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## Post-Fordism

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Post-Fordism. The term Fordism derives from the methods of success of the Ford Motor Company in respect of the mass production and selling of their Model T car in the early decades of the 1900s, and is typically understood to originate in the work ethic and labor organization that was first seen in the car assembly lines. Fordism became the model for mass production – an organizational strategy to meet emergent mass consumerism, and the democratization of consumer society put in train by an emergent and newly enriched working class. The ideas of Fordist production and consumer culture in the last century are inseparable.

On a micro level, the worker placed at the conveyor belt, and repeatedly engaging in the same activity, or drawing on the same area of expertise (even if that particular job requires little expertise), optimizes production. Workers working in unison can maximize speed: distractions and downtime are minimalised; pressure to continue to work is exerted by all on all – an unauthorized break by one worker effectively stops all the other workers on that conveyor belt. The workforce can be easily monitored, and the speed of the conveyor belt upped when necessary. Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*, Chaplin's *Modern Times* and Jean-Luc Godard's *British Sounds* all reflect these working conditions as an absolute, unenviable enslavement; the worker is driven by the machine – in a perverse reversal of industrialization. These critiques echo the Fordist prehistory of slave labor and unchecked industrialization: the appropriation of Blake's term "dark Satanic mills" in the late 1700s to describe early steam-powered factories, Karl Marx's noting of the alienation endemic in capitalist labor as the worker finds ever greater distance from his work and the products created, and Wilhelm Reich's theorizing of the diminishment of the biological potency of the exploited worker.

These inhuman conditions were eventually deemed mostly unacceptable for the Western worker, and the assembly line factory model was exported elsewhere – to developing countries where new workers, lacking alternatives, would step up to the job. Apologists for this export, and sympathetic historians of American industry, note that the Fordist regime guaranteed a higher wage – indeed, it struck a bargain with the worker, a capitalist “new deal” that ended the Great Depression. Indeed, on a macro level, the Fordist approach comes to define – in the sense of both structure and characterize – the symbiotic relationship between the individual worker and the nation state: thus General Motors CEO Charles Wilson was reputed to have famously said that “what was good for the country was good for General Motors and vice versa.”

The possibility of the export of Fordism can be understood to occur with the increased education and specialization of Western workforces, unionization of labor and the formalization of demands for safer and non-exploitative workplaces, and a reluctance of the Western worker to accept the conditions imposed on his predecessors (with the increased wealth in the West after the years of World War II scarcity). The emergence of new forms of labor in the upwardly mobile working classes strata, forms that could not be exploited on the assembly line, also rendered the factory model inappropriate. The worker demanded freedom both from the conveyor belt and from the factory – to be the master of his own time, and to exert creative control over his work.

Fordism came to denote an economic philosophy as much as a mode of production; post-Fordism is the phase that breaks with the historical and prescriptive manifestations of Fordism while retaining – indeed, advancing – the exploitation of the workforce formerly achieved in the Fordist formulation. This break or advance

occurs with both a new economic philosophy and the emergence of new forms and modes of labor.

### Transitions in work and consumption

It is difficult to date the moment at which the worker's demand for an exit from the factory, or factory conditions, occurred. That vanguard of workers whose success exerts a centrifugal force on the work environment as others begin to aspire to and engage in their model of working seems ever-present. The need for Post-Fordist work practices arguably exerted a pull on the workforce too, enabling or quickening this partial exile. This can be seen in its most dynamic early phase in the West in the 1950s, at the end of post-war austerity. With the rise of "service sector", of industries of media and entertainment, of consultation and outsourcing, came the demand for a mobility to the worker. This necessitated an erosion of the set hours of work (on the understanding that the worker would be relatively unchecked), the ability of the worker to service multiple locations of work, or to meet specific and changing needs in different locations, and to possess a widened set of skills as autonomy was gained. In these new circumstances a transition from the old certainties of a stocked warehouse as ensuring the potential to meet upward fluctuations in demand ("just in case") to a greater flexibility in the business model and eradication of all overheads not deemed immediately essential ("just in time") occurred. The latter philosophy, which would have once seemed foolhardy, actually empowered the consumer: the possibilities for a personalization of services and products became a reality. To work up against a deadline, and to meet the absolute known quantity of demand, allows for

the consumer to be let into the production process, and to have a say in what is supplied, and to be freed from the constraints of mass consumption.

The rise in a market for information and advice, for services and entertainments, for assurances and underwriting, or the selling of a location (as with a holiday) or a status symbol (such as going on a certain holiday) also called into being a new kind of work to service these new consumer scenarios. In edging towards the creation and delivery immaterial goods for such a market (immaterial over the palpable or material product), the working environment as had previously been understood was often dissolved, and often ever further enmeshed in the new environments of consumer culture. At its cutting edge, and only ever for a select few, work became play, and play became work.

These new forms and modes of work effectively revised ideas of what constituted work or productive labor: what was once considered a leisure-time activity for the worker suddenly emerges as an activity ready for exploitation. The history of Information Technology exemplifies such a moment: from the academic research into electronic applications seemingly without any use, and the 1970s computer enthusiast writing code on a machine in his garage, surrounded by half-built circuit boards, to the application of such technology to accounting, writing and communicating, and from there to the position of IT as the very lifeblood of almost all industries. (For an overview of this particular trajectory, see Cringely 1999). However, the social, political and even sexual ruptures of 1968, as major Western cities were momentarily paralyzed by a wave of strikes, occupations and acts of civil disobedience, can be understood to be the moment in which patterns of work were necessarily (that is, by industry, at the behest of the workers in revolt) redefined. Ten years later, Régis Debray wrote:

Industrialization had to be given a morality not because the poets were clamoring for a new one but because industrialization required it. The old France paid off its arrears to the new... The France of stone and rye, of *apéritif* and the institution, of *oui papa, oui patron, oui chérie*, was ordered out of the way so that the France of software and super-markets, of news and planning, of know-how and brain-storming could show off its vitality to the full... This spring cleaning felt like a liberation and, *in effect*, it was one. (Régis Debray: *A Modest Contribution to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Tenth Anniversary*, 1979; Debray's italics)

Here, Debray discusses what seems to be a post-Fordism paradigm as an entirely – organically, even – capitalist event; the final stage of industrialization. Likewise, in Hardt and Negri's analyses of post-Fordism (2001, 2005), it is industry that followed the worker in this respect, freeing its slaves but – and it is here that the notion of post-Fordism seems to be anything but a liberation – freeing them only to re-enslave them in a fuller exploitation. That is, as factory work was increasingly replaced by tertiary sector work, manual labor shifted to forms of labor that can be understood to sell the experience as much as the product: “affective labor”. And if this no longer necessitated the locations – let alone the heavy machinery – of the old industry, then new forms of control over the worker (in Marxist terms: new ways of exploiting, ever further, the activity of the individual, whether understood as work or otherwise), sophisticated in the sense of supple and all-pervasive, were needed.

Despite a number of recent studies, theorizing post-Fordist labor remains a contentious issue. The political Right tends to suspicion; media and IT-related jobs

seem devoid of traditional skills and outcomes, product-less, and therefore seem not to map onto the traditions of a “Protestant work ethic” and the idea of a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s labor. The bursting of the IT bubble in the late 1990s confirmed and consolidated such concerns, and in turn prompted financial aid to more traditional industries, and informs the general animosity towards Higher Education programs that prepare students for such work (particularly Media Studies). More orthodox Leftist currents tend to express skepticism to such theorizing of new forms of labor, particularly in respect of Hardt and Negri’s work; with a history of struggles for workers’ rights, the Trade Union powerbase seems inextricably wedded to the notion of a mass of workers generating discernible products – “strength through numbers” – and auditable via union subscriptions. Theorizing on the radical Left, however, and particularly in respect the use of Foucault’s 1970s work on the body as subject to the disciplines and liberations of society, has been more amenable to newly emergent modes of labor with a view to identifying new global fronts against globe-enveloping market capitalism.

### Commonplace environments of Post-Fordist labor

What is, precisely, affective labor? And what is the landscape of labor in the post-Fordist paradigm that places such a high premium on it? In its crudest terms, the cheery sign-off of “Have a nice day!” from the North American waitress can be understood to be as important to her customers as her role as a taker of orders and server of food. The waitress facilitates the nature of the environment in which the food is served; her pleasantries become the point of real contact between the customer and the business that owns and runs the prepared food outlet (and so in this respect,

she *is* the brand); friendships she may strike up with customers come to shore up the commercial base of the café, even extend her working hours (if she is loathe to throw the regulars out five minutes before closing time). The resultant pleasant environment of the café effectively reinvents the role of the café in society. Thus the Starbucks chain café (upon which this theorizing is not modeled) was originally conceptualized as being the “third place”: neither the place of work, nor the place of leisure – but a location to which the worker brings his co-worker to socialize as well as talk business, or brings his partner to meet other co-workers. The Starbucks environment, with furniture neither office nor home, food neither fast nor slow, and free wireless internet access, can be read in just this way. In this context, the waitress can be understood to engage in all-important “affective labor”: creating this environment, so that the environment agreeably insinuates itself into everyday life, and becomes the area for commerce. The move from blue collar to white collar is a move ever further towards affective labor. The waitress engages in standard material labor (food preparation and serving), but it is her immaterial labor (smiling, chatting) that becomes crucial – particularly at the point of hire.

In this café, the waitress might engage with “no collar” workers (i.e. no office dress code; the ease of the t-shirt, collar-free, favored by cultural workers, and IT workers), who in turn will be socializing or talking business with their clients. If self-employed, they have no need for an office – and the café effectively functions as an appropriately informal meeting place for those who work in industries that have no more need of the formal spaces (offices, conference rooms) of their predecessors. Or the no collar worker might be spending the afternoon away from the office, dealing with emails from the café rather than the workplace. In this environment, he or she would be more inclined to work harder and less inclined to compensate the loss of



freedom associated with a nine-to-five regime by spending swathes of time chatting with colleagues at the water cooler or surreptitiously texting friends. For the worker, the absence of the boss lowers the intensity of the work experience and so, in addition to answering emails, they may use social networking sites unimpeded, and text freely. But in the analysis of post-Fordism, this itself is understood as a new frontier of work: the social connections the worker makes are also affective, and exploitable, and further connect the company and the worker to the world outside – via friendships, rather than mail-shots or the usual and mostly ineffective (and costly) ways of soliciting new business. And if the worker remains free to work at home and so has no need to pay for a child minder, then it is surely the case that this privilege has been granted in order for the worker to work more effectively? Likewise, the sexual relationships he or she may enter into with other co-workers, as the Invisible Committee point out in their discussion of contemporary working conditions (2009), effectively expand the working day – allowing for continued concern for work, and development of interpersonal skills, long outside of the designated working hours.

The Invisible Committee, which is seemingly an anonymous collective of political activists given over to analysis of contemporary society and directions for civil disobedience, unsurprisingly talk of the post-Fordist worker with contempt, decrying the self-satisfaction of the figure who believes he has overcome the alienation of labor associated with the Fordist phase by becoming his own boss. The price of this liberation is an increasing infantilisation of the professional workforce. The post-Fordist worker, afforded all creative comforts, has no need to enter into the harsh realities of the adult world. Meanwhile, those in the café kitchen or – more probably – those on café-supplying warehouse food assembly lines, are increasingly subject to precarious working conditions. As suppliers undercut one another in the

scramble for contracts as larger companies increasingly outsource elements of their operations (such as sandwich assembly, cleaning, the actual building and decoration of the café), companies come to effectively rely on grey collar workers. For these illegal immigrants, who have no choice but to accept underpaid, non-unionized, security-free jobs, the freedoms of the Fordist phase for blue collar workers (with, at least, pension provision, some token bonuses, and access to finance for houses and cars) must seem like a Golden Age. In terms of the supplies of raw materials (the coffee beans, the coffee machines, food packaging and so on), and the desire to further minimize overhead costs, the outsourcing reaches out to workers in the developing world where the labor conditions remain resolutely and substantially pre-Fordian.

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