RESISTANCE AND COLLECTIVE ORGANISATION ON THE SERVICE FRONT-LINE: REASSESSING THE POSSIBILITIES FOR OPPOSITION IN THE TRIADIC RELATIONSHIP

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The importance of service work

- Approximately 70% work in services in advanced economies (Lopez, 2010; Warhurst et al., 2009)
- Nearly 30% do interactive front-line service work (FLSW) (Korczynski, 2009)
- Citizenship at work in 21st century needs organised, combative FLSW
- E.g. turning into action Obama’s pledge to tackle income inequality
Why reassess service work resistance?

1. Is FLSW resistance constrained by customer relations in service triangle?
2. Growing evidence of resistance in recent literature: 70% in last 20 years (Karlsson, 2012)
3. Plethora of high profile FLSW struggles in fast food, retail, care-work, railways, etc.
4. New groups taking organised action: museum and cinema workers, coastguards, lawyers, etc.
5. Some evidence of union growth for private sector service unions (e.g. UFCW and USDAW [UK])
Defining resistance

- Product of structural imbalance of power
- Conscious “employee-employer contestation over matters related to time, work, product and identity” (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999: 25)
- Commonly a collective dimension
- Continuum of resistance from informal misbehaviour to organised conflict (Ackroyd, 2012)
- Rule breaking and rule making (Taska, 2012)
A neo-liberal, triangular mire?

- Raised ideological importance of customer (Korczynski, 2002)
- Presence of customer is profound for FLSW (Leidner, 1993) and most important relationship (Korczynski, 2002)
- Reflected shifted emphasis from production to consumption (Warhurst et al., 2009)
- Logically, resistance limited to contesting terms of service encounter, not foundations of employment relationship (Brook, 2007)
- But, “the customer-management-agent triangle is not equilateral” (Taylor & Bain, 2005: 264)
Back to labour process basics

- Worker-customer relationship is an aspect of underpinning employment relationship (Bélanger & Edwards, 2013a)
- Management control and value creation
- “Structured antagonism”
- FLSW distinctive due to raised visibility of use-value and exchange-value in labour process
- Customer as real “individual”, not abstract category, as in manufacturing
An “ultimate paradox”?

- “(F)oundations of conflict are made more explicit, as employees see more openly how their contribution to the labour process has use and exchange value” (p. 447)
  - Frequent poor pay and conditions
  - Frustrated and dissatisfied customer relations

- But, “less capacity to resist or oppose. In the main, service workers do not want to act ruthlessly with customers…” (ibid)
Same old customer-oriented fetters?

- Use value/exchange-value analysis is insightful
- But, how significant is FLSW distinctiveness for capacity to resist?
- Do customer/service-user relations universally dampen active resistance?
- Bélanger and Edwards (2013a) reproduce same disarming conclusions, albeit from a robust labour process perspective
- Understates capacity to resist
How significant are ‘customer’ relations?

- Vulnerable users most likely to experience conflict:
  - Firefighters, social security workers, school teachers, health, social and care workers

- High dependence service-users too:
  - Rail, airlines, buses, postal, colleges and universities, passport offices

- Low dependence services least affected by conflict:
  - Retailing, hotels, hospitality, call centres, tourism
Contested service relations

- ‘Good service’ is contested, frequently ideological (e.g. public sector; Baines, 2011)
- Defending jobs and services fuels many FLSW disputes
- Neo-liberal language of ‘customer’ undermined by tax dodging, executive ‘reward’ and poverty pay
- Abiding traction from *Occupy* logic (e.g. Piketty)
- Low paid service workers aspirations buoyed by fraying corporate legitimacy?
- Social justice trumps customer logic?
Resistance and organisation today

- ‘Service’ = contested, heterogeneous and double-edged phenomena
- Customer relations not a universal fetter on resistance
- Service triangle generates conceptual ‘glare’ on resistance
- Growing evidence of informal resistance (Barnes & Taska, 2012; Karlsson, 2012) and open conflict (see Coulter, 2014; Silver, 2014)
- Specificity of analysis is required
- “Contestation is...shaped by forces from the very general to the very particular” (Bélanger & Edwards, 2013b: 23)
References