

Rethinking Modern Alienation in McDonald's Window Workers

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IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY, THE INDUSTRIAL revolution sparked an onslaught of socioeconomic change, bringing millions of former subsistence farmers, artisans and craftsmen into the factories across Europe and America. This permanently altered the nature of labor, as Karl Marx famously noted in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Marx suggested that industrial working conditions, which had become increasingly centralized, routinized and managed, had unprecedented impacts on worker psychology. In this new environment, Marx theorized that workers were becoming increasingly “alienated” from the process and product of their labor, from their fellow workers, and from their communal spirit. Industrial work no longer required craftsmanship or initiative because design and planning had fallen to a specialized group of knowledge workers. It no longer required community and motivation because the capitalist supplied the motive of profit.

Work was compartmentalized into units. As Harry Braverman put it in his seminal 1975 book, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, “the production units operate like a hand, watched, corrected, and controlled by a distant brain” (125).

In the years since Marx, and even in the years since Braverman, the composition of the American economy has changed; the number of blue-collar workers in the service sector now dwarfs the number of those in traditional manufacturing and industrial jobs. Attempting to apply nineteenth-century theories of alienation to modern service workers, such as the McDonald's window workers that Robin Leidner follows in *Fast Food, Fast Talk*, can lead to counterintuitive conclusions. Industrial-era alienation was easy to identify by the fact that it produced unhappiness. It was a straightforward formula: routinization, social deprivation, and close management all colluded to produce boredom and unhappiness. At first glance this equation does not seem to apply to Leidner's McDonald's interviewees; their work, though heavily routinized and managed, also requires a certain degree of social savvy, and the majority of them feel satisfied, in some cases even enthusiastic, about their work. Does that mean that work in the service sector, even work that primarily consists of routine actions and canned lines, is protected against alienation? Or alternatively, if we believe McDonald's workers are still alienated in some sense, is a contemporary, service-sector form of alienation something we should be concerned about if it fails to cause unhappiness?

These questions form the main objections against applying Marx's theory of alienation to McDonald's service workers. These workers may not be alienated at all, and if they are, they do not seem to mind too much. There is a strong case to be made for

this argument, as will be seen from the wealth of evidence that seems to suggest so. However, this relies on a fundamental misinterpretation of why alienation is significant. A closer reading of Marx reveals that alienation is not equivalent to routinization or unhappiness; rather, alienation is a distorted relation of the worker to himself, his human nature, and his fellow workers. The chief crime of alienation is not that it causes unhappiness, but that it is wasteful of the “intelligent and purposive character” (Braverman 56) unique to human beings. Instead of expanding a worker’s creative and social identity, it stifles what Marx called a worker’s “species-being” as well as his human nature. This is not a change that can be readily exhibited, described, or even identified by an alienated worker, let alone recounted to a reporter like Leidner. Because service-industry alienation is hard to quantify or verify, we are tempted to dismiss situations such as the Leidner case, but this is a mistake. Instead we ought to reconsider how this century’s new, highly psychological context for labor relations might cloud our view of a human phenomenon that still exists, even in the service industry.

We start from a relatively familiar framework: McDonald’s window workers are trained in routines that encompass every aspect of their work, from pushing buttons on machines that dispense fixed quantities of soda to following the “Six Steps of Window Service” script while taking orders (Leidner 72). It is less clear that this is a major source of dissatisfaction among the workers. One worker tells Leidner that the Six Steps “work well” and another explains that “you can hit a groove...a kind of high...not... having to think about it any more” (Leidner 138). It

seems that workers are trained to use and prefer to use the Six Steps because routines allow customers to stay predictable and workers to “expend as little emotional energy as possible” (Leidner 136). Quick, standard exchanges, Leidner reveals, had the added benefit of protecting workers from intrusive or uncomfortable personal conversations (146). Given the long lines and customer expectation for speedy service, highly personalized conversations were often desired by neither party and workers preferred customers who were “ready to give their order” (Leidner 143). As Leidner notes, McDonald’s management valued a friendly atmosphere but emphasized speed as their first priority; routines helped workers who “prided themselves on their speedy service” (143) to stay efficient and professional.

For those workers who desired more social contact, the Six Steps did not restrict them to robotic formulae. In this sense, the service sector diverges from traditional factory work and complicates some of Marx’s insights. Management had an interest in humanizing the McDonald’s experience, and workers were told to act naturally, not in a stilted way that would have made customers uncomfortable (Leidner 73). Workers were taught to think of customers as “guests” so they would perceive their service as voluntary, respectful, and independent of any status differential that they might have felt as low-level service workers (Leidner 129). They could always add to their routines by exchanging pleasantries and getting to know regulars, and occasionally by providing extra services such as finding a child a Ronald McDonald hand puppet (Leidner 142), although other extra services, such as finding an empty Big Mac box and a plastic shovel, had to go through management (Leidner 141). Among workers, a fun, high-spirited culture full of

affectionate teasing developed, and one woman even arrived at the store two hours early to “hang out” at work (Leidner 136). Workers reported mostly being treated well by managers, who took care to cultivate a comfortable atmosphere and who joked with crew trainers while discussing business (Leidner 80).

McDonald’s management style is obviously designed to keep worker morale high, a goal that seems favorable for both the corporation and the workers. Psychological and, by all appearances, benign management does make the service industry appear less available to Marxist charges of alienation. Managers made an effort to notice and compliment good work, and incentives such as free meals and friendly sales competitions also motivated workers to work hard (Leidner 79). Of course, normal tensions arose when some managers strayed from “corporate directives” and used more authoritarian methods, but the corporate directives themselves were quite effective in encouraging good worker behavior (Leidner 81). Leidner even describes a scene in which a manager explains to workers that they need to keep labor costs down by scheduling the bare minimum of workers to a shift, and the workers agree that this policy is reasonable despite the burdens it places on their workload (80). Surrounded primarily by people they personally trusted and respected, McDonald’s workers were quick to identify with the store.

So where is the problem here? Leidner has a point in saying that “labor-process theorists who treat workers’ preference for jobs that are varied, challenging, and personally involving as a constant have not provided a satisfactory account of those workers whose responses to routinization are not entirely

negative” (138). Perhaps Leidner is right: we are too quick to dismiss routinized jobs as uniformly unfulfilling. Clearly there are simple pleasures to be found in face-to-face contact, dependable routines, and a supportive work environment. In the McDonald’s case, mere brainwashing is too dismissive an explanation for the very real satisfaction that these workers seem to feel. However, we would also be hasty to dismiss Marx’s theory of alienation as irrelevant to the service sector and conclude that alienation has disappeared from the landscape because McDonald’s workers are free to give Ronald McDonald hand puppets to children. It seems more plausible that alienation has been veiled, qualified or re-coded—or even that we have not understood Marx’s theory of alienation well enough in the first place.

It may be appropriate here to return to Marx on “Estranged Labor” and delve into it more closely. Marx speaks of four types of alienation in labor, which include alienation from the act of production, alienation from man’s “species-being,” and alienation from fellow workers (Marx 113-114). (For the time being I will not address alienation from the products of labor, as the changes between the industrial and service economies do not seem as significant.) Marx describes alienation from the act of production as labor that is “external to the worker,” that “does not belong to his essential being” and in which “he does not affirm himself but denies himself ” (110-112). Because of this, “the worker therefore only feels himself outside his work” because “the worker’s activity is not his spontaneous activity...it belongs to another” (Marx 110-112). Because Marx conceives man’s labor as closely tied to man’s identity, this results in “the loss of his self ” and yields “*self-estrangement*” (110-112). This

aspect of alienation seems to rely strongly on a subjective measure of well-being, but Marx is more abstract in describing alienation from man's species-being (Marx 112).

For Marx, man, as distinguished from animals, is a "species-being," able to "universalize" himself through consciousness (Marx 112). This "species-being" is the basis for sociality in man, and also defines his relation to his labor, or life activity, which becomes the "object of his will and of his consciousness" (Marx 113). Under conditions of alienated labor, work is not directed by the will and consciousness of human nature but is merely a "means of satisfying...the need to maintain physical existence" (Marx 113). As a result, man is unable to apply what makes him most human to his life activity, and his vistas narrow. Man's focus now is only on his individual life, which "becomes the purpose of the life of the species" (Marx 112-113). Without the ability to see man's essential nature and universal species-being behind his own individual life, he becomes estranged as well from other men, "viewing the other in accordance with the standard and the relationship in which he finds himself a worker" (Marx 115).

Alienation, in the Marxist sense, is therefore not merely an emotion that can be expressed or identified, but a changed and disconnected relation to oneself and to the world. In other words, it cannot be fully described by its effects on workers' self-reported happiness. We have been looking for the subtraction of utils (an imaginary unit used in economics for comparing utility, or happiness) when we ought to be looking for the marks of a subtler conflict—something hardly to come up in conscious thought let alone in an interview with a journalist like Leidner. For instance, most workers prefer speedy, routine interactions to

personal service, yet they go out of their way to find hand puppets and Big Mac boxes for children. Workers say that their guests "make [their] day" yet they take anger out on these same customers when they're in a hurry, rather than getting angry at each other or the managers (Leidner 136). We can attribute much of this variation to personality differences between workers, whether the day has gone well, and other chance factors. However, the big picture seems to show that these employees as a group experience conflict between their identities as social beings, as workers, and as loyal members of the McDonald's corporation.

This sense of inner conflict is no surprise to anyone who has ever held a job—it would be too much to ask for every act on the job to emerge seamlessly from our innermost consciences. This is obviously not a practical goal that we should take from Marx. However, there are aspects of McDonald's window work that require prolonged and stressful suppression of workers' personal needs and inclinations for the good of McDonald's profit margin, causing workers to act as though they feel "outside [them]selves" or alienated from the act of production (Marx 110). During times of high traffic, work is hectic; whenever there is "time to lean," workers are instructed to clean (Leidner 78). One grill worker is reprimanded for taking a moment to look at the work schedule because managers "did not want to pay workers for a moment of nonproductive time" (Leidner 78). Workers eventually internalize this grueling work ethic, agreeing that it is only sensible for the company to overwork the minimum number of workers possible rather than hire more and waste money (Leidner 80). They can only consent to being given unpredictable

hours and paid unpredictable wages, so that McDonald's can shift "the costs of uneven demand" to workers (Leidner 83).

Window workers are also the targets of customer frustration and anger, as they are the only visible representatives of their corporation, but they also cannot respond because they have to maintain professionalism (Leidner 131). McDonald's use of suggestive selling, which instructs workers to prompt customers to order additional items, particularly provokes customer anger and worker humiliation as it cuts short any genuine sociability; suggestive selling, in other words, brings both of them sharply back into the realm of scripted, profit-driven interaction (Leidner 140). In the Leidner study, workers regularly describe ways of dealing with customer abuse, and have clearly grown accustomed to exercising self-control. In representing McDonald's to the outside world and working for the benefit of McDonald's, workers more often than not have to put aside their own needs as human beings to serve the interest of the corporation—and even, in some cases, come to see it as what should be done, not only what must be done.

This constant stress and strain in the process of labor contributes to alienating workers from man's species-being and from his fellow workers. Window workers' creative processes are limited to variations on the Six Steps of Window Service, pleasantries, and an extra service now and then, but normally the work is machinelike and a poor substitute for work that truly demands human ability. The highly routinized nature of the job meant that workers could only challenge themselves by pushing for greater efficiency and faster service, "hit[ting] a groove [and] not having to think about it anymore" (Leidner 138, 143). In times of stress, managers prioritized efficiency over friendliness,

and tensions rose between workers and customers. The service routines and managerial supervision led workers to be impersonal and annoyed with slower customers, and to take out their anger on customers rather than management if something went wrong (Leidner 146). Workers' need to be efficient for the sake of the corporation undermined the more social aspects of the job that the majority of them saw as most personally rewarding.

Even in workers' normally tranquil relationships with one another, the interests of management can cause tensions to spring up. Leidner notes that carefully chosen methods allowed managers to extract the names of uncooperative crew people from their fellow workers (Leidner 80). Cooperation between workers was encouraged, but not to such an extent that they ever became a "powerful force for resisting managerial demands" (Leidner 133); as friendly as it might have been, Leidner reports, "the peer culture was not a unified one that could enforce alternative definitions of work" (134). Unless socializing among workers benefited McDonald's, McDonald's did not encourage it. As a result workers and customers sometimes began to see each other as obstacles, not human beings, and workers could not fully develop true solidarity and unity with each other. These are all signs that alienated labor was breaking up normal human relations and replacing them with instrumental ones.

Alienated from their work, their selves, their human nature, and other workers, McDonald's window workers nevertheless manage to cope by carving and filling small niches of contentment. The niches they create for themselves, the self-control they have learned to develop, and McDonald's

psychological management all combine to create an initially counterintuitive picture of contemporary alienation. The Leidner case demonstrates that Marx's theory of alienation can be extended to cases that do not show all the outward symptoms of disease, but which do reveal signs of a growing distortion and tension between the self's needs and the limitless demands of alienated labor. Alienated happiness is at best impoverished—we need to look beyond reported happiness to examine how alienated workers must struggle to reconcile their dual identities as corporate machines and as social human beings.



Works Cited

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