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Always Be Closing: Experiencing and theorizing time and wage in a UK call center

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Abstract

This article reports the author's experience of working in telesales. Through a call center, the case study company sells home improvements. The article describes the everyday organizational life of the telesales unit. Using this autoethnographic experience, the article analyses the organization of work-time in call centers. In particular, the article probes how commission constitutes a form of piece-wage. This piece-wage assists the manipulation of working hours. It does so by masking their extension. To understand this, the article applies the conceptual tools of Marx's *Capital*. Marx directs attention to how capitalists organise time in the pursuit of surplus-value. The autoethnographic account explores the application of this to call-center work. Flexible working arrangements and zero-hour contracts extend work-time. A pay framework based around commission and performance-linked piece-wages conceals this. In the case study, there is an absence of technology as productivity-raising measure or means of control. This challenges existing Foucauldian approaches to call-center work. It suggests that traditional forms of capitalist domination- the contract, the wage, time organization- are highly relevant to the call-center context.

Introduction

In the latter part of the noughties, I worked at a UK home improvements company. Over four years, I was a member of a small telemarketing unit working from a call center. Our job was to phone potential customers to arrange sales appointments. The basic pay was at minimum wage. But we chased commission linked to the appointments we made. Different forms and scales of recompense applied. The arrangement of an appointment contributed to a 'conversion rate'. This guaranteed a higher hourly rate for that week. A successful appointment- with provision of a quote- warranted a one-off payment. The amounts reflected whether quotes were for windows, fascias, conservatories, and so on. But this piece-rate obscured the long hours worked to attain a decent wage. In this article I analyze this process using insights from Marx's *Capital* (1990). In particular, I use Marx's conceptualisations of absolute surplus-value and piece-wages. This

theoretical approach decodes the experience of working at GlazingCo Windows and Conservatories.¹ It helps understand the absence of technological means of extracting greater value and why, instead, management attempts at increasing surplus labor centered upon the organization of time. Through shift work, zero-hours contracts and long, unpaid breaks management extended work-time beyond waged hours. The commission structure, I suggest, concealed this extension.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, I provide a justification for the reinstatement of experience in Marxist empirical analyses. In so doing I draw upon the work of E. P. Thompson. I then outline Marx's theorization of the production of absolute surplus-value. This provides an orientation for the next section, which describes the case-study. I then analyse the way that the piece-wage masks the manipulation of working hours.

Applying Marxist theory to autoethnography, this article challenges existing call-center research. The organizational structures of call centers invite certain approaches. Many inquiries focus on their panoptic mode of control and use of technological discipline. (Winiiecki, 2004, Townsend, 2005). A Foucauldian theoretical standpoint tends to follow this empirical focus (Foucault 2001). Where explicit, emphasis falls upon 'regulation', 'control' and 'power' (Winiiecki 2004, pp. 85-86, 89-90). Where implicit, Bentham's 'panopticon' is used to the same ends it serves in Foucault. (Townsend 2005, pp. 47-48).

Woodcock (2013) and Taylor and Bain (1999) give effective critiques of this Foucauldian inheritance. As Woodcock suggests, the panoptic metaphor misses the point. A call center is 'neither prison nor asylum' (McKinley and Taylor 1998, cited in Woodcock 2013). Rather the call center is a site for the 'dynamic process of capital accumulation' (Taylor and Bain 1999, p. 103). A Foucauldian analysis elides this dynamism. Foucauldian accounts see only the compliance of workers before panoptic power. But capitalism's dynamism, as Woodcock (2013) argues, contends with contingency and resistance. It must constantly renew itself in the face of this dynamic context. And, against the preoccupation of Foucauldian accounts, technology is not enough alone. 'Management', Woodcock writes, 'requires [a] human component.' Decisions must be made and acted on. These center on the 'key problem of the capitalist enterprise'. Namely: 'how to extract the maximum amount of surplus value from workers during their time on the job' (Woodcock 2013). The solutions, I suggest, lie in the manipulation of work-time.

This article situates call-center work in this context. Call centers are sites of capital accumulation. This process is dynamic and contingent. The pursuit of surplus value demands certain measures. These measures relate to the intensification and extension of working hours. They must be enacted and reproduced. This differs from Foucault's seamless exercise of power, enforced through technology. It is question of the social relations in place to secure a profit. Marx's theory of relative and absolute surplus value shows us how this plays out.

This article contributes to a rethinking of how we understand the call center. In common with Woodcock, I eschew the Foucauldian inheritance of call-center studies. In so doing, I continue the rediscovery of Marx's critique of capitalism as a viable analysis of call-center work. The article understands the experience of working in a call center using Marxist theory. The Marxian conceptual apparatus brings the autoethnographic evidence into wider theoretical perspective. The theory brings the case study into dialogue with existing understandings of call-center work. Crucially, it highlights their weakness through a case study where technological control is insignificant. More significant is the traditional capitalist terrain of contract, wage and time.

Methodological foundations: E.P. Thompson on practice, process and experience

Against Foucauldian stasis this article poses Marxist contingency and dynamism. This reflects my autoethnographic approach, inspired by the work of E. P. Thompson (1963, 1978). Thompson rejected the structuralism of the French theory of his time, with the main target of his ire Althusser. We can see, in some ways, Foucauldian thought as of a piece with structuralism. For Thompson, 'structure' denied the fluidity of social relations. What was really needed was an understanding of 'process' (1978, p. 362). This process comprised human practice- something negated in the structuralist approaches Thompson savaged. This article's critique of existing call-center research resonates with this standpoint. A focus on practice stresses the everyday importance of profit-seeking measures. A fluid and dynamic conception of capitalism foregrounds process and practical activity. As Thompson writes, 'it is by practice that production is sustained'

¹ The name of the company has been changed in order to guarantee anonymity and protect the identities of those with whom I worked.

(*ibid.*, p. 290). Against the Foucauldian approach, here production must be *sustained* through the implementation of employer strategies. This is struggled for. My approach does not take power for granted.

For Thompson, experience expresses the human practice at the heart of process. In a fluid conception of capitalism as process, experience can be a rebellious category. It can adopt a critical position apart from social relations. It is a valid tool of empirical inquiry. On this basis, Thompson inspires my utilization of autoethnographic evidence. Thompson aimed to reinstate subjectivity and experience into Marxist analysis. He argued for the insertion of personal experience into academic discourse. In so doing, he distinguished between ‘empiricism’ and the ‘empirical mode’. The former solidifies social reality into fixed meanings. These are accessible only through the utilization of the correct ‘method’. But the latter, for Thompson, is superior. The empirical mode draws upon the subjective experience of events and processes. Thus, this mode highlights how social meaning and facts are constantly in formation.

In this article, I combine this ‘empirical mode’ with a Marxian theoretical approach. Thompson’s approach to class demonstrates the relationship between the two. It suggests how subjective experience translates into concrete observations about objective phenomena. Rather than a ‘structure’, Thompson conceives class as something that ‘happens’. It is only by virtue of this happening, or having happened, that it can be said to exist at all. And it is through the experiences of those to whom it happens that it can be known. For Thompson, class possesses ‘a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure’. Only subjective experience captures this fluid process. This allows its theorization as a ‘historical phenomenon’. Class is not a ‘thing’ that ‘exists’, but rather a relationship. There is a ‘multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences’ of it. Yet through theoretical analysis, we can ‘observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas and their institutions’ (1963, pp. 8-10).

The example of class demonstrates the relationship between experience and theory in this article. It suggests how subjective accounts of everyday life translate into an objective empirical agenda. Class is understandable as a historical phenomenon only in relation to a wider body of experience. The same goes for the experience of work. What confirms this experience as analytically valid is theoretical analysis. This provides the wider frame through which it relates to an extended range of experience. This fixes temporary analytical meaning around elements of the practice-in-process it describes.

This describes the relationship between the theory and the case study used in this article. I apply Marxist theory to subjective experience, supported by existing studies of call-center work. This situates my autoethnographic case study in a broader picture of capitalist social relations. It brings it into critical dialogue with existing approaches to call-center work organization.

Theoretical foundations: Marx’s theory of the production of absolute and relative surplus-value

Marx’s theory of value (1990) seeks to explain where wealth arises from in capitalist society (also see Holloway 2015). It assesses how a surplus results from the production and exchange of commodities. It describes how this surplus accrues to the capitalist in the form of profit. For this, Marx looks towards the labor process. The capitalist profits whilst apparently paying the worker the full value of their labor. But the wage is not paid for labor, but labor power. This is the potential to labor. The wage is determined in advance of the performance of this labor. Thus, it relates only indirectly to expended labor. The wage, aided by the contract, awards the capitalist future control of the laborer’s time. The capitalist can then employ this time in pursuit of surplus value. The wage is the price they pay for the privilege. It need only be pitched at a level sufficient for the reproduction of the worker’s labor power. This guarantees the worker’s continued attendance and productiveness under capitalist control (Cristicuffs 2015).

For Marx, the working day has two components: necessary labor and surplus labor. It is in the distinction between the two that surplus value arises. Necessary labor is that part of the working day in which the worker produces value in proportion to their wage (i.e. the cost of reproducing of their labor power) (1990, p. 325). This is arbitrated on the basis of socially necessary labor time (SNLT, see Marx 1990, p. 303). This is the average value-productivity of labor realized in the exchange of commodities. The specific SNLT applied to a given production process thus rests on past market validation. This is constantly updated with the circulation of new rounds of goods and services. Individual capitalists thus face uncertainty in their calculations. They may be correct or incorrect in their recruitment and employment of labor-power. The relationship between expended labor and the SNLT will ultimately be decided in the market (see Mason 2015, p. 155).

Any value realized above this- surplus value- will accrue to the capitalist as profit. This represents the amount of time that the worker labors above and beyond the cost of their reproduction. This is surplus labor. Surplus labor is that part of the working day beyond what is necessary. Here, labor power is consumed by the capitalist in order to produce surplus value. Thus, it is in the capitalist's interest to prolong this part of the working day as far as possible (see Marx 1990, pp. 340-344).

Marx calls the ratio between necessary and surplus labor time the rate of surplus value (Marx 1990, pp. 324-5). An expansion in the latter in relation to the former secures the capitalist more surplus value and thus more profit. According to Marx, capitalists have two primary means to expand the surplus part of the working day. The first is the production of absolute surplus value. This comes in two forms. First, capitalists can extend surplus labor itself, with necessary labor constant. Second, they can intensify the existing labor time. Here, a greater amount of value is produced in the time at the capitalist's disposal. This greater value, in effect, represents the equivalent of an extension in surplus labor time (Heinrich 2012, pp. 104-5).

The second method for expanding the surplus part of the working day is the production of relative surplus value (Marx 1990, pp. 419-421). Here, the capitalist reduces necessary labor, shifting the balance towards surplus. The principal means for this is the implementation of technology in the labor process. This gets more out of the labor-time at the capitalist's disposal. It thus reduces the overall necessity for human labor. Over society as a whole, technological increases in productivity reduce the cost of commodities (*ibid.*, pp. 429-31). This in turn reduces the cost of the reproduction of labor power, and thus the wage (*ibid.*, pp. 437-8). Thus, the production of relative surplus value harnesses technology to reduce necessary labor. The less labor it takes to meet the SNLT and reproduce labor power, the greater the surplus part of the working day.

Both methods rely on the manipulation and reorganisation of time. As the buyer of labor power, the capitalist desires optimum value from their purchase. For the capitalist, then, 'moments are the elements of profit' (1990, pp. 342-44). My case study features a company in which the production of relative surplus value is largely absent. In the following account, I will explore some of the reasons why this is not a viable course for the capitalist in this context. The absence of technological means of increasing surplus labor challenges existing call-center research. Many previous studies focus on the technological intensification of labor. This is not a feature of this case study. Rather, control is wielded by the capitalist through the production of absolute surplus value. This proceeds through the reorganization of working time. The use of performance-related pay and bonuses supplementing the basic wage aids this reorganization.

The case study

Introduction

The UK has long been 'call center capital of Europe' (Glucksmann, 2004, p. 797). There are over 5,000 call centers in the UK, employing approximately 1,125,000 people. (Read 2013). This is around 4 per cent of the working population of the UK. This represents a significant upwards trend. In 2004, call centers employed 400,000 people. At 1.25 per cent of the British workforce, even then this was a high number (Glucksmann 2004). But, despite offshoring, UK call centers boomed. Taylor and Bain (1999, p. 102) chart the history of how such workplaces came into being:

the roots of their rapid growth can be located in the adoption by organizations of vigorous, direct selling techniques and by perceived dramatic savings in costs and overheads emanating from the centralisation of 'back office' customer servicing functions. [T]hese new practices were quickly adapted to comply with conditions in the travel industry, telecommunications, IT products and public utilities, as organizations in diverse industrial sectors sought to extend customer service facilities and/or to gain direct sales based upon exploiting a large existing customer database.

The case study corresponds to the business context described by Taylor and Bain. GlazingCo is a leading home improvements firm. It specializes in double-glazed windows, fascia boards and conservatories. GlazingCo's primary means of marketing its products to potential customers were outbound call-centers. Across all sectors, outbound call centers tend to exist 'to sell a product or service' (Dormann & Zijlstra, 2003, p. 306). The GlazingCo telemarketing unit was no different.

I was employed at GlazingCo for a period of two years, with another two years of on-off ad-hoc working. I was a member of GlazingCo's telemarketing unit, based at a regional showroom. I would phone prospective and existing customers to arrange an appointment with a salesperson. The salesperson would quote them for the work they needed, or were told they needed.

Staff were asked to keep to a script when calling. Along with the script, we were given an accompanying sheet of answers to common concerns and queries. The scripted material utilized 'closed' questions designed to coax the customer into confessing information. These centered on a series of carefully-worded assumptions about the state of their property. 'So', I would ask, 'it was just the three windows you had left to do there wasn't it?' The information gleaned was then employed in the crafting of a sales pitch. Customers were hooked with the promotion of an endlessly reheated 'new' offer. They were then spun the falsehood that a salesperson was already in their area. They were finally captured with a 'close', pressured into giving a time that they would be available to meet. Post-close, I would comfort them with a guarantee that there would be no hard-sell. I would promise only a non-binding, speculative quote.

Upon successful completion of the call, I would fill out a form detailing the 'raw lead'. It was 'raw' inasmuch as it had not yet been converted into a 'confirmed' lead. I would fax the raw lead to the member of staff responsible for this conversion. They would phone the person back to confirm details and award a 'special sales code'. This code was invented entirely at the caller's will and served no real practical function. It was all a part of the close. At this point, around two-thirds of the leads made by the team would fail. They would be rejected by management, the contact having received a quote previously. Certain 'customers' would persistently draw salespeople out to their homes for fun. More often, potential customers backed out at the last minute. Most were pressured into an appointment by hard-selling telemarketers keen to meet their targets. That aside, if the salesperson did eventually deliver a quote, the confirmed lead became a 'pitch'. There were rewards for all three stages: raw, confirmed and pitch. As I will show, these were central to the attempts to expand surplus labor.

Technology and its absence at GlazingCo

My analysis of the organization of time at GlazingCo will center on the production of absolute surplus value. But, first, I will account for the absence of attempts at the production of relative surplus value at GlazingCo. The insignificance of technology in this case study is stark. This is especially so when seen in the context of existing call-center studies.

Many studies associate call centers with information technology such as Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) systems. Indeed, for Taylor and Bain (1999, p. 102) it is a key feature of what makes them what they are. ACD limit the ability of workers to manage the intensity and pace of their work. Calls come thick and fast, beyond the volition of the worker to dial or hang up. GlazingCo presents a challenging example in light of this literature. There was no automated dialing system. Employees manually dialled numbers from normal domestic phones, reading from paper lists. This created opportunities for resistance, as one could self-manage the pace of the work. This created many problems for management. But, overall, reliance on the performance-related pay framework undermined the will to resist.

It is not only that GlazingCo lacked any kind of automatic dialing system. There was no computer technology present on the premises at all. The nearest counterpart was a fax machine. Everything existed on paper: reams and reams of it. Telemarketers would ring from books of data. Each successful call created a trail of paperwork: everything in duplicate, photocopied and faxed. These traces would reappear in the production process at a later date, mined for potential leads. Piles of paper formed a perimeter around the office. They were separated into 'warm' and 'cold' leads. 'Warm' was previous contacts and existing customers. This contained data absorbed from defunct and still-operative call centers elsewhere in the region. It also contained the 'callbacks' kept by ex-colleagues, picked over immediately upon departure. 'Cold' indicated the hefty dossiers of new names and numbers provided by the company. Most employees did everything they could to avoid the latter.

Why would the employer maintain such backward, convoluted processes? Why would they run the risk of resistance and the undermining of measure and rationalisation? Marx's theory of absolute and relative surplus value suggests some answers.

Most importantly, the price of labor power might be so low as to discourage investment in technology. It is difficult to make low-paid labor work harder and become cheaper. There are two reasons for this. First, the price of labor power can only go so low before compromising its reproduction. This was certainly the case at GlazingCo. Basic pay was at National Minimum Wage (NMW). Many GlazingCo employees were under 22, and therefore eligible only for a reduced 'development rate' NMW of £4.25 per hour (approximately \$7.82 at the time), rising to £4.77 (approximately \$8.43 at the

time) over the period I worked there. That the post-22 NMW was almost a pound more suggests that this amount was hardly already in keeping with the cost of living. Regardless, the NMW prevents employers paying any lower. Thus the option of making labor power cheaper was foreclosed. Second, any investment in technology would likely exceed the low cost of labor power. Basic pay, via the NMW, was fixed at a permanently low level. The commission paid recognized only labor capable of producing profit. Thus, the latter did not unduly raise the low fixed cost of labor. As such, investing in technology would seem less attractive. It would end up costing more than the labor it was brought in to replace.

The production of relative surplus value via technology would thus seem unattractive. Marx does offer further thoughts on why capitalists avoid technology. These fall outside the distinction between absolute and relative surplus value. But they are very relevant to the situation at GlazingCo. One possible means is restricting constant capital- or, in other words, technology (Heinrich 2012, p. 144). Now, competition between capitals usually instills a drive for increased productivity (*ibid.*, p. 108). This proceeds through the implementation of new technology. But in one possible response to falling profits, Heinrich suggests, capitalists restrict productivity-raising technology. This applies specifically where the working day is not fixed. The room for maneuver around working hours allows capitalists to overcome technologically-retarded unproductivity. Multiple shifts and extended hours can make the best of backward means of production. The savings on constant capital allow the payment of bonuses for extra effort and time commitment. Capitalists achieve further margins by 'cutting back on safety measures or by accepting labor processes that are dangerous to workers' health' (Heinrich 2012, p. 145).

This describes well the situation at GlazingCo. Marx stated that relative surplus value comes into play only where the working day is fixed (1990, p. 646). But at GlazingCo the working day was far from fixed. It was not necessary to implement productivity-raising technologies. Nor, indeed, was it possible, owing to the low price of labor power. Competitive advantage could be better attained through the manipulation of work schedules. Bonuses afforded by savings on constant capital were key to the reorganization of time. A greater effort can be attained through monetary incentive than technological intensity. At GlazingCo, the capitalist pursued surplus value under the auspices of performance-related pay. And, in line with the analysis above, it was the lack of technology that made this possible. Thus, this study centers on the production of absolute, not relative, surplus value.

As previously noted, many analyses of call-centers adopt a Foucauldian standpoint vis-a-vis technological discipline. These analyses usually focus on the panoptic function of ACD. But the technological backwardness of GlazingCo suggests other means of control and discipline. There is no single technology to be reified as the all-powerful arbiter of workplace control. Rather, the traditional conduits of capitalist control-wage, contract, time organization-are key. They act as a means for the expansion of surplus labor rather than the reduction of necessary labor. The absence of technology directly facilitates their operation. Savings on constant capital permit bonuses that extend the surplus part of the working day. As I will show, commission pays a central role in guaranteeing workplace control. The technological panopticon is nowhere to be seen. Indeed, its absence secures power within the GlazingCo workplace rather than inhibits it.

Working hours at GlazingCo

Work-time at GlazingCo ebbed and flowed with the business cycle. Many people were on zero-hours contracts (ZHCs). Hours could be increased or reduced at the employer's will. As Taylor and Bain note (1999, p. 111), part-time and zero-hour contracts allow flexibility against the vagaries of customer demand. Employer responses to favorable or unfavorable market conditions produced some variation in work schedules. During peak periods there were three three-hour shifts per day (morning, afternoon and evening). At low points marked by sales decline there were only two shifts, one in the morning and one in the evening. It was compulsory to work every other Saturday. Other than this, the number of hours each staff member worked was flexible.

The contract, for Marx, is the juridical relationship key to capitalist exploitation. It enshrines the right of the capitalist as a buyer of labor-power to use the time of the seller as they wish (1990, p. pp. 342-344). ZHCs constitute the ideal form of this contract. The best part of a decade before they became a political buzzword, we endured them at GlazingCo. ZHCs gave full rein to management. They could decide with no notice when and for how long a telemarketer could labor based upon their performance. This meant that management avoided the burdensome administrative process of formally dismissing under-performing staff. Instead, management would cut a worker's hours down to zero and wait for them to leave. The flexibility of ZHCs gave the illusion of freedom to some. But it was freedom for management, not freedom from management. ZHCs gave employers absolute, abrupt control over the the length and predictability of work-time.

As mentioned, at good times, there would be three shifts a day, from 10.00 to 13.00, 13.30 to 16.30, and 17.00 to 20.00. At bad times, there would be only two, 10.00 to 13.00 and 17.00 to 20.00. The effect of these split shifts would be to extend working hours. Even when work-time shortened, the working day would, contradictorily, lengthen. This was mainly because many employees would choose to work both shifts to avoid making a trip back to one of the outlying villages in which they lived. This led to an indeterminate boundary between work and play, between work time and non-work time. During lean periods with reduced shifts, many staff faced an awkward conundrum. Their wages for the short shifts were not enough to justify the outlay on petrol or public transport to get there. To make the journey worthwhile, workers adopted one of two strategies. Which one they chose depended on the current business climate. During lean periods, workers would wait four hours between the morning and afternoon shifts. In more favorable circumstances, they would work from 10.00 to 20.00, breaking between shifts. This organization of time gave the company overwhelming control over the time of its workers. It ensured that many were ever-present. Indeed, the prospect of commission led some to work unpaid between shifts. A few extra leads could make the hours served without basic pay worthwhile.

Performance-related pay as piece rate

At GlazingCo, an ensemble of basic pay and piece wage obscured the shifting boundaries of the working day. As noted, the basic wage was low. Many workers were under 22, and thus qualified for the lower NMW. The firm was keen to recruit youngsters at almost a pound less an hour. Indeed, the job gave flexible employment to many young people in further and higher education. In 2004, 63 per cent of UK call-center workers were under thirty (Glucksmann 2004, p. 797). Kinnie, Hutchinson and Purcell (2000, p. 968) highlight the preponderance of students seeking evening and holiday work. They also note the significant relationship between call-center work and the formerly unemployed. Many call-centers are deliberately situated to absorb quantities of unemployed workers. Taking advantage of the ability to be located anywhere, they ‘access [...] appropriately qualified and costed labor’ (Wickham & Collins, 2004, p. 10). Call centers enjoy youth, unemployment and low premiums for training an unskilled workforce. Taken together, these combine to guarantee a lowly basic wage.

The wage was supplemented by a range of bonuses based on the successful completion of certain targets. As Richardson, Belt and Marshall (2000, p. 397) indicate, performance-related pay is the norm in outgoing sales-oriented call-center work. Commission was linked to a series of targets based around pitches and the two categories of lead: raw and confirmed. Raw leads were not rewarded directly with pay. But it was expected that a telecanvasser should make three leads a shift, in other words one an hour. On average, management said, one in three raw leads would confirm. This was a strangely dogmatic and unchanging statistic. It had many organizational practices conducted in its name. Most interesting was the incentive to leave early if you made three ‘raw leads’ in a shift. For workers intent on getting away early, it was quite easy to fabricate a lead. You might use your imagination, or call a friend or family member. Alternatively, you could turn to one of the many ‘persistent lead makers’. The names of these troublemakers were displayed in clear view on the office walls. It was easy to find their number and call them for your three leads, and get to leave early. Resourceful telemarketers could sometimes leave an hour into the shift and get paid for all three. But, in many ways, management was still stacked against them. For many, those three hours clocked in at the under-22 NMW. It was hardly at great cost to the employer, especially in light of the incentivization of decent leads. Everyone at GlazingCo wanted performance-related commission. There was no possibility of securing it by leaving early. Few abandoned the shift by merit of a string of substandard leads.

Performance-related pay commenced at the point that a lead was confirmed. As noted, each telecanvasser would should achieve three raw leads a shift, on average one of which would confirm. This produced a ratio of the number of confirmed a telecanvasser had achieved next to the number of shifts they had worked. This gave the ‘conversion rate’. This was calculated on a weekly basis, in line with the payment schedule. Indeed, that the payslip was weekly indicated the contingency of working life at GlazingCo. If your weekly ratio was 1:1, then you earned an extra 50p for each hour worked. If your ratio increased, your hourly wage rose correspondingly.

The final part of the performance-related pay was commission awarded for successful pitches. As explained previously, the lead became a ‘pitch’ if the quote was given to the customer by the salesman. Therein, workers received £3 per fascia board quote, £6 per window quote, and £10 per conservatory quote. Workers received breakdowns of which of these pitches became sales, and how much they earned the company. Yet they received no recompense for these financial gains. I saw the company sell an £18,000 conservatory after having made the initial contact that led to the sale. It was a galling experience to receive a mere £10 of that sum.

Sometimes we would open our payslip to see numerous confirmed leads and an absence of pitches. This would cause tension with the salespeople who worked out of the office downstairs. Once an appointment was made, we were powerless to determine its success. The quote could happen or it could not. The results upon which the pitch commission rested were out of our hands. The value of our labor was validated elsewhere. Thus, there was a sense of disconnection between the commission structure and the hours worked. In the closing section, I will examine this interrelation.

The piece-wage and absolute surplus value

At GlazingCo, piece wages obscured the extraction of absolute surplus-value through time. The commission structure placed an emphasis on the product of labor rather than the time in which it took place. Indeed, if an employee remained on NMW for three weeks, they were usually dismissed or had their hours reduced to zero. Everything was geared towards the piece-rate represented in commission. Performance-related pay induced a focus on results rather than process. The achievement of commission gave the worker a sense of having made a gain *from* the capitalist. The performance element, however, rewarded the creation of gains *for* the capitalist. In spite of this, employees tended to view work-time as a means for the worker to earn as opposed to an ends for the employer to exploit.

Marx's comments on wages are instructive on this point. For Marx, the wage 'extinguishes every trace of the division of the working day into necessary labor and surplus labor, into paid labor and unpaid labor. All labor appears as paid labor. [T]he money-relation conceals the uncompensated labor of the wage-laborer' (1990, pp. 679-80). Marx states that the hourly wage

loses all meaning as soon as the working day ceases to contain a definite number of hours. The connection between the paid and the unpaid labor is destroyed. The capitalist can now wring from the worker a certain quantity of surplus labor without allowing him the labor-time necessary for his own subsistence. He can annihilate all regularity of employment, and according to his own convenience, caprice, and the interest of the moment, make the most frightful over-work alternate with relative or absolute cessation of work. He can abnormally lengthen the working day without giving the worker any corresponding compensation, under the pretence of paying 'the normal price of labor'. (*ibid.*, pp. 685-6)

Thus, the lower the price of labor, the longer the worker must labor to secure a decent wage. The 'low level of the price of labor acts here as a stimulus to the extension of the labor-time' (*ibid.*, p. 688). This is the calculation that management at GlazingCo had made. It was one which relied on the piece-wage disguising the lengthening of the working day. It induced workers to spend more of their day creating absolute surplus-value for the company. The piece wage serves a fetishistic function, in that it

seems at first sight as if the use-value bought from the worker is not his labor-power as it actually functions, but labor already objectified in the product. It also seems as if the price of this labor is determined...by the producer's capacity for work....This is mere appearance however, challenged by the fact that 'both forms of wages [time and piece] exist side by side, at the same time, in the same branches of industry.' (*ibid.*, p. 692)

Like the time-wage, the piece-wage is divided into necessary (paid) and surplus (unpaid) components. Piece-wages do not express value directly. Rather than 'measuring the value of the piece by the labor-time incorporated in it', with piece-wages 'the labor the worker has expended [is] measured by the number of pieces he has produced' (*ibid.*, 694). So, the time-wage is calculated on the basis of a given labor's duration. But the piece-wage too is measured on a similar basis. Namely, it is measured on the *given time* in which a set number of products have been produced. In this way, the piece-wage and the time-wage are mirror images. The piece-wage directly concerns the length of the working day. It thus aids and abets the production of absolute surplus-value. At GlazingCo, it was an effective tool for the manipulation of the laborer's time.

Conclusion

My experience at GlazingCo evinces the relevancy of absolute surplus value in call-center work. It applies Marx's theory to a field outside its original topic of factory labor. In particular, call-center work is indicative of the move towards service-sector employment. This is typically marked by flexible organizational patterns (Lee, McCann and Messenger,

2007, pp. 86-89). The resultant ‘tertiarization’ of the economy has radically diversified labor-time. This has been to the extent where the statutory working day is arguably a thing of the past. As such, employers possess a new capacity to redefine the boundaries of work and non-work time. They can easily extend the working day to derive greater value the labor power purchased. The case study provided here exemplifies these tendencies. It stresses the relevancy of Marx’s conceptualization of absolute surplus value to such work.

Many studies of call-center organization focus on the panoptic technological control of labor. In so doing, they draw upon Foucauldian conceptualizations of discipline and power. However, the experiences presented and analyzed in this article challenge this standpoint. Technology is not everything. Indeed, it is nothing without the social relations that circumscribe it. These social relations are capitalist. They are expressed in contract, wage, labor and time. Power, discipline and control cannot be understood except through these categories. The pursuit of surplus value is paramount.

In the case study, time is organized in pursuit of surplus value under the spell of commission. The commission-based piece-wage conceals the manipulation, reorganization and extension of working hours. This has implications for the study of call-centers and other sectors with non-standard hours. Forms of performance-related pay may constitute an important development in wage provision. However, they mimic the traditional piece-rates with which Marx was preoccupied in *Capital*. This suggests that the old tools of analysis may still apply. As noted at the beginning of this article, call-centers may not be the prisons of Foucauldian critiques. Rather, they are just factories, plain and simple.

Some wider methodological implications of this article relate to its marriage of experience and theory. Inspired by Thompson, I have attempted to bridge the gap between everyday experience and broader social categories. When combined they offer the means to understand the former in the context of the latter. Experience is confirmed in the mapping of larger structures and processes. In this meeting, everyday experience is rendered commensurate with other experiences. These are represented in theoretical constructions and existing empirical accounts. In its confrontation with theory, the experience of the everyday is abstracted from. This abstraction allows us to critique work, organization, time and life in capitalist society.

Thompson has more to teach us. In this article, I have presented my experience of capitalist work organization in a call-center. Experience, for Thompson, captures the importance of practice and process. Focusing on human practice allows contingency to become clear: not only the contingency and uncertainty capitalists face and respond to, but the contingency that makes resistance possible. The Thompsonian standpoint sees history as composed of human practice. This may be an employer decision or an act of worker revolt. In both, the Thompsonian standpoint embraces contestation. The employer chases surplus value against the antagonistic social basis of capitalist society. The worker lashes out at the dehumanizing strictures of capitalist existence. The Thompsonian standpoint sees society in process, with class ‘happening’ constantly. This is lacking in those accounts that see the call-center as a panoptic prison. They see people ruled over by power with no possibility of escape. This pessimism is viable only where technological control is treated monolithically. There is no sense of the social relations that circumscribe it. But a Marxist perspective says that capitalists must act to expand surplus labor in the pursuit of profit. They must implement shift patterns and pay structures that induce the worker to labor harder and longer. Though their will is bent to the iron rule of competition, this occurs through human practice. And, moreover, it occurs in response to human practice. Capitalists must act because the messy unruliness of humanity can never quite be tamed. As Woodcock (2013) writes in his account of call-center work, the ‘[c]oncrete experience’ of employer tactics like electronic supervision reveals their power to be ‘far from total’. Because every tactic ‘requires human interaction’, space is left for ‘potential resistance’. Experiencing capitalism as process and practice, this article insinuates the possibility of its overthrow.

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