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# **The Alienated Heart: Hochschild's 'emotional labour' thesis and the anti-capitalist politics of alienation**

Paul Brook

## **Abstract**

Arlie Russell Hochschild's influential emotional labour thesis in *The Managed Heart* (1983) exposes and opposes the harm wrought by the commodification of human feelings as customer service, and complements contemporary anticapitalist writing with an enduring influence and political relevance that is underpinned by Hochschild's application of Marx's alienation theory. Critics have sought to blunt the politics of her thesis by rejecting as absolutist her condemnation of workers' alienation. But her application of alienation theory is not thorough, since her explicit usage of it is limited to only two of Marx's four dimensions, and thus it stops short of theorising alienation as generic to society. This undermines Hochschild's argument on emotional labourers' resistance, since she inadequately captures the way workers are shaped by alienation but not blinded to the reality of capitalism. The continuing political potency of her thesis requires that it should be defended and strengthened.

## **Introduction: A very political theory**

It is difficult to overestimate the enduring influence of the emotional labour thesis found in Arlie Russell Hochschild's seminal work, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (2003 [1983]). Debates on emotional labour continue to turn on this pioneering contribution (Bolton, 2005), and yet it is an unlikely candidate to have won such a high profile. Published in the harsh, neoconservative climate of Reagan's USA, the book resolutely exposes and opposes the harm wrought by the expanding demand for the commodification of emotions in the form of customer service. Thus, *The Managed Heart's* core arguments and political conclusions are highly relevant to today's anticapitalist movement with its slogan of 'our world is not for sale', underpinned by its damning analyses of neoliberalism, corporate power and consumerism.

Since *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild's emotional labour thesis has spawned an immense range of studies that reach far into the world of work beyond her original study of flight attendants and debt collectors. These, which Bolton (2005: 53) has referred to pejoratively as an 'emotional labour bandwagon', include studies of nurses, Disneyland workers, retail and childcare workers, schoolteachers, psychotherapists, holiday representatives, call-centre workers, bar staff, waiters and

many others (see Steinberg and Figart, 1999; Bolton, 2005). While these studies vary in the degree to which they follow Hochschild in her explicit condemnation of emotional labour, they tend to contain an implicit acceptance of its exploitative and subordinating nature. Some have extended Hochschild's thesis to include additional dimensions, as in Witz et al.'s (2003) addition of aesthetic labour, which stresses the increasing commodification of service workers' appearance and sexuality as 'display'. Most notable has been the development of a feminist dimension to emotional labour debates, which centres on the socially reproduced, gendered commodification of emotion in organisations, and on the related feminisation of most service work (see Fineman, 2005; Colley, 2006; Lewis & Simpson, 2007). Thus James (1989, 1992), in her pioneering studies of cancer nurses' emotional labour, developed a feminist orientation in her analysis of the source, maintenance and commodification of compassion in the 'caring workplace'.<sup>i</sup>

What underpins Hochschild's politicised critique in *The Managed Heart*<sup>ii</sup> is the pivotal role played in it by her application of Marx's alienation theory. This is borne out by the central argument of some of Hochschild's critics, who seek to blunt her critique by rejecting as absolutist her condemnation of the alienation workers suffer through the commodification of their emotions. They argue instead that customer service interactions are double-edged in that they possess the potential to be subjectively satisfying as well as distressing for the worker (Wouters, 1989; Tolich, 1993; Korczynski, 2002). In essence, they reject the notion that the experience of having one's emotions commodified is intrinsically alienating. Indeed, in recent years there has been a growing movement towards the rejection of 'emotional labour' as a meaningful category of wage labour (see Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Bolton, 2005; Lewis & Simpson, 2007), on the basis that not all emotions are commodified in the labour process, and that Hochschild's application of alienation in this context implies that workers are rendered powerless. Consequently, Hochschild's 'emotional labour' theory is now challenged by a growing usage of Bolton's (2005) alternative, largely depoliticised thesis on 'emotion management' in organisations. This argues that emotion workers exercise a significant degree of emotional free choice because of the very limited extent to which their emotions can be commodified. Therefore, they enjoy a largely unalienated experience of the labour process. To date it has been Hochschild's opponents, rather than those who wish to build on her thesis, who have recognised her understanding and use of alienation as pivotal, and who have thereby subjected it to sustained criticism (e.g. Wouters, 1989; Tolich, 1993; Bolton, 2005).

Although it has been condemned as absolutist, Hochschild's application of alienation theory is nevertheless not thorough.<sup>iii</sup> She restricts her explicit theorisation to the two of Marx's (1975 [1844]) four dimensions that are specific to the workplace: product alienation and labour process

alienation. The first deals with workers' loss of control over and ownership of their labour product, and the second with the removal of their control over the labour process. However, while alienation has its source at the point of production, Marx's remaining two dimensions relate to the wider corrosive effects of alienation in society, and should not be separated from the first two (Yuill, 2005). These dimensions – human nature alienation and fellow beings alienation (including commodity fetishism) – deal with the way the suffusion of the commodity form and market relations through society severely distort our self-knowledge, social relations and understanding of the world. While these dimensions are occasionally implicit in Hochschild's analysis, she does not explore them as wider social dimensions of alienation contributing to and compounding the direct commodification of workplace emotions. In not doing so, she stops short of theorising alienation as generic to capitalist society (Meszaros, 2005 [1970]; Billig, 1999). This effectively localises the existence of alienation to workplace social relations. Furthermore, *The Managed Heart* is devoid of an explicit class analysis. This undermines Hochschild's argument in explaining individual and collective responses, including resistance by emotional labourers. She compounds this weakness with an insufficiently dialectical analysis (Rees, 1998) whereby she is unable to capture the complexity and potential of contradictory dimensions in the emotional labour process (Sturdy, 1998; Taylor, 1998). Thus Hochschild inadequately theorises the way workers are shaped by alienation but not blinded to the reality of capitalism (Lukács, 1974; Heller, 1978).

The combination of under-theorisation and theoretical gaps generates weaknesses in her overall thesis that leave it open to more valid criticisms than partisan claims of absolutism. In particular, Hochschild is criticised for her tendency to dichotomise the distinction between the private self and the commodified public self (Wouters, 1989; Barbalet, 2001; Bolton, 2005); and for overestimating the degree of managerial ownership and control of workers' emotions (Ashworth & Humphreys, 1993; Barbalet, 2001; Bolton, 2005; Theodosius, 2006), as a consequence of which she presents frontline workers as 'crippled actors' (Bolton & Boyd, 2003).

Whatever the weaknesses in Hochschild's thesis, it is nevertheless, 'one that clearly politicises our understanding of emotion at work' (Fineman, 2005: 6). What follows is a critical defence of Hochschild's emotional labour thesis at a time when there are growing efforts to reject its Marxian core of alienation theory, and to diminish its political content. Accordingly, this article aims to defend the thesis as a valuable contribution and a significant building block for a still thin Marxist debate on emotional labour.<sup>iv</sup> It begins with an exposition of Hochschild's thesis, followed by an analysis of the 'emotional labour' concept against each of Marx's four dimensions of alienation. Central to this assessment is the question of the adequacy of her theorisation of worker's resistance

arising from the alienation of emotional labour, and how it can be strengthened and developed within the classical Marxist tradition (see Rees, 1998).

### **Emotional labour in play**

The *Managed Heart's* opening lines set the analytic and political tone for what is to come. Hochschild begins by citing the case of the young boy in a wallpaper factory discussed by Marx in *Capital*. She notes Marx's point that the boy is no more than an instrument of labour, and expresses a fundamental concern at the human cost. Hochschild then makes a direct comparison between the boy in the nineteenth-century wallpaper factory and a flight attendant over a century later:

The work done by the boy in the wallpaper factory called for a co-ordination of mind and arm, mind and finger, and mind and shoulder. We refer to it simply as physical labor. The flight attendant does physical labor when she pushes heavy meal carts through the aisles, and she does mental work when she prepares for and actually organizes emergency landings and evacuations. But in the course of doing this physical and mental labor she is doing something more, something I define as 'emotional labor'. This labor requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others. (p. 7)

Here Hochschild is laying the foundations for her argument that the human cost of performing emotional labour is as harmful as that of the physical and mental labour discussed by Marx. This is because "beneath the difference between physical and emotional labor there lies a similarity in the possible cost of doing the work: the worker can become estranged or alienated from an aspect of self – either the body or the margins of the soul – that is "used" to do the work' (p. 7).

The early introduction of alienation theory is joined by another equally fundamental use of Marx's critique of wage labour; namely, the distinction between exchange value and use value in the commodification of emotions. This is integral to Hochschild's primary definition of emotional labour as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has "exchange value". I use the synonymous terms "emotion work" or "emotion management" to refer to those same acts done in a private context where they have "use value" (p. 7).<sup>v</sup>

Hochschild's analysis rests on this distinction between emotion work and emotional labour. Emotion work is the process of managing and presenting emotions in the private sphere of our lives, such as

amongst family and friends and even as a customer. Emotional labour, in contrast, involves the commercialisation of workers' feelings through a transmutation<sup>vi</sup> of 'private sphere' feelings into a package of emotions that is consumed by the customer as a commodified service interaction. The process has the effect of alienating frontline workers from their emotional product through management's wresting of formal ownership and control from workers of the form, timing, giving and withdrawal of feelings, moods and their display.

Two other aspects compound this loss of control. First, there is an unequal relationship with the customer: 'the customer is always right'. This is in contrast to our private lives, where we tend to experience a much greater level of assumed and/or near equality in our emotional interactions:

In private life, we are free to question the going rate of exchange and free to negotiate a new one. If we are not satisfied, we can leave; many friendships and marriages die of inequality. But in the public world of work, it is often part of an individual's job to accept uneven exchanges, to be treated with disrespect or anger by a client, all the while closeting into fantasy the anger one would like to respond with. Where the customer is king, unequal exchanges are normal. (pp. 85–6)

Second, management imposes codified *feeling rules* on emotional labourers in order to ensure the delivery of the requisite quality of customer service. These rules dictate the form, content and appropriateness of emotional displays, thereby separating workers from the design and control of the labour process. Workers, therefore, are estranged from their emotional product and the process of emotion production.

Hochschild argues that employers' *feeling rules* increasingly go further than demanding behavioural compliance, which she calls *surface acting*. This is because management frequently strives for emotional workers to internalise the feelings they are required to display, not only in order to enhance the 'quality' of the emotional display, but also to diminish the likelihood of *emotive dissonance* (Jansz & Timmers, 2002), caused by the strain of continuously bridging what is really felt with what has to be feigned over long periods. Hochschild argues that the response of many emotional labourers is to 'try to pull the two closer together either by changing what we feel or by changing what we feign' (p. 90), which she calls *deep acting*.

Deep acting is the result of a worker's seeking a more comfortable space for her self, free from the dangers of emotive dissonance (Jansz & Timmers, 2002) through the *fusion* of her real and acted emotional labour. However, despite fusion's apparent benefits, there is 'a cost to be paid' (p.119), since it is a condition that requires a systemic suppression of the real self, thereby deepening the

individual's subordination to her commodification. However, as a contradictory and unstable condition, it can transform into a nascent form of resistance:

Often the test comes when a company speed-up makes personal service impossible to deliver because the individual's personal self is too thinly parcelled out to meet the demands made on it. At this point, it becomes harder and harder to keep the public and private selves fused... The worker wonders whether her smile and the emotional labor that keeps it sincere are really hers. Do they really express a part of her? Or are they deliberately worked up and delivered on behalf of the company? (p.133)

### **Alienated from what?**

Underlying Hochschild's conceptualisation of emotional labour is her 'social theory of emotions'. Such a theory, she argues, has to possess both social and psychological dimensions in that it needs to be able to ask how the construction of social interaction for profit influences an individual's personality. Hence, while employers' feeling 'rules run deep ... so does the self that struggles with and against them' (p. 229).

Hochschild states that to manage feeling is to strive consciously to alter a pre-existing emotional state that is indicative of a *given self*. Yet this notion of a psychological given self does little to articulate its relationship with the socially constructed dimension of emotion. For this, Hochschild turns to Freud's notion of the *signal function* of emotion, whereby messages such as anxiety, delight, hope and despair signal to the individual that there is the presence of danger, pleasure and so forth from within or external to the individual. Signal function achieves the integration of the social and the psychological dimensions by being a manifestation of the innate self that is profoundly contingent upon socially constructed *prior expectations*:

The idea of prior expectation implies the existence of a prior self that does the expecting ... Most of us maintain a prior expectation of a continuous self, but the character of the self we expect to maintain is subject to profoundly social influence. Insofar as the self and all we expect is social ... the way emotion signals messages to us is also influenced by social factors. (pp. 231–2)

Hochschild's theory of emotion, therefore, binds together the psychological and the social into an interdependent and dynamic unity that is akin to Marx's ontology of the dialectical unity of the mind and body (Marx, 1975 [1844]; Meszaros, 2005 [1970]). It does this by integrating the notions of

emotion as a signal function – a biological sensory function – with socially constructed prior expectations as indicative of the given self. Without such a conceptualisation, it would be incoherent to theorise alienated emotional labour, for without a theory of human nature, how is it possible to identify an alien condition that violates the individual?

Hochschild's given self, like Marx's theory of 'human nature', appears to oppose the common-sense idea that each individual possesses a common, discrete and fixed human nature independent of society (Ollman, 1976 [1971]). While Hochschild does not provide an explicit anthropology of the given self, her implied conceptualisation is not incompatible with Marx's materialist conception, which argues that the only nature-imposed condition of all human existence is the requirement to labour on the environment in order to satisfy human needs. As sentient beings, humans are different from other animals – we are reflective and imaginative in the abstract before concretely acting on our natural environment (Marx, 1976 [1867]). Marx calls our capacity for conscious labour *species being*. This is not just a theory of individual human nature: species being is inherently social because in order to survive, individuals have to enter into collaborative, interdependent relationships.

For Marx, the source of alienation in capitalist society is the necessity for the overwhelming majority of people to labour for a wage in order to ensure physical survival and a semblance of emotional dignity, where a minority, the ruling class, owns and controls the means of production. A worker, therefore, hands over ownership and effective control of her labour – in other words, her species being. For Marx, this essential relationship between worker and capital generates alienation in capitalist society:

The fact that labour is *external* to the worker, i.e. it does not belong to his essential being; that he therefore does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free physical and mental energy but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. Hence, the worker only feels himself when he is not working ... (Marx, 1975: 326)

Here, Marx explicitly refers to the ruination of body and mind. This understanding of mind and body as an interrelated dialectical unity (Yuill, 2005) is crucial to the task of interpreting the efficacy of Hochschild's argument that emotional labour is alienating in the same way as the production of physical commodities.

### **Hochschild's half-made theory of alienation**

Marx (1975), as indicated above, identified four dimensions of alienation, with the first two – product alienation and labour process alienation – dealing with the immediate conditions of workplace relations. The second two, fellow beings alienation and human nature alienation, encompass capitalist society as a whole. These dimensions are not separate processes with discrete sets of symptoms, but are rather aspects of a generic process that is endemic to capitalism. This is because the whole of humankind is alienated, in that it suffers a loss of control because the power of capital is embodied as an alien force that confronts individuals and society as a hostile and potentially destructive power (Meszaros, 2005 [1970]). How thorough and adequate, then, is Hochschild's application of alienation theory, and what are its consequences for her theorisation of emotional labour?

### **Product alienation**

The worker is alienated from the product of her labour by the simple fact that it is not she who owns or controls its disposal, but rather the capitalist. The consequence is that the product of her labour is objectified and appears as external to herself rather than as an affirmation of herself, her species being. Thus while the worker invests her energies and life in the production of the commodity, it is a one-way relationship – a 'one-sided enrichment of the object' (Ollman, 1976: 144) – for which she receives only money. The creative power, energy, thought and consideration that is required in order 'to make something vanishes into the object of alienated production, which in turn is not replaced by other revitalising creative power' (Yuill, 2005: 135). Hochschild concurs with the idea of a 'one-sided enrichment' when she states that when the product 'is a smile, a mood, a feeling, or a relationship, it comes to belong more to the organization and less to the self' (p. 198). This is because for the cabin crew in Hochschild's study, their smiles 'were seen as an extension of the make-up, the uniform, the recorded music, the soothing pastel colours of the airplane decor, and the daytime drinks, which taken together orchestrate the mood of the passengers' (p. 8). Hochschild, like Marx, sees this estrangement from the product of labour as having a human cost for emotional labourers. While Marx makes the general point that alienated labour 'mortifies the flesh and ruins the mind', Hochschild is more specific and identifies emotive dissonance amongst many cabin crew where they experience 'burnout', feeling 'phoney' and 'emotional deadness' (see Jansz & Timmers, 2002).

Emotive dissonance is the result of a worker investing emotionally in her performance over a prolonged period. The cumulative effect is that she suffers an emotional 'malnourishment' caused

by an insufficient revitalising return on her investment. Hochschild argues that there comes a breaking point between the real and acted self, and that as a matter of self-protection she is forced to 'divide': 'some workers conclude that only one self (usually the non-work self) is the real self. Others, and they are the majority, will decide that each self is meaningful and real in its own different way and time' (p. 132).

Hochschild appears to argue that emotional labour elicits a more profound form of alienation than even Marx imagined. This is because the majority of workers can only cope with their estrangement by 'fusing' their commercialised selves with their real, 'private sphere' selves. Hochschild's argument, therefore, implies that Marx underestimated the potency of alienation when he stated that 'the worker only feels himself when he is not working' (1975: 326).

### **Labour process alienation**

Closely allied to product alienation is labour process alienation, wherein workers lack control over the process of production – that is, the conditions under which we work, how our work is organised, what we produce and the effect it has on our health (Cox, 1998). For Marx, by wresting control of the labour process, capital denudes us of our intrinsic capacity to work creatively and transforms it into its opposite. Thus a worker experiences 'power as impotence ... [and his] own physical and mental energy, his personal life ... as an activity directed against himself, which is independent of him and does not belong to him' (1975: 327).

Another dimension to labour process alienation is the fact that work is under the control of forces hostile to us. This is because owing to the competitive nature of capitalism, managers are under constant pressure to extract more value from the worker, thereby cheapening the worth of the individual to capitalism. As capitalism develops and corporations grow larger, there is a general tendency for work to be designed to achieve ever-greater economies of scale, unit efficiencies and labour productivity, thereby enhancing the importance of the productive process, its logistics and technologies over the skills and value of the individual. The result is that 'the special skill of each individual, insignificant factory operative vanishes as an infinitesimal quantity before the science, the gigantic physical forces, and mass of labour that are embodied in the factory mechanism' (Marx, 1976: 548), and the 'idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as *mere sources of error*' (Lukács, 1974: 89).

Hochschild echoes Marx and Lukács when she argues that contemporary service jobs 'are now socially engineered and thoroughly organised from the top' (p. 8). Yet management's control of

workers' display and performance is contradictory and unstable. She details how, during cabin-crew training, airlines seek to suppress workers' negative emotions, which are largely borne of their experience of the service labour process where they are 'treated with disrespect or anger by a client, [yet] all the while closeting into fantasy the anger one would like to respond with' (pp. 85-86). For her, companies' efforts to control the service labour process is an estranging experience in which 'the more seriously social engineering affects our behaviour and our feelings, the more intensely we must address a new ambiguity about who is directing them (is this me or the company talking?)' (p. 34). Moreover, Hochschild is at pains to highlight the alienation that derives from the progressive devaluing of a worker's creative contribution through the increasing rationalisation of the labour process. Hochschild shows how the worker is no more than an appendage to the externally imposed smile factory system, and her personal, defensive responses are treated by employers as 'mere sources of error', such as offering 'a thin crust of display' (p. 21) in order to cope with management's ever increasing customer service targets.

For Hochschild, new forms of deskilling compound the alienation generated by the corporate control of the labour process, and the ever-greater competitive pressures to rationalise the service production system. Following Braverman (1974), she argues that there is a tendency for the 'mind' of the work process to 'move up the hierarchy leaving jobs de-skilled and workers devalued' (p. 119). For example, cabin crew training on how to deal with angry passengers is a form of deskilling. This is because the 'mind of the emotion worker, the source of the ideas about what mental moves are needed to settle down an "irate" has moved upstairs in the hierarchy so that the worker is restricted to implementing standard procedures' (p. 120).

In summary, Hochschild's theory of emotional labour explicitly argues that workers are systematically alienated from their service product and the labour process that determines the form and timing of its manufacture. However, while her explicit theorisation peters out beyond the immediacy of workplace relations, she does provide a partial analysis of the impact of emotional labour on wider capitalist social relations. As a result, it is possible to argue that her thesis, rather than rejecting the remaining two dimensions of Marx's theory of alienation, instead possesses the potential for their acceptance and integration.

### **Human nature alienation**

Human nature alienation is that aspect of alienation, which addresses the damaging and distorting effects of capitalist society on our species being. For while capitalism has immeasurably enhanced

our collective capacity to transform the world through medicine, travel, communication, modern agriculture, etc. in the interests of all, this capacity is thwarted. This is because capitalism suppresses our potential to realise our collective species being, based as it is on an anarchic drive for profits, competition, class division and exploitation. Hochschild appears to hint at an understanding of the way capitalism's capacity to meet the needs and desires of humanity is thwarted by its need to put profit before all else:

Massive people-processing – and the advanced engineering of emotional labor that makes it possible – is a remarkable achievement. It is also an important one, for a good part of modern life involves exchange between total strangers, who in the absence of countermeasures and in the pursuit of short-term interest, might much of the time act out suspicion and anger rather than trust and good will ... But like most great achievements, the advanced engineering of emotional labour leaves new dilemmas in its wake, new human costs. (p. 187)

Hochschild is ambiguous, however, as to whether she believes the costs of emotional labour to be removable without replacing the whole process of commodification of emotions or, more simply, reorganising the process. At several points, she seems to suggest that workers can avert alienation by successfully managing their 'true self': 'When feelings are successfully commercialized, the worker does not feel phoney or alien; she feels somehow satisfied in how personal her service actually was. Deep acting is a help in doing this, not a source of estrangement' (p. 136).

This is a shift away from Marx's theorisation of alienation as a systemic dimension of capitalist relations of production, and towards one that posits it as primarily an individualised, pathological condition that can be 'treated' within capitalist social relations. Indeed, subsequent writers have drawn on this inconsistency to argue that it is possible to remove the alienating psychological costs of emotional labour by redesigning the work to ensure greater autonomy and control for the individual (Wharton, 1996; Ashworth & Humphrey, 1993). In short, Hochschild's ambiguous theorisation and her inconsistencies on the nature of alienation and its existence beyond the immediate realm of workplace relations serve to blunt her overall critique of the generic commodification of human feelings.

Conversely, Hochschild also suggests that capitalism's deepening and spreading market relations have a cumulative spill over effect into wider society. In her 2003 afterword to *The Managed Heart*, she refers to the increasing take-up of 'personal services' and the way private life is progressively invaded and shaped by commodified emotional labour, suggesting a 'vital link between larger social contradictions and private efforts to manage feeling' (p. 202). These contradictions, she states,

which generate emotional strain between the real and false selves, now exist not only at work but also at home, and increasingly 'in between' work and home. Thus she tentatively hints at the possibility of an analysis that would highlight emotional labour's alienating, corrosive effects beyond the workplace.

### **Fellow beings alienation and commodity fetishism**

Fellow beings alienation' refers to social relations between individuals that increasingly take the form of relationships between commodities. In a society based on the production and consumption of commodities, the pervasiveness of commodities can seem an inevitable, even a natural state of affairs (Lukács, 1974; May, 2006). Marx states that under capitalism, the wealth of society appears as an 'immense collection of commodities', with the commodity becoming a 'universal category of society as a whole' (Marx, 1976: 125).

For Marx, this generates a multi-dimensional phenomenon throughout capitalist society, which he calls 'commodity fetishism' (1976). Consequently, we experience relationships with each other not as individuals, but as if we were extensions of capitalism (Ollman, 1976). As capitalism develops, commodification encroaches and invades our lives to the point at which a life outside market relations and independent of commodities is unimaginable. Even the most intimate aspects of our lives are touched and shaped (Hochschild, 2004), for from cars, washing machines, art, dating, dog walking and customer service to the ever-present commercial images of beauty, success and happiness, our lives and self-concepts are inscribed by commodification. Whatever the personal or social usefulness of these commodities, their exchange value takes precedence. Consequently, 'things' dominate our existence. Even as consumers, we are alienated thanks to our enmeshed dependence on the market, where 'the very character of man is at the mercy of his products, of what they make him want and become in order to get what he wants' (Ollman, 1976: 146).

Individuals also relate to each other in society as objectified bearers of the commodities that they produce, possess and consume. The consequence is that commodities acquire social and human characteristics, as with 'cool', 'sophisticated' and 'sexy' brands, owing to our entering into social relationships based on the amount (especially money) and quality of commodities we possess (Lodziak, 2002). Our social interactions are also determined by our place and function in the market as managers, staff members, sales assistants, customers, clients, professionals, unemployed workers and so on. Thus we encounter each other in competitive market relationships in which we are either in an inferior or a superior position (Cox, 1998). In other words, we are reified individuals and enter

into reified relationships as the bearers of economic relations. As such, we are the personification of the commodities we possess (Lukács, 1974).

Reification necessarily generates an obscuring of the actual social relations that lie behind the production of any commodity. We connect with our fellow humans through the lens of commodities, where all knowledge of and understanding of how and why our fellow humans produced the thing is submerged beneath a fetishised embrace of a commodity's assumed and claimed properties (Ollman, 1976). One example of a fetishised embrace is that of customer service. As customers, we expect sales staff to respect and value us irrespective of whether that respect and value is sincere. Thus commodity fetishism<sup>vii</sup> is the process whereby human relationships are reified as exchange values, human qualities are invested in material commodities, and real social relations of production are obscured to the point at which the world of markets and commodities appears to be almost independent of human design.

Hochschild does not acknowledge fellow beings alienation and commodity fetishism as being a dimension to Marx's theory, nor to her own. However, as in the case of human nature alienation, her theorisation does not close off its existence. Indeed, *The Managed Heart* is replete with references to and examples of commodity fetishism. She shows how cabin crews' existence as commodified labour power generates a fetishised discourse on their worth as things. Managers continually remind them of their disposability due to competition for cabin crew jobs. Even more starkly, managers refer to them as 'bodies for the flight' and 'breakage' when they are too ill to work (p. 136). Hochschild recognises this as reification when she explains that 'surface and deep acting in a commercial setting ... make one's face and feelings take on the properties of a resource ... to be used to make money' (p. 55). She further explains that a broader managerial discourse, based on a corporate logic in the airline industry, underpins this. This discourse makes 'a series of links between competition, market expansion, advertising, heightened passenger expectations about rights to display, and company demands for acting' (p. 90). This can reasonably be interpreted as the construction of a reified, 'taken for granted' perspective by workers on the naturalness of their being treated as things.

While Hochschild's arguments are largely consistent with the concept of commodity fetishism at the level of workplace relations, she is ambiguous as to the extent to which it exists in other spheres of commodified social relations. Her theoretical ambiguity, however, does not preclude the occasional tantalising commentary on the damaging impact of emotional labour in wider society:

Estrangement from display, from feeling, and from what feelings can tell us is not simply the occupational hazard of a few. It has firmly established itself in the culture as imaginable. All of us

know the commercialization of human feeling at one remove – as witness, consumer, or critic – and have become adept at recognizing and discounting commercialised feeling. ‘Oh, they have to be friendly, that’s their job’. (pp. 189–90)

The significance of Hochschild’s ambiguity is that she leaves open the theoretical door to the argument that away from the immediacy of workplace relations, capitalist society possesses spaces free from alienation, whereas Marx’s commodity fetishism theory makes plain that in a society based on commodity production, there is no escape from alienation. As Meszaros explains, ‘selling is the practice of alienation [as] alienation is characterized by the universal extension of “saleability” [and] by the conversion of human beings into “things” so that they could appear as commodities on the market’ (2005 [1970]: 35).

### **Commodity fetishism, class-consciousness and resistance**

Commodity fetishism is central to Marx’s theory of class-consciousness and class struggle. This is because commodity fetishism produces the appearance ‘that class exploitation is not a social product but the inevitable and unalterable result of the functioning of the market’ (Rees, 1998: 95). Class distinctions are also submerged by the common experience of being a customer. This is particularly acute in contemporary ‘consumer capitalism’ thanks to the ideological elevation in status of consumers over producers through the ‘myth of consumerism’ (Lodziak, 2002), wherein workers and billionaires appear to possess, in equal measure, ‘customer sovereignty’. Commodity fetishism, therefore, is the harbinger of a distorted ideology peculiar to capitalism in which ‘all men and their circumstance appear upside-down as in a camera obscura’ (Marx & Engels, 1970 [1845]: 47). As such, under capitalism ‘widespread social beliefs become so distorted that they are insufficient for understanding the social conditions which have produced such beliefs’ (Billig, 1999: 314).

Commodity fetishism may dominate the everyday consciousness of workers, but it is not an ‘iron cage’ of ideological distortion. This is because the wage-labour relationship comprises a central contradiction that acts as a countertendency to commodity fetishism. Thus, although capitalists treat workers’ labour power as if it were another purchased tool to be exploited intensely, it is unlike any other commodity, for it is not possible to separate the worker from the labour power itself. When an item is bought from a shop, full ownership and control of the commodity passes to the consumer. However, the price, content and duration of labour power are subject to continual

haggling. Moreover, the 'worker brazenly accompanies his labor power right into the workplace and stands protectively by it' while arguing 'about the terms of its sale' (Rees, 1998: 221). For Lukács (1974), this central contradiction corrodes and prises open the grip of commodity fetishism. This is because the reified 'laws' of the market accept as reasonable this daily struggle – antinomy – but cannot resolve the contradiction (Rees, 1998).

Workers, therefore, are compelled to address the social reality of their commodification and its exchange as a struggle for justice and dignity against exploitation and abuse by the capitalist. Through this experience, nascent working-class consciousness emerges and begins to oppose the distortions of commodity fetishism, with the potential for workers to collectively 'use this insight to unravel all the other mystifications of human relations that have taken on the appearance of relations between things' (Rees, 1998: 222). Thus a contradictory consciousness exists within classes and individuals, comprising a dialectical relationship between commodity fetishism as bourgeois ideology, and class consciousness. Alienation, therefore, is never a complete process but is instead a contradictory one that generates the potential for conscious resistance by workers to commodity fetishism and its underpinning, dehumanising social relations.

*The Managed Heart* offers argument and evidence that supports this analysis of the relationship between commodity fetishism and class-consciousness, without itself utilising either concept. Hochschild's 'transmutation of feelings' is an unstable state, vulnerable to the contradictions of capitalist accumulation processes, as she explains: 'When an industry speed-up drastically shortens the time available between flight attendants and passengers, it can become virtually impossible to deliver emotional labour. In that event, the transmutation of emotion work, feeling rules, and social exchange will fail' (p. 121). The instability of transmutation arises, for the most part, from the central contradiction intrinsic to the wage-labour relationship: the daily struggle over the terms of sale of workers' emotional labour, particularly in an increasingly competitive environment:

The companies worry that competitors may produce more personal service than they do, so they continue to press for 'genuinely friendly' service. But they feel compelled to keep the conveyor belt moving faster and faster. For workers, the job of 'enjoying the job' becomes harder and harder. Rewards seem less intrinsic to the work, more compensation for the arduousness of it. (p. 125)

Hochschild explains that when management is seeking to intensify emotional labourers' work, there is a corresponding reaction by many workers that undermines any such efforts, and protects the workers' perceived value of their labour power:

The company exhorts them to smile more, and 'more sincerely', at an increasing number of passengers. The workers respond to the speed-up with a slowdown: they smile less broadly, with a quick release and no sparkle in the eyes, thus dimming the company's message to the people. It is a war of smiles. (p.127)

Hochschild's 'war of smiles' can be seen as a breach in the wall of commodity fetishism that allows class consciousness to emerge. As management's speed-up bites, trade unionism gives expression to workers' 'accumulated resentment and discontent' (p. 126). This burgeoning class-consciousness is also evident in reactions to those workers who respond positively to management's work intensification: they 'become the "rate-busters" who are resented by other workers' (p. 130). Thus Hochschild acknowledges that there are contradictions in the commodification of emotional labour that generate resistance to management's control of the labour process – 'As one veteran put it: "The more the company sees the battle, the tougher they get with the regulations. They define them more precisely. They come up with more categories and more definitions. And more emotionalizing. And then, in time, we reject them even more"' (p. 130).

Hochschild's analysis, therefore, interprets resistance to exploitation and subordination – and its accompanying undermining of commodity fetishism – as being generated by the contradictory nature of wage (emotional) labour.

### **'Crippled actors' or resistive agents?**

Hochschild's account of resistance demonstrates that she understands that workers are reflexive and possess the agency to begin to challenge their alienation. This contradicts a commonly made criticism of her thesis, namely that she presents emotional labourers as 'crippled actors' in that their 'transmutation of feelings' implies they cannot exert an active and controlling force in relationships with management and customers (Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Bolton, 2005). This is because Hochschild is said to imbue management's feeling rules with such dominance that the performance of customer service becomes an atomised experience for the worker, where emotional reassessment is anaesthetised by alienation. This is evidently not the case, for Hochschild clearly theorises workers' transmutation of feelings as being inherently unstable owing to the daily playing-out of the struggle at the frontier of control of emotional labour power. Equally, she is able to explain how the breakdown of 'transmutation of feelings' frequently transforms itself into conscious, organised resistance. Nevertheless, such is the frequency of the 'crippled actors' charge and its milder form of

Hochschild's theory being too 'one-dimensional' (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002: 248), that her account of resistance requires more detailed critical assessment.

Since *The Managed Heart*, competition, restructuring and work intensification have fuelled unionisation and militancy in the airline industry globally (Blyton, 2001), and the resistive 'emotional labour' of cabin crew has proved a rich source of empirical study (e.g. Linstead, 1995; Tyler & Taylor, 2001; Bolton & Boyd, 2003). Indeed, Linstead's (1995) account of the 1993 strike by Cathay Pacific cabin crew against staff cuts and the consequent speeding-up of work appears to take up the 'story' where Hochschild leaves off. In it, Linstead captures the contradictory struggle between management's normative (and gendered) emotional demands, and the class-conscious nature of resistance to them: 'In the advertisements, the Cathay girls fix sultry smile then avert their faces with Asian humility ... this servile image has been smashed by the perfumed picket line which has shown itself to be tough, resilient and well orchestrated' (p. 200).

While the airline industry represents the best example of militant trade unionism by emotional labourers, there is also evidence that in their day-to-day activities, cabin-crew 'remain very aware ... that they are offering an *empty performance* ... without ever *buying-in* to the norms set by the company' (Bolton & Boyd, 2003: 301). Moreover, there exists a plethora of evidence from other service industries of day-to-day, informal individual and collective resistance, irrespective of a union presence (e.g. Ogbonna & Harris, 2004; Sandiford, 2007). Thus in call centres, Mulholland found that 'sales sabotage, working to rule, work avoidance, absenteeism and high turnover are expressions of a workplace antagonism rooted in and against the social relations of production' (2004: 720). Moreover, workers invariably direct their resistance against customers as well as against managers. In betting shops, Filby (1992) found that while women are employed for their 'figures', their 'personality' and their 'bums', they exploited their sexualised emotional labour to assert informal control by developing a culture of sexual humour to ridicule and humiliate male managers and unpleasant 'punters'. Likewise, Taylor and Bain's (2003b) call-centre research found that workplace activists used a culture of humour to subvert anti-union managerial authority in their campaign for trade union recognition. Thus, Taylor (1998: 99) is correct to argue that workers experience an 'incomplete transmutation', and that as a resource for the creation of surplus value, the emotional labour of service employees is a 'double-edged sword' (Filby, 1992).

Studies on resistance amongst emotional labourers in a range of service settings tend to highlight the triadic nature – which includes the customer – of the labour process (Korczynski, 2002; Sandiford, 2007). Likewise, many point to the existence of shifting boundaries at the 'frontier of control' (e.g. Tyler & Taylor, 2001; Taylor & Bain, 2003a), where 'management control of emotional

labour can be partial, incoherent and often contradictory' (Taylor, 1998: 100). This is due to the 'exacerbated' labour indeterminacy of emotional production (Bolton, 2005: 62), as management struggles to control the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of workers during customer interaction. Accordingly, service regimes are commonly marked by a process of informal, 'continual negotiation and re-negotiation [with management/customers] over the transformation of emotional labour power into a serviceable product' (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002: 251).

It is not surprising, therefore, that Hochschild's notion of a 'successful transmutation of feelings' should risk appearing to consign workers to a disabling, fetishised state. This is a consequence of her partial application of Marx's theory of alienation, which disallows an explicit conceptualisation explaining the contradictory experience of emotional labour dialectically. Thus she is unable to produce a conceptualisation of workers' consciousness as contradictory and their agency as constrained, comprising an antagonistic interrelationship between the twin potentialities of emotional assimilation of feeling rules and class-conscious resistance. Such a theorisation would enable an explicit explanation of how workers retain and exercise sufficient control over their emotional labour to alleviate their day-to-day working lives – or even to exert a counter controlling force in relationships with management and customers (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002).

While Hochschild does not, in her theory, close off the potential for the type of daily *getting by* and *getting back* activities outlined above, she largely omits an explicit analysis of them. Moreover, her lack of a theorisation of class means that she does not possess the conceptual armoury to account for them as preconditions and precursors to more class-conscious acts of resistance, in contrast to more recent, Marxist oriented labour process analysis (LPA) studies of emotional labourers (e.g. Taylor, 1998; Taylor & Bain, 2003a, 2003b; Mulholland, 2004). These studies have sought to overcome this weakness by arguing for the integration of the emotional labour concept with LPA's theorisation of relations of production as antagonistic and contradictory, thereby producing 'a complex interplay of compliance, consent and resistance' (Taylor, 1998: 100). Nevertheless, to date there has not been a detailed and systematic assessment of Hochschild's theoretical adequacy from within the LPA tradition.

Finally, it should be noted that Hochschild explores the experience of emotional labour principally through the individualised, conceptual lens of her distinction between individuals' surface and deep acting, and 'transmutation of feelings' (Bolton, 2005). By focusing on the immediacy of the individualised commodification process, in contrast with the LPA approach, she insufficiently locates her analysis in the wider context of workplace class relations. Thus, she underemphasises the basis, form and significance of collectively forged organisational space for worker agency and activity

outside and within the commodification process. Yet a lack of emphasis is not the same thing as a theoretical closure, as Bolton and Boyd (2003) and Bolton (2005) have argued. Rather, Hochschild's portrayal of the emotional labour workplace is one in which consent, indifference and conscious resistance by workers are ever present, but are unduly overshadowed by her conceptual foregrounding of the deleterious impact on individuals from the commodification of their emotions.

### **Conclusion: Reasserting the human cost of emotional labour**

*The Managed Heart* may suffer from theoretical ambiguities, inconsistencies and gaps, but its core arguments remain tenable within the context of a classical Marxist analysis (Rees, 1998). Hochschild convincingly argues that the commodification of emotions is an acutely alienating variant of wage labour that systemically pits emotional labourers into a daily struggle to secure a dignified sense of self. It is fought out in the context of management's continual search for enhanced performance, driven by intensifying capital accumulation strategies. Emotional labourers experience this pressure collectively and, as Hochschild demonstrates, frequently resist it through trade unionism. Her thesis, therefore, offers a trenchant critique of the harm caused by the production of customer service – and the commodification of emotions more generally – as a core feature of so-called 'consumer capitalism'. In doing so, *The Managed Heart* can be said to be an early example of contemporary anticapitalist-style critiques of consumerism and the profound alienation suffered by its producers.

*The Managed Heart's* legacy remains a powerful one, if theoretically enigmatic. As with all eclectic endeavours, there exists the risk that divorcing a concept from its wider theoretical foundations might diminish its potency and explanatory power. While this is so with Hochschild, it is also the case that her theorisation leaves sufficient space for a more rigorous and politically potent analysis to emerge that restores the full range of explanatory power to Marx's theory of alienation in its application to emotional labour. In this era of growing global resistance to rampant commodification, a resilient and damning critique of emotional labour is of vital necessity.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Hochschild makes a largely theoretically unintegrated foray into the gendered nature of emotional labour in *The Managed Heart* (pp. 162-184).

<sup>ii</sup> Intriguingly, *The Managed Heart* is the only time Hochschild has employed alienation in relation to emotional labour or in her subsequent work on the commodification of everyday life (2004, 2005).

<sup>iii</sup> Hochschild's partial application may be a consequence of her narrow understanding of Marx's concept. After reading an earlier draft of this article, she commented, 'It really made me think about alienation in a larger way' (2007). She is not alone in offering a partial rendering of alienation, e.g. Barbalet (2001) and Lodziak (2002).

<sup>iv</sup> Heller (1978) provides a rare example of a Marxian attempt to theorise emotion in relation to alienation. She argues that as capitalism develops, it generates dominant ideological notions of emotional appropriateness that are dependent on the needs of capital and bourgeois society more generally. Thus it is possible to interpret the increasing reification of customer norms throughout society, and their attendant emotional requirements, as a product of contemporary 'consumer capitalism'.

<sup>v</sup> Hochschild is vague on whether all forms of wage labour comprising emotional displays constitute alienating emotional labour. She suggests that the all-important distinction is whether or not there is 'exploitation of the bottom by the top'. Therefore, 'It is not emotional labour itself but the underlying system of recompense that raises the question of what the cost of it is' (p. 12). Yet Hochschild does not attempt to theorise what might constitute an exploitation of emotional labour.

<sup>vi</sup> Hochschild deliberately chooses a 'grand word' here (p. 19). Her usage is designed to express the grievous nature of the process, not to imply permanent 'mutation'.

<sup>vii</sup> Lukács (1974) greatly developed this concept) as reification.