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“That type of thing does give you a boost”: Control, Self-valorisation, and Autonomist Worker Copings in Call Centres

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Abstract

There are growing concerns over current and future incarnations of routine work, based on the rise of technology and its perceived impact on skill requirements in the labour market. Drawing on Autonomist Marxist (AM) literature, the following article demonstrates how and why workers are likely to play a role in maintaining meaningful forms of work. Complimenting labour process research which focuses on the role of worker ‘resistance’ in the workplace, we develop a more nuanced perspective on worker agency and the human potential to *create* meaning through self-governance in even the most unlikely service work encounters. Taking resilience and reworking agencies as subtle forms of ‘self-valorisation’, we show how different spaces of routine work are mobilised for reproducing human connections and values in ways which act as in opposition to management’s control and the evolution of unpleasant work environments.

Introduction

The following article offers a riposte to claims on the limited agency of workers to negotiate labour market and work realities, spurred by the onset of new technologies (Glaser 2014; Graeber 2013; Graeber 2018; Mason 2015). Through a focus on the agencies of call centre workers we demonstrate ways in which people can and do mitigate the effects of deskilling as facilitated by technological and bureaucratic control. In doing so we examine multiple ways in which workers (in combination with capital) transform the workplace through resilience and reworking strategies which, we suggest, offers optimism regarding people's ability to make the most of unpromising work environments.

Theoretically our contribution draws upon Autonomous Marxist (AM) perspectives on work, within and outside radical geography, as a form of capitalist control that is always reliant on the vitality of human agency. Contrary to a threat of work loss, AM theory views work as vital to capitalist control and its goal of subordinating human autonomy, creativity and free-thinking (Böhm et al. 2010; Cumbers et al. 2010; Hardt and Negri 2004). Building on the notion that workers are as important to capital, as capitalist work is for workers own reproduction, we explore coping practices which workers (i.e. autonomous people) deploy to maintain personal visions of what work should entail and feel like. Our focus is based on the understanding that, far from acting as passive dupes, people construct their own work realities which contradict the vision of low-end service work as meaningless and unsatisfying. Our focus includes a lens on to the more productive forms of coping as well as foot-dragging resistance, as evidenced in the course of routine moral dilemmas in the course of working (Hastings 2016; Mullholland 2004). In certain cases, workers are shown to *re-work* seemingly deskilled positions by variously 'thinking above their station', pursuing their own agendas and 'making a difference' to the lives of customers by treating them with values of empathy and care (e.g. refusals to treat customers as targets and/or else spatially distant 'others') rather than on a pure transactional basis.

In our engagements with Autonomous Marxism we offer two main contributions. Firstly, we provide greater insights into what constitutes human 'doing' and self-valorisation *within* the workplace. A rather

ambiguous term developed by Holloway, *doing* refers to the multitude of ways and means in which people negate their abstraction under capitalism (Böhm et al. 2010: 21; Holloway 2002; Holloway 2010a; Holloway 2010b; Holloway et al. 2008). In the course of our discussion we suggest ways in which autonomous creativity (human ‘doing’) manages to co-exist alongside forced processes of abstraction inside the labour process. In the main discussion worker agency is shown to include alternative visions for work (and the pursuit of these visions) as linked to individual values and ambitions associated with a sense of worth and desired impacts on wider society (i.e. as determined by the individual).

Such insights into everyday actions within work are offered as a productive contribution to labour geography which has too often relied on more remarkable and unusual cases of labour resistance (Peck 2013; Peck 2018). To achieve this, the article proceeds as follows. In the first section we outline AM perspectives on worker agency and coping at the point of production. The main discussion is then used to explicate a role of worker agency in overcoming labour process controls which have been perceived as delimiting autonomous decision-making in work. We finish with a brief conclusion of the findings discussing what this means and suggests for future directions for research.

Work and Autonomist Marxism

Claims of a post-capitalist era in which working roles are displaced by non-human technology have grown popular in recent years, questioning the value and longevity of entry-level positions in which labour is easy to replace (Bregman 2017; Graeber 2013; Graeber 2018; Mason 2015). Despite these claims, critics have questioned the totalising effects of scientific innovations, observing that technology is likely to play a role *alongside* rather than instead of human agents (indeed a recent report by the OECD has downplayed the rate at which automation is likely to replace human work; Findlay and Thompson 2017; Nedelkoska and Quintini, 2018). In rejecting the ‘end of work’ thesis, critical discussion has also pointed to the role of worker agency in effecting labour market change, including the uptake of new work technologies in the labour process. As noted by Thompson and Briken:

‘...we have been here before with previous waves of technological determinist predictions from futurists and other ideational entrepreneurs of the ‘end of work’ (e.g. Rifkin, 1995). Such determinism lacks not only a sound empirical basis but also an appreciation of agency. To avoid the same mistakes, analysis of the future role of the digital in capitalism needs to embrace an understanding of the varied contexts, power relations, choices and decision structures and the capacity for resistance.’ (Thompson and Briken 2017: 258)

The following discussion expands on this perspective by engaging with radical Marxist literature in the Autonomous Marxism (AM) tradition. Unlike orthodox Marxist perspectives which begin from the standpoint of capital, AM theory starts from the more positive position of people as creative and autonomous ‘doers’ which *capital chases to engage* rather than vice-versa (albeit often with state support through labour control regimes; see Helms and Cumbers, 2006). In making this point AM approaches open up numerous antagonisms which flow through the capitalist system, a point made through its central focus on the dual nature of labour. By this, Autonomists refer to the ongoing process of alienation and antagonism which takes place when human activity in the *concrete* form is subordinated into *abstract* labour under capitalism (see Bonefeld 2010; Hardt and Negri 2001; Hardt and Negri 2004; Holloway 2010a). Accordingly:

‘the crucial point is to conceive of it (labour) as a self-antagonistic category, rather than as a unitary concept. “Labour”... is a category which obscures the antagonism between “concrete labour” and “abstract labour”. As such, it conceals the power of concrete labour and human creativity; it exists in the form of abstract labour, or – as Richard Gunn puts it – it exists “in the mode of being denied”. On this account, “concrete labour” exists in the form of being denied...it exists in , against, and beyond its own denial’ (Holloway and Susen 2012: 31)

Strands of Workerism (*Operaismo*) followed by *Autonomia* developed traction throughout the 1970s in Italy (Böhm et al. 2010; Gray 2018; Wright 2002), furthered more recently by the insights of Antonio

Negri, while contemporary texts in the tradition have grown to include John Holloway's '*Crack Capitalism*' (2010b) and Harry Cleaver's '*Rupturing the Dialectic*' (2017). Each underline a perspective that human struggles are waged not just *against* capital, but also *for* a variety of new ways of being through multiple forms of self-valorisation (Cleaver 2011: 55). Developed by Negri, self-valorisation refers to a multitude of possible actions which go beyond *reacting* to capital (e.g. by 'fighting back'), centred more positively on creative, imaginative efforts to re-invent the terms of human activities and our ways of living (Cleaver 1992; Cleaver 2000; Negri 1991). In this sense self-valorisation 'indicates a process of valorisation which is autonomous from capitalist valorisation – a self-defining, self-determining process which goes beyond the mere resistance to capitalist valorisation to a positive project of self-constitution' (Cleaver 1992: 129; Holloway 2010: 920-921). The dynamic of self-valorisation may thus be described as radicalisation of worker antagonism, aimed not just at opposing capital but also at the social *re-appropriation* of value (del Valle Alcala 2013: 79).

This take on worker autonomy aligns with new labour geography's (NLG's) normative and analytical concern for labour's agency to shape economic space through proactive, novel and creative spatial strategies¹ (see Herod 2001; Peck 2013). AM and labour geography perspectives share a core belief in labour as 'agent and not victim', while supporting inquiries into labour's political possibilities (certainly by contrast to orthodox Marxist accounts and post 1970s Anglo-American economic geography; Peck, 2013: 109). One of several 'pluralised' approaches to examining labour agency and employment in economic geography, NLG has drawn criticism for creating new structure-agency binaries in favour of worker praxis, thus over-stating labour's ability to contest structural constraints (Castree 2007; Peck 2018: 15; Hastings 2016). Addressing this trend, it is in this context that we engage with AM thinking as a theoretical lens into the *continual and everyday* forms of agency which people evoke through routine engagements with the labour market, thus avoiding a focus on more dramatic and selective cases of worker resistance. Rather, our focus is on more typical, omnipresent forms of agentic lived experience at work in which people make restricted labour market options work for them in autonomous ways. Importantly, AM inspired work has also emphasised the way individuals and communities create

their own agency both individually and collectively beyond the workplace around the realm of the household and social reproduction (Cumbers et al. 2010).

While the majority of AM workplace studies have focused on work refusal strategies and the creation of non-capitalist spaces it is important to consider other forms of human agency which coexist within capitalism (for refusal studies old and new see Gambino 1976; Mullholland 2004; Tronti 1965; Woodcock 2017; notably other AM work has focussed on non-capitalist relations outside the world of work: see Chatterton and Pusey, 2019)². This point is similarly observed by Glassman, who notes that post-Marxist theorists have often focussed too much on the pursuit of noncapitalist economic spaces, ‘creating unwarranted pessimism about prospects for change emerging from *within* capitalism’ (Glassman 2013: 254, emphasis added; see also White and Williams 2016). Agency in the context of capitalist dominance includes a multitude of copings based on more passive forms of non-compliance such as foot-dragging, sabotage and feigned ignorance (Mullings 1999; Scott 1985). Within the workplace studies in the labour process theory (LPT) tradition exemplify this case, showing how workers make their own meanings through gameplay and social interaction, forms of coping which both combat alienation and allow for the generation of new value systems ‘from below’ (Birdi 2013; Burawoy 2012; Featherstone and Griffin 2016; Mullings 1999; Scott 1985). At the same time it is well noted that methods such as gameplay often distract and help mystify the capitalist relations of production, aiding forms of compliance which ultimately support capital’s hegemony in the long run. In this sense a majority of LPT and orthodox Marxist based inquiries of the labour process convey less transformative visions of human agency than those of self-valorisation based on autonomous self-constitution (Cleaver 1992: 129; Weeks 2011: 95-96).

Holloway’s *Crack Capitalism* offers important counter insights in this respect, referring to more minor forms of autonomist practices - ‘spaces or moments of other-doing’ - which, whilst stopping short of fully autonomous acts and behaviours, nevertheless push forward in that direction (Holloway 2010b). Whereas Negri’s use of self-valorisation refers chiefly to autonomous spaces outside of the capitalist labour process, we draw on the notion of ‘cracks’ to explore the small autonomous practices present

within spaces of *doing work* (Holloway 2010a). Holloway sees this term as comparable with self-valorisation, noting ‘it is clear that we are speaking of, and trying to understand, more or less the same processes of revolt’ (ibid. 189). Holloway insists that abstract and concrete labour *coexist* as a constant ‘live antagonism’ (Holloway 2010b: 189), implying a broad vision of self-valorising incorporating ongoing everyday life experiences both within and beyond the workplace:

‘Perhaps the great appeal and strength and weakness of autonomist or *operaista* theory is that it is a theory for activists, a theory of activism, but of an activism separated from the experience of everyday living. I want to reach beyond that and to ground our understanding of revolt in everyday life...Quite simply, life is the antagonism between doing and abstract labour, and activism is simply a particularly intense expression of that all-pervasive antagonism, from which it separates itself as its peril.’(Holloway 2010b: 190)

We are sympathetic to this broader conception of self-valorisation based on the continual antagonism we face to realise *useful doing* in all walks of life (i.e. including the spaces in which we perform ‘routine work’) while implicated in alienating and exploitative capitalist labour processes. To better convey what self-valorisation may mean in this context, we use the concepts of ‘resilience’ and ‘reworking’ developed by Cindi Katz and previously deployed in labour geography accounts (Coe and Lier 2011; Cumbers et al. 2010). Unlike resistance in the sense of directly challenging capitalist power relations, *resilience* here refers to acts of coping and ‘getting by’ within existing social relations of the workplace, while *re-working* implies a deliberate recalibration of power relations with a view to improving life experiences (i.e. in the context of a range of structural constraints and contexts; see Katz 2004; Hastings 2011). In this context resilience is useful in exploring how learned behaviours and values (e.g. developed in past roles and non-work spaces of social reproduction) are autonomously reproduced and sustained within the labour process, while forms of reworking are more transformative in nature and geared to qualitative adjustments in the tasks that workers perform.

The next section discusses the methods used within the research. This is followed by a main discussion and conclusion section where we consider some of the broader implications of these findings.

Methods

The research draws on fieldwork involving 82 semi-structured interviews with call centre workers and different stakeholders with a strategic interest in this work, focussing specifically on four call centre case studies³. This work included in-depth case studies of three Glasgow call centres: a city council call centre handling customer inquiries (Gov-Tel); a technical support centre (Game-Tel); and an outsourcer sales call centre (Sales-Com) in which agents handled sales functions for a variety of clients (high to low-value contracts). Additional interviews also took place with workers from *TribJust*, a remote service centre based in England which provided a helpline and conciliation service for employees and employers experiencing or anticipating workplace disputes⁴. Workers in Gov-Tel and TribJust had access to a public sector union, though organised resistance did not emerge as a significant theme from discussions with participants (see Noronha and d’Cruz 2006; Woodcock 2017). In the Glasgow cases access was granted to undertake non-participant observation of call centre work ‘in action’ based on time spent with agents operating on the phones. This allowed for the recorded observation of call centre work including interactions and discussions of life on the phones in real time (observations were recorded in a diary). To a certain degree this also allowed for observations of emotional labour in practice, a subject of interest given the nature of the call centre role in managing and performing emotions over the phone. The selection of case studies was chosen based on a combination of access availability and to reflect experiences of people drawn from a range of key sectors involving call centre work (Batt and Moynihan 2002; Glucksmann 2004; Taylor and Anderson 2012; Taylor et al. 2002)⁵. A focus on government owned/affiliated call centres was also seen as relevant in the context of austerity programmes (i.e. post 2007) which have led to the increased use of intensive performance targets in line with requirements to deliver service efficiencies in the context of economic cut-backs (see Davies 2011).

Jamie Woodcock's own workerist inquiry into call centre work (Woodcock 2017) here provides a useful comparative study for exploring different internal responses to the tight controls of the call centre labour process (often seen as analogous to factory/Taylorist principles, an assembly line experience and electronic surveillance; Bain and Taylor 2000; Taylor and Bain 1999). Woodcock's own inquiry reiterated many of these hallmark features, together with emotional labour and feelings requirements, again finding a common recourse from staff in the form of work refusal (e.g. efforts to avoid work and the ultimate form of resistance: turnover). At the same time studies have also found that people negotiate call centres through a multitude of other methods include social practices such as humour (Taylor and Bain 2003) while for other workers (in particular in offshored cases such as India) call centre roles have offered a route into more varied career progression (Benner and Mane 2009; James and Vira 2012).

Given the number of interviewees, and the limitations on word length for this article, it is not possible to discuss the profiles of all those who inspired findings in the research. The following interviewees are worth considering in relation to some of the direct quotes that follow. Eddie (Gov-Tel call centre agent) was a fifty-year-old Glaswegian who left school at 16 and had built up a varied work history including spells of unemployment. Following work as a landscape gardener with the City Council in the 1980s (part of a back to work scheme) Eddie had gained office-experience in the department of land services, prior to transferring internally to Gov-Tel. Steven (agent, Gov-Tel) was a thirty-three-year-old who previously worked as a factory supervisor at Motorola in Motherwell. In Sales-Com Anya (30 years old, call centre agent) had migrated from Poland prior to finding a role on the phones, and was fluent in multiple languages. Reflecting on the last two years at Sales-Com, Anya noted that her position at Sales-Com had proved hugely useful in meeting people and settling in to Glasgow. Drawing on a similar social rationale, Leon (Sales-Com call centre agent) was a 28 year-old Glaswegian who had worked for a number of call centres prior to Sales-Com (Leon had worked for Sales-Com for four years). His main rationale for call centre work was a service role that paid better than bar/restaurant work and allowed him free weekends to socialise with friends. These expectations for call centre work differed to Jennifer (26, former helping agent now working as a trainer) who had worked in TrustJust for two and a half years. Jennifer viewed TribJust as a route into a more challenging career in the public sector in the area

of conciliation. Accordingly, this selection of different workers sheds light onto common and contrasting forms of ‘doing’ and self-valorisation in the role as linked to distinct uses for call centre work (McDowell 2015). We now turn to the main discussion section and explore the experiences of these and other staff in the call centre roles.

Autonomy in Call Centre Work

In common with familiar findings on call centre work the case study centres were found to rely on a range of quantitative and qualitative criteria/targets, used to help direct the quality of interactions between agents and customers (Taylor et al. 2002). Case centres also bore the hallmarks of volume-driven and routinized control settings for the most part, with only Game-Tel emphasising a focus on quality and reasonable time between calls. Agents in the remaining cases endured pressure to maintain high rates of availability and to deliver on a range of qualitative targets connected to their centre’s operation. Importantly the role of workers in each case was formally demarcated to include set tasks with limited discretion., with more complex tasks passed to specialist operators often based outside the call centre in question.

In explaining the ways in which workers seeks to maintain their own spaces of activity in the labour process we focus on different spaces of the call centre workplace (an approach similarly used by Mann 2004). Goffman’s (1990) dramaturgical focus on self-presentation is here applied to the call centre work space which simultaneously operates as both a ‘front’ and a ‘back’ region (see Crang 1994; Mann 2004), based on the mediating effects of technology and depending upon the set of social relations in question. On one level agents are seen to perform in a ‘front’ region in which their performance is verbally ‘on show’ to customers and captured through monitoring technology and procedures (see Bain and Taylor 2000; Fernie and Metcalf 1998). Outside of this voice interaction and formal surveillance, the ‘inside’ of call centres also functions as a ‘back region’ in terms of the scope for non-verbal interaction between agents, facilitated by the fact that they rarely sit in close proximity to management on the floor. In the

following sections we discuss worker praxis in relation to self-valorisation in each of these dramaturgical spaces.

Back-stage: resilience in the workplace

Some of the more obvious ways and means in which interviewees had railed against role expectations included the use of back-stage spaces for (different) non-work purposes, including day-dreaming, socialising and the pursuit of personal interests within or outside the role (including off-phone study by students). In pursuit of these activities in several cases workers commented on efforts to appropriate time by extending the use of ‘wrap-up time’ for breaks (‘I go on strike for a bit!’; authors’ interview) and technical errors to expand time between calls (e.g. problems with the Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) system⁶). In doing so workers were able to take back some degree of control over their machines instead of being controlled ‘by them’ (Burawoy 1979: 81; Meegan 1996). Of these practices, day dreaming and self-study reflected a highly individualised and hard to trace set of practices, combatting monotony by engaging in ‘free, conscious activity’ (Holloway 2012: 89):

‘Ach! My brains away in a different world...you *are* paying attention to what the persons saying, you know, but in-between calls and other times, you’re away in a dream world. See when Gemma came to get me there, I was sitting staring out the window like that (smiles and draws a relaxing sigh) – ‘cos I’m going away for the weekend up to Ullapool.’ (Steven, Agent, Gov-Tel)

‘There were bits of helpline that I did enjoy... The case law is always changing, there is always something new to advise on and you’re always going to come across people with a question that you haven’t come across before. So there’s always the opportunity to look into the law in slightly different ways, in more detail, whatever it may be. So I enjoy that side of things...’ (Jennifer, Former helpline agent, Tribjust)

These varied activities may be read as a form of self-preservation or resilience within the role, in line with resilience based forms of ‘getting by’ (Katz 2004). Day-dreaming in particular helped workers to realise basic human desires to think (or dream) of non-valorised/non-work moments and social relations outside of capitalism (e.g. time spent with family). Adding to these (individualised) forms of switching off, more collective forms of ‘getting by’ drew parallels with much LPT case study research of interplay in a deskilled labour process settings:

‘Come on! What do you do in the call centre? We’re basically sitting next to each other and making jokes. You’re not concentrating constantly on work, you’re trying to get your thoughts *off* work, so when you sit next to somebody eight hours every single day, there is no possibility you won’t blend in with them really well...’ (Anya, Agent, Sales-Com)

‘...You’re bleathering to whoever’s sitting beside you, you know talking about anything – football, holidays, the usual nonsense, having a laugh, slaggin’ one of the lassies off or whatever – just to keep morale up, and you know, to alleviate the boredom. Because it does get boring: you’re chained down, you’re not up, you’re thinking to yourself...’ (Steven, Agent, Gov-Tel)

In several cases interactions bore resemblance to factory-based ethnographic studies of the workplace (e.g. Donald Roy’s ‘banana time’, 1973; Burawoy’s ‘Manufacturing Consent’, 1979), with agents drawing on past experiences and ways of acting learned prior to a role on the phones (e.g. branch plant manufacturing roles in/around the Glasgow area; author’s interviews). Many practices drew admonishment from Management, including routines of ‘slaggin’ off the lassies’ (a common patriarchal practice in Gov-Tel which employed several former factory workers and staff drawn from other areas of the Glasgow Council), and the use of whipping boys and pranks at Sales-Com. Reflecting the backgrounds of particular groups, workers in many cases sought to embed their own personally desired norms and routines, at times clashing with both with the ideals of others and reinforcing gender and social power relations around call centre work cultures (Cleaver 2011: 56; Hastings and MacKinnon 2017)⁷. The point here is not the morality of worker actions in these moments, but rather the ability of

workers to construct their own ‘times and spaces with alternative activities and new forms of sociality’ (Cleaver 2011: 64).

Unlike forms of resistance which directly challenged management, then, these acts are better categorised as forms of resilience which enable workers to cope and create their own meanings amid otherwise dull and repetitive tasks (Taylor and Bain 2003) but not always in socially progressive ways, particularly in relation to gender. At the same time, it is important not to over-state the transformative potential of the behaviour, which paradoxically worked to *support* the reproduction of capitalist social relations by recuperating and readying people for further calls and wider rounds of work. This agency may be read as similar to the gameplay discussed by Burawoy, and was reliant to a large extent on consent to the workplace regime⁸. A similar point is made by Cleaver with respect to food preparation and meals, which, while recharging workers for further rounds of work, achieve far more than this in terms of helping to sustain human relations based on affection and intimacy (Cleaver 2011: 6). We now turn to discuss more transformative forms of self-valorisation based on re-working strategies within the call centre role.

Front-stage copings: reworking the call centre role

It was in the ‘front stage’ of the customer interaction that agents faced the greatest test to their personal expectations for achievement and creative sustenance at work. This space also included a number of challenges to personal ethics and outlooks on the work itself, in which workers weighed up the importance of doing tasks as instructed or else pursuing personal decisions contrary to these objectives. This was especially the case in public sector centres TribJust and Gov-Tel where longstanding agents voiced frustration at perceived changes to the service ethos as linked to transitions to remote service delivery. As noted by another interviewee remarking on TribJust as a whole: ‘The ethos of TribJust and why I came to work for TribJust is eroding rapidly because they are too focussed on targets... when I came first you did your best, you gave it your all, you tried to get a resolution.’ (Interview, Maureen, TribJust).

In Tribjust several agents felt the call centre format had depersonalised and deskilled a role which was previously face-to-face in nature and embedded in regional ‘patches’. By contrast to more personalised/proximate interactions, agents were now tasked with remotely processing hundreds of conciliation cases annually, under pressure to maintain high average rates for ‘early conciliation’ (i.e. as based on an average of calls). Concomitantly, monitoring and the use of targets was seen by some to have eroded the pursuit of good work as part of a shift to a monetary focus based on savings to the taxpayer (typically accrued through early conciliation, this led one manager to jokingly depict TribJust as ‘the enemies of justice’ – authors’ interviews).

Here several workers spoke of ways in which personal values - unrelated to training or the remit of the centre - were carried over as a result of ‘human’ obligations which trumped management requirements. This included instances where members of the public were clearly distressed, and related scenarios where the dry administering of information was seen as insensitive to the needs of those calling in:

‘...some people go more the kind of empathetic route and try and offer advice that is outside of the employment law, you know ‘have you spoken to a family member, have you spoken to the Samaritans, have you done this, have you done that?’. Which probably we shouldn’t do, but you can’t help it sometimes...our remit is to give employment law advice, but sometimes you have to kind of ignore that and just be a human being’ (Jennifer, TribJust)

Many such acts reflect forms of caring extended to ‘anonymous others’ through the phone. Of note in the above quote, agents expressed frustration that their ‘human’ ways of coping conflicted with targets and the formal quantification of their performance. Faced with this conflict, agents more often than not advised that supporting people and not ignoring them was more important than maintaining targets in the role. This decision to support tended to reflect the individual preference of the worker, as reflected by responses to numerous ‘grey areas’ in the customer interaction where no formal path to resolution was obvious. To take a trivial example, in Gov-Tel agents often exploited their own decision-making

power when deciding what to advise customers on issues, including self-directed advice independent of any training. Among various examples, advice from Eddie ranged from methods for tackling pest control without help from the council to frank discussions on why bins were not being collected ('they probably sent the lazy squad out') (author's interviews).

Agents often relayed what they felt was best for customers in terms of coping with the realities of service provision, what would *really* help/improve lives and the best ways of coping with delays to routine services. While such practice may be more expected in the context of public sector work, similar sentiments over customer wellbeing were also expressed in the private Sales-Com centre, in which agents frequently faced dilemmas over pushing sales to vulnerable customers. Here, workers were shown to weigh the importance of targets against a self-perceived need to 'do the right thing' if not 'doing things right' (Van den Broek 2008):

'(Some) people will sell to anyone. Some of the top sellers, they'll sell to a Granny. They'll sell them something that'll lose them money...now I'm on the cusp...(but) if I don't think I'm gonna save people money I often pull out of the sale. But that's not what you're meant to do, like if the team managers and all that knew that you weren't going in for the sale then they wouldn't like it at all, you'd be wasted. Wasted.' (Leon, Agent, Sales-Com)

As noted by Leon, in the case of Sales-Com imagining customers as family members helped create a sense of duty which influenced behaviours on calls. Clearly antithetical to the role of selling, workers were prepared to operate in non-market rational ways, restricting their own potential to hit targets and win bonuses despite the consequences if caught ('you'd be wasted'). In doing so workers drew on alternative sources of legitimacy based on moral reasoning and imagined connections with distant others, with a view to establishing spatially stretched relations of care with the customer base. As noted by Barnett and Land (2007: 1067, emphasis original):

‘The idea that care’s value lies only in the intense *familiarity* of circumscribed personal relationships is not sustainable once we recognise the degree to which any caring practice depends on mediating practices, relations of professional competency, and various institutional and material infrastructures’

By contrast to Woodcock’s experience of sales (wherein agents struggled to combat expectations to exploit customer weaknesses such as ill health), workers mobilised emotional and tacit skills to maintain personal standards in the role, so creating more concrete caring versions of their labour which was more useful (or less hurtful) than the versions expected by Management. Workers thus found ways of altering work experiences short of refusing to take part or leaving the role that created other forms of social value in opposition to exchange value.

This form of agency extended from more provocative cases of social injustice. In Gov-Tel agents voiced frustration at being unable to follow through and help remedy service inefficiencies on behalf of customers. Reacting to this frustration, Eddie advised that he often broke protocol by contacting council depots directly to fix service failures (e.g. refuse collection). The breaking of rules this way was seen as key to generating impacts in the real world and accruing a sense of achievement through customer commendations:

‘That (a complaint call) is one of the calls that makes your day! If you can get on to the depot and you yourself get it sorted, you know, you can turn around and say ‘well *I* done that...*I* got that person’s thing picked up’. And then if the customers happy with it, there has been occasions where the customer phones back in and gives you a commendation... that type of thing does give you a boost.’ (Eddie, Agent, Gov-Tel)

This ability to think and act on one’s own moral volitions chimes with basic definitions of autonomy, including Kantian thought which likens autonomy to the ability to self-generate moral principles (see Böhm et al. 2010: 19). Extending the AM tradition, this unilateral *taking* of responsibilities and decisions – opportunities not given or endorsed by management – is similar in spirit to those more

violent and impactful forms of seizure discussed in Gray's accounts of autonomists in the city (Gray 2018). Rather than seizing social resources without permission (e.g. accommodation), those in routine jobs are frequently found to think above their station and break protocol in order to realise alternative visions and values at the scale of *doing work*. In the above account Eddie's refusal to act as 'passer on of information' may be seen as a small means of expanding his role and establishing wider social and ethical responsibilities formally denied to him and other agents. Compared with resilience based forms of getting by, such praxis reflects a more transformative form of self-valorisation analogous to 'reworking' approaches. Workers epitomised this approach by pursuing caring and empathetic relations with customers in reflection of alternative social and personal ethical outlooks. Holloway (2010a) puts it well when he states:

'Useful doing exists also beyond its form as abstract labour in those moments or spaces in which, individually or collectively, we succeed in doing that which we consider necessary or desirable. Although abstract labour subordinates and contains useful doing, it does not subsume it completely: useful doing exists not only in but also against and beyond its form.' (pg. 915)

Further strategies for realising more impactful work despite established managerial rules and role constraints included cases where agents in TribJust protested against known callers having to re-start cases centrally despite the fact that familiarities had already been established ('I've built that relationship with that employer, I want to keep them out of hot water', authors' interviews). For certain agents this sentiment drew on nostalgia for the earlier era in which customer cases were aligned to regional 'patches' and agents could more commonly develop close relationships with those involved (complimented by better local knowledge of cases). These volitions also manifested themselves in the pursuit of promotions, wherein helpline agents sought to be transferred into conciliation positions with scope for establishing deeper relations with customers and the possibility for face-to-face encounters. Accordingly, workers found ways of developing more proximate relations with customers through a range of means as linked to the pursuit of responsibility and difference-making.

The above praxis, we suggest, is more transformative than ‘getting by’ and involves a proactive *reworking* of allowed behaviour within front-stage service spaces. This form of reworking is qualitatively different to the acts of game-play discussed earlier (Burawoy 1979, 2012). While workers did take part in consent-generating play (notably some acts discussed under the rubric of back-stage *resilience*), front-stage interactions in particular involved qualitative changes to work in ways desired by people: it was not merely the speeding up or slowing down of management’s desired service. In this sense reworking the role on the phones is seen to create small moments of self-valorising, allowing people to develop more (personally) useful and gratifying forms of concrete labour alongside the abstraction process, here helping to make small difference to the lives of others through the service interaction.

We should emphasise here that resilience and reworking practices are not always synonymous with positive, altruistic motivations and outcomes⁹. Thus, in other cases workers undoubtedly use their discretion to gain advantage at the expense of vulnerable customers, a point evident in the number of call centre ‘scams’ based on the exploitation of distant others over the phone. Equally, one worker’s expression of autonomy can disempower others (e.g. the construction of sexist work environments, white vs. blue collar work experiences, and so on). This multiplicity of actions and their varied effects on others is noted in other labour geography accounts: workers compete with one another as well as capital in the construction of economic space (see Gialis and Herod 2014; Gough 2010; Hastings 2016). Equally, it is unclear whether forms of resilience and reworking may ultimately feed collective action (e.g. enhanced organising efforts, prospective strike action etc) which formally challenges workplace arrangements (Noronha and d’Cruz 2006; Taylor et al. 2009). Short of such resistance, we have argued that the different ways that people negate abstraction in the labour process helps realise alternative visions of work.

Conclusion: challenging work through cracks and ruptures

In a useful discussion with Susen on the nature of ‘doing’ John Holloway underlined the potential for *aspects* of capitalist work to offer satisfaction and wellbeing for those involved. The above discussion has linked such moments of satisfaction to self-valorised acts which are routinely contested and brought about in the process of engaging with work. This emphasis on the subtle processes of resilience and reworking at the point of production is intended to compliment labour geography’s more common focus on celebrated forms of resistance and reworking agency in the face of labour market restructuring (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011). Equally our emphasis underlines the reality of structural constraints – notably post-industrial service-led labour markets and working options which are not ‘ideal’ for those working at the lower end of routine technologically-driven service jobs. Within these constraints, our emphasis has been on the continual processes in which workers shape their own realities, creating meaning in unpromising work environments. Drawing on AM theorising, this perspective on agency is to emphasis the ongoing social pursuit of meaning within work as distinct from worker refusal or resistance.

Inquiries into labour’s role and agency in labour market restructuring are a longstanding theme in economic and proto-labour geography accounts, including Massey’s early work in *Spatial Divisions of Labour*. Within this context the resilience of call centre work itself – as important spaces within the post-industrial service economy of cities such as Glasgow - is an important consideration, somewhat blunting arguments that labour resistance in the form of turnover is likely to wield substantial labour market change. Contrary to this more typical workerist solution as strategic resistance, we have argued that agency based on ongoing interactions and adaptation of work tasks is relevant to the evolving palimpsest of labour geography analysis (Peck 2018). Focussing on call centres we have shown that paths to self-realisation in work need not rely on direct refusals. Equally, workerist agency does not rest solely on the creation of collective commons or autonomous forms outside of work. Instead, through a focus on call centre work we have highlighted the ability of people to use their own agency to develop more individually meaningful and socially useful roles from the ‘bottom-up’ whilst utilising the types of work available locally.

Importantly, the evidence used has been combined with autonomist perspectives to emphasise the positive potential for human doing in routine roles which are themselves manifestations of previous rounds of technological upgrading. Whilst not discounting the realities of workplace frustrations in the wide stratum of lower-end service work, interviewees have been shown to find ways of challenging and opening up their roles in ways more congruent with the values they hold and the pursuit of non-valorised meaning. In this sense we have sought to demonstrate that, while autonomous actions are frequently co-opted by capital, that co-option may be read as a defensive move to maintain production in ways which accommodate different cracks and ruptures initiated by workers (Böhm et al. 2010).

Self-valorising strategies are of course as likely to apply in a myriad of other working roles as much as a call centres, and indeed the latter were chosen in part due to the tight controls and limitations on worker agency within these technologically controlled settings. It is possible to conceive of resilience and reworking practices in all manner of employment settings in ways which hamper the commodification process which bring about small pockets of autonomy in the ways we work. These opportunities, we suggest, allow for the uptake of alternative ethical and social values as driven by people engaging with local labour market options. Exploring these potentials theoretically and politically is a task for a critical labour geography in expanding its remit in the future.

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Notes

¹ Labour geography is a sub-discipline of human and economic geography which examines the spatialities of labour struggles and labour's agency to improve work conditions within and across economic space. Rather than acting as a passive factor of production (as previously depicted in location studies, for example), labour geography defines people as active agents who shape economic space in concert with capital and the state (Andrew Herod thus notes that previous spatial science approaches may be described as a 'geography of labour' whereas 'labour geography' reflects the development of space via a worker-centred perspective; Herod 1997; Herod 2001). Longstanding themes and foci in labour geography include a focus on the politics of organised labour and evolving forms of community unionism (e.g. the work of Jane Wills; Wills 2001), while recent attentions have included a focus on worker-led adjustments to labour standards and labour process change (Hastings 2019; Peck 2013; Rainnie et al. 2010).

² Many of AM's more convincing cases of self-valorisation are rooted in the sphere of social reproduction (Gray 2018; Harrison 2011). Research has thus focussed on a range of creative examples including networked activities which utilise public space ('commons') for non-capitalist forms (there is a strong role for social cooperatives in many cases studies) and the use of adaptable 'hammocks' of activity as tailored to the specificities of local needs and projects (Cleaver 2011; alternative cases have focussed on cooperatives and charity movements).

³ This includes interviews with trade unions, trade associations and the non-department public body Scottish Enterprise. We also acknowledge that the call centre function covers/incorporates a multitude of different industries (Glucksmann 2004).

⁴ Interviews considered in the developing this paper included: 12 interviews with workers from Gov-Tel; 13 interviews with workers from Sales-Com; 14 interviews with workers from Game-Tel; and 9 interviews with workers from Trib-Just. This included discussions with workers drawn across the division of labour including managers, supervisors, trainers and agents. Over the course of researching Tribjust the helpline function at this location was closed as part of wider Trib-Just reorganising. Material considered here is based on worker reflections on the helpline by workers now mainly performing roles related to conciliation over the phone.

⁵ Taylor and Anderson (2012) conducted a compressive survey of call centres in Scotland, observing that public sector call centre work accounted for 13.4% of the call centre workforce in Scotland in 2011. For the other sectors considered in this study Game-Tel may be categorised under 'Computers/IT' call centre work which represents 3.9% of the workforce at this time, while Sales-Com is here counted under 'various' which captured 13.3% of call centre workers in the survey.

⁶ Other agents remarked on the possibility of exploiting particular calls where the customer had left the call yet not hung up, and the dialler thus failed to queue a subsequent call.

⁷ Contrary to Management's use of time as averages – i.e. based on averages for handling times, customer resolution rates, sales and other criteria – workers established their own more meaningful routines throughout the day. As noted by the Italian Autonomist Virno:

‘Time is not always the empty and abstract index for assigning value, a unit of measure in itself. The simultaneous presence – and the rather haphazard combination – of work as “coordination” and “supervision”, together with embryonic elements of counter-economy, submission to the machine or nomadism among many and various precarious activities, *establishes a pluralistic perception of time, a diversified perception deeply marked by the “space” of the experience.*’ (Virno, 1970, emphasis added)

⁸ Our focus of autonomous copings in the workplace stops short of a direct discussion of class consciousness on the part of workers. For research in this area see Livingstone and Scholtz (2016), who explore class consciousness in different strata of the service/knowledge economy via labour process analysis based on different dimensions of production relations.

⁹ As Leon and other agents observed, certain other agents in Sales-Com were, by contrast, driven to attain bonuses/targets in line with cash incentives. This diversity of moral outlook – and its impact on forms of performance – reflects the varied evaluative nature of people (Sayer 2011).

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