the employer can draw in the service of the company. Manual workers, as Virno suggests, are encouraged to contribute ideas for improving efficiency which are then absorbed into official company policy, rather than being shared informally as ways of making the job easier.[27] Even if such exercises are of no practical use to the management (i.e. in streamlining staff levels), they still serve a symbolic and ideological function by eliciting consent under a banner of "participation". The same can be said for "huddles" and "team-building" exercises, which paradoxically promote an individualized workplace in which informal social contact is compulsorily directed towards formal corporate goals, rather than work being a mere setting for social life. So a performance of informality might actually disguise a formality which is all the more powerful for being unacknowledged; and this (in)formality, like the orientation of the precarious worker, is internalised and becomes self-perpetuating.

Finally, and crucially for my purposes, emotional labour can be broadened beyond the traditional boundaries of work and applied to the whole para-occupation of "jobseeking". The well-prepared candidate has already started "putting in the hours" prior to receiving a wage. The skills required to present oneself correctly to employers and generate future opportunities constitute a new untrammelled form of emotional labour, driven by insecurity, which leaks over into leisure and consumption and colonises the social life whose energy it has drained, transforming the home into an office and friendship into a promotional network.

The job interview is perhaps the most obvious example of this sort of unpaid emotional labour: here the candidate must appear sufficiently confident and enthusiastic to satisfy a selection panel assessing "presentation" and "personality", as if these were objective scientific criteria. (Some employers, no doubt tooled up with pop-psychological theories of body language, seem to pride themselves on their ability to tell instantly from the way an applicant enters a room whether they are suitable for the job, unaware of how fantastically ignorant such claims make them sound.) So the interview, regardless of the job, becomes a kind of talent show audition hinging on generic questions about change, teamwork etc. (the equivalents of the standard repertoire of *X Factor* ballads), while the interviewee must project an all-purpose positivity by extemporising around this script without revealing its artificiality. The candidate must project the right image and hit the right notes, and must put his "heart and soul" into every performance, even for the most dreary role.

Preparation for the interview therefore ceases to be about the actual content of the job and instead becomes a theatrical rehearsal, concerned primarily with costume, demeanour, eye contact, stage presence, learning one's lines. The character of the applicant must be placed within a seamless yet engaging narrative, and any outside interests incorporated into the work

sphere (so for instance, for a retail job, an interest in films becomes "I like to keep track of all the latest DVD releases"). Above all, it is important to appear "natural". Actual experience is secondary to a willingness to blend in; to contribute to that collective suspension of disbelief which is vital to the smooth running of the contemporary workplace.

Neither is such unpaid emotional labour limited to the supposedly professional, highly motivated candidate, as depicted by the smiling replicants of agency websites and corporate newsletters. Under the law of aspirational inclusivity, everyone is a contestant in the jobseeking talent show, whether or not they are natural performers. The forced smile of compulsory enthusiasm is stretched across the welfare-to-work programmes and reflected in the unglamorous depths of the economy. I recently underwent a recruitment process for pre-Christmas shelf-stacking work at Asda (a UK subsidiary of Wal-Mart) which involved, first of all, filling in a multiple choice questionnaire ostensibly "designed to let us know more about the type of work you enjoy and the kind of person you are". This consisted of twenty pairs of either/or statements. Some examples:

A) I am orderly	B) I am easy going
A) I am absorbed with ideas	B) I notice things around me
A) I follow the rules	B) I try to find short cuts
A) I am calm	B) I am lively
A) I work best without pressure	B) I enjoy time pressure
A) I am argumentative	B) I respect authority

Of course the answers given say nothing about your personality, other than whether you understand the expectations of the workplace you will be entering, and whether you are willing to conjure up a version of yourself which fits in with that workplace – showing respect for order, rules and authority, and displaying enjoyment linked to productivity (Oh yes, I *enjoy* time pressure),

supplying practical energy rather than calm absorption and abstract ideas. Many other retailers have similar recruitment questionnaires, whose pseudo-psychological blurb is merely a cover for testing one's capacity for conformity. The flimsy realism of the act is illustrated by the statement on the form that "there are no right or wrong answers". By circling the correct first-person statements and signing the form, the candidate "takes ownership" – in the current therapy-speak – of this ultra-complaint persona, gives it his name, and consents to its future on-demand production.

The questionnaire was followed by a "group screening" session in the training room of an Asda store. There twelve of us were shown a corporate documercial in which various beaming employee-performers listed the company's "values" and "beliefs" (unsurprisingly, these involved saving its customers money and looking after its employees, rather than making money for itself out of those customers and employees). We were then divided into groups, given large sheets of paper and coloured pens, and told to design a poster, based on the content of the video, which would "sell" Asda to a potential employee. Finally, each group had to stand up and present its poster to the other groups and the assessors.

It might seem odd to approach retail recruitment from the point of view of promoting the company to its own staff, rather than to its customers; but then, as noted earlier, this process is not so much about "selling" in the old sense, but about instilling a particular way of performing-thinking-feeling; making the candidates claim this positive attitude as their own and recognise it in others, as something natural and almost spiritual, rather than artificially imposed.

Under cover of a teamwork exercise, this was effectively a task of emotional labour. We were required to induce and suppress certain feelings in such a way as to satisfactorily identify Asda/Wal-Mart as the caring happy "family" of the

corporate video, presumably with the managers cast as parents and ourselves as innocent children, in a felt-tipped primary coloured world where the reality of consumer capitalism was unthinkable, or at least unspeakable. As with the questionnaire, this exercise (which, behind the façade of "selection", was surely self-eliminating) demanded an act of virtuosity, using various props to improvise the sort of generic character which was expected of us - positive, unquestioning, enthusiastic, extra-mile-going - and then offering this version of ourselves willingly. The aim was to plant in our minds a suitable emotional orientation which could later be harvested for a profit.