Affective labour and alienation: Spinoza's materialism and the sad passions of post-Fordist work

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the alienation entailed in contemporary emotional and affective labour and the ways this might be overcome. I identify the shifts in the nature and function of this labour since it first received attention by feminist and other scholars in the 1970s and '80s. And I point towards the emergence of contemporary struggles to limit the emotional intensity of the working day, similar in some ways to those Karl Marx once described around its length. My primary wager is that overcoming the forms of alienation at stake in the putting to work of personality, subjectivity, and self, need not be understood as a largely idealist question of 'de-alienation' or 'de-reification'. Rather, drawing on Benedict de Spinoza's work on the body, mind, and affects, I suggest it is one of organising material encounters between bodies and their joining together through the construction of 'common notions', reason, and a more 'real' understanding of the social world as well as one's location within it. I argue that, in approaching such a project, feminist and other methods of 'consciousness-raising' may prove of greater use than many traditional approaches to developing and delivering 'class consciousness'.

In this paper, I interrogate the alienation that is often entailed in contemporary forms of emotional and affective labour and the ways this might be overcome. I identify the shifts in the nature and function of this labour since it first received attention by feminist and other scholars in the 1970s and '80s. And I suggest that where emotional relationships are primarily consumed by colleagues and co-workers, rather than customers and clients, new forms of what could be called 'emotional class struggle' are often generated. These struggles tend to revolve around the emotional intensity of the working day and are similar in some ways to Karl Marx's ([1990 [1867]]) description of those around its length.

My primary wager is that, in a time in which personality, subjectivity and self are put to work, we can think the overcoming of the alienation this entails through an engagement with Benedict de Spinoza's ([1996 [1677]]) account of the body, mind and affects. I argue that external bodies, in the form of labour-power alienated and objectified in commodities (including commodified affects and emotions), assume a power to direct social processes, restricting our power to act. Eliminating this form of 'bondage', or abolishing this present state of things, need not be understood as a largely idealist question of 'de-alienation' or 'de-reification'. Rather, drawing on Benedict de Spinoza's work on the body, mind, and affects, I suggest it is one of organising material encounters between bodies and their joining together through the construction of 'common notions'. This would allow instead for the production of different feelings (specifically, more joyful affects), for the production of reason, and of an increase in our power to act.

This alienation (Entäußerung) entailed in emotional and affective commodity production is clearly caught up with a second (humanist) sense in which the term has been used: to describe the Entfremdung or estrangement that occurs when humanity loses much of its capacity to determine its creative activity. This aspect of alienation is, as others have observed, more pronounced today, where emotional and affective production and management are pervasive. Spinoza's work provides a framework for thinking both this phenomenon and its potential overcoming, while avoiding any reliance on essentialised notions of emotional authenticity, human nature, or 'species-being' (Gattungswesen). Rather, our 'essence' is understood simply as our continual 'striving' (conatus) to persevere in our being, to realise our power to be, and also to become.

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1 All Spinoza ([1996 [1677]]) citations are from Edwin Curley’s translation of Ethics. Following Curley, rather than page numbers I use the following abbreviations to locate quotes: A – axiom; P – proposition; D (following roman numeral) – definition; D (following P + Arabic numeral) – demonstration; C – corollary; S – scholium; Exp – exegesis; Post – postulate; Pref – preface; App – appendix; DefAff – definition of affects at end of Part III. Roman numerals refer to parts; Arabic numerals to axioms, propositions and definitions. E.g.: IIIP3D refers to the definition following proposition three in part two.

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The first part of this paper engages with Arlie Hochschild’s (2003 [1983]) ground-breaking feminist sociology of emotional labour, and her account of the ways it often entails recalling and mobilising real emotional memories. The second examines the various functions fulfilled by emotional labour today (including the production of ‘distinction’ and ‘social-esteem’) as well as the nature of struggles around its intensity. I argue that there are a number of obstacles to transforming these (often individual) struggles into collective political practices, and that these largely derive from the spatial shifts entailed in the post-Fordist world of work. Part three addresses the theoretical continuities and the distinctions between notions of ‘emotional’ and ‘affective’ labour, as well as the difficulties entailed in theorising any overcoming of the alienation these forms of labour involve. Part four argues that Spinoza’s ‘perspective of affects’, attentive to the body and to emotions, allows us to embark on precisely such a theoretical endeavour, and from within a thoroughly materialist framework. And a fifth, final part of the paper outlines the possibility for a project both of intellectual inquiry and material political organisation. This is directed towards transforming what I will describe as ‘the sad passions’ that shape much emotional and affective labour today into an increased capacity to act, to affect and to be affected. As such, this paper hopes to contribute towards a theory of overcoming alienation that is materialist and attempts to resist essentialisms, as well as towards the outline of a project that might set such a process in motion.

1. Early accounts of emotional labour

Drawing on research primarily carried out in the 1970s, Hochschild’s (2003) The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling provided one of the first sociological studies of emotional labour when published in 1983. She defined it as paid work that “requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochshild, 2003 [1983]: 7). A number of key occupational groups were identified as calling most clearly for such work at the time: “professional and technical workers, managers and administrators, sales workers, clerical workers, and service workers” (Hochshild, 2003 [1983]: 44). Hochschild acknowledged her debt to C. Wright Mills (2002 [1951]: 182) seminal study of the emergence, in 1950s America, of a white-collar middle class who had begun to sell their “social personality” along with their “labor, energy, and skill”. While Mills had convincingly and crucially argued, “when we ‘sell our personality’ in the course of selling goods or services we engage in a seriously self-estranging process, one that is increasingly common among workers in advanced capitalist systems”, Hochshild (2003 [1983]: ix) insisted there was nevertheless something important missing from Mills’ account. Namely, “a sense of the active emotional labour involved in the selling” (Hochshild, 2003 [1983]: ix). Kathi Weeks (2007: 240) points out that Hochschild’s key advance on Mills was thus shifting focus from what she called the personality market to “the labour process itself” and the processes of subjectivation it entails.

The primary focus of The Managed Heart was the labour of flight attendants, 85% of whom in Hochschild’s sample were women. She showed that they were trained to produce a range of emotions in passengers from conviviality to homeliness and a sense of ease, even in moments where they were experiencing fear or distress themselves. To describe the techniques used to achieve this, Hochschild drew on the Russian theatre director Constantin Stanislavski’s (2003 [1936]) distinction between surface and deep acting. The former involves acting “as if” one has a particular feeling (Hochshild, 2003 [1983]: 37). Body language, facial expression, timing and tone of voice are used to create convincing performances. “[The art of an eyebrow raised here, an upper lip tightened there” (Hochschild, 2003 [1983]: 37–38). With various degrees of success, many emotional labourers deploy surface acting today. Think how much more sincere a fast-food worker seems if they make eye contact when telling you to ‘Have a nice day’!

Deep acting, however, requires a different methodology, enabling what Stanislavski called a more “powerful” and “profound” acting upon the soul, with actors directly exhorting feelings from within themselves, or making indirect use of emotions through a trained imagination (Stanislavski cited Hochshild, 2003 [1983]: 38). The latter of these techniques is what has become known as ‘Method’ acting, or Stanislavski’s (2003 [1936]) ‘experiential’ method. Instead of performing as if one feels fear, for example, the actual feeling itself is induced by recalling real emotional memories. Some of the most advanced forms of emotional labour see workers trained in these techniques. One graduate from the Delta Airlines’ trainee programme explained to Hochschild:

You think how the person resembles someone you know. You see your sister’s eyes in someone sitting at that seat ... I like to think of the cabin as the living room of my own home.

(Cited in Hochshild, 2003 [1983]: 105)

It is here, as Weeks (2007: 241) points out, that processes of subjectivation are most clearly at work: “practices that have a transformative effect on the doer.” Emotions both “affect how bodies take shape in social space and”, as Sara Ahmed (2008: 12) points out, “how spaces cohere around bodies”. In other words, by transforming the doer, deep acting shapes the subject’s bodily performances and in turn the emotional experience of a space, and the ways people relate within it. Here, the commercial space of the cabin comes to increasingly resemble that of the home; a space that, as Hochschild (2003 [1983]) points out, is itself no longer completely free of commercial interactions.

2. Authenticity and emotional labour today

Despite considerable transformations in the aviation industry, and the global political economy in general, since the 1970s, the case of the flight attendant remains instructive. The rise of budget airlines in Europe, Asia and elsewhere since the mid-1990s has been marked by a rise in the feeling of a pared-back customer service at the industry’s lower end. This sometimes forms a conscious component of brand identity: the sense of ‘no frills’, where you are paying only for what you really need. Meanwhile, the deep acted emotional labour, invested in producing feelings such as homeliness, continue to be expected of more exclusive airlines and by many business and first-class passengers. Similar processes of differentiation can be found elsewhere. The emotional labour of the ‘have a nice day’, surface-acted kind in budget or standard supermarkets, for instance, often barely disguises the emotions it is designed to disavow – say, of frustration or fatigue. Yet in more exclusive stores there is often a premium on workers’ authentic investment in the products and services they sell. “Customers are very intelligent!”, observes Whole Foods Market CEO John Mackey (2007: 7): “They know when someone is doing a sales job on them, and they know when someone genuinely cares about their wellbeing”.

Part of what is enabled by the production of authenticity through deep-acted emotional labour, or labour that feels irreducible to labour, is the operation of what Pierre Bourdieu (1984: xxix) termed ‘distinction’ to denote, “the systems of dispositions

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