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The capitalist's apprentice

Employment and the reproduction of capitalist culture

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On the eve of the Industrial Revolution Adam Smith (1776) reflected on emerging employment relations and how they would affect the cognitive ability of workers. Observing that one's "understandings" were "necessarily formed by their ordinary employments," Smith (1776) warned that the restricted ambit of the workplace dulled the employee's intellect by limiting opportunities to "exert [their] understanding or exercise [their] invention" (p. 336). Subsequently, he observed, the structure of the workplace impaired the employee's capacity to effectively function in social and political life. But Smith was careful to preserve the assumption that employment under capitalism was a departure from the past by locating the cause of these conditions in the seemingly objective, technical division of labour rather than in relations of domination. A few years later, John Millar (1803) connected the psychosocial implications of employment with workplace subordination. He observed that labourers are "placed in a state of inferiority" through which they "acquire habits of submission" (Millar, 1803, pp. 115–116). Consequently, "[b]y living in a state of inferiority and dependence, the mind is inured to subjection. . ." (Millar, 1803, p. 291). Neither Smith nor Millar drew a direct connection to a historic feudal power structure, even as they described relations of dominion over labour. Yet, no matter how much early economists brushed aside the feudal legacy within employment relations, this legacy was clearly inscribed in English common law and its influence can be traced well into the liberal-capitalist era.

This chapter examines the persistence of a feudal legacy of hierarchy and paternalism in the Anglo-American workplace. Because of its relevance to modern employment, this chapter focuses on the evolution and influence of paternalism within “free” labour rather than the undisguised domination associated with chattel slavery. But just as coerced servitude is often assumed to have disappeared with the abolition of chattel slavery, feudal forms of domination are perceived as relics of a past that gave way to the emancipatory spirit of capitalism and wage labour. Consequently, the persistence of workplace paternalism and hierarchy offers a basis for rethinking the purportedly liberalising dimensions of occupational freedom by positing that all employment is a form of domination. This, in turn, supports a reassessment of capitalism, from a democratic system productive of economic opportunity to one of social control and exploitation. I argue that employment perpetuates the spirit of apprenticeship by limiting employee autonomy and requiring submission to authority within a hierarchic framework. By tracing the historic endurance of apprenticeship-like power relations into the modern institution of employment, I uncover the feudal legacy of wage labour. The psychosocial effects of employment that Smith and Millar identified remained relevant throughout industrialisation and continue into the seemingly liberalising era of the modern gig economy.

Workplace domination continues to cultivate authoritarian personality traits which suppress critical thinking, rationalise domination and subordination, and encourage political apathy and conformity (Fromm, 1941/1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2002).¹ These traits arise from a psychological need to assuage and rationalise feelings of powerlessness engendered through workplace subordination. For many, the rationalisation of subordination takes the form of a self-narrated fantasy of freedom and autonomy realised through conformity to workplace culture. This phenomenon has long been studied by psychologists. But while earlier researchers located the origins of authoritarian traits in childhood development (Adorno et al., 1950; Lipset, 1959), later scholarship has focused attention on continued socialisation in adulthood (Mortimer & Simmons, 1978) and on the workplace as the most important theatre of this process (Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Stanojevic et al., 2020). Traits acquired in the workplace transfer to other social contexts (Gini, 1998; Marcuse, 1964; Solt, 2012). Subjection to workplace authority, I contend, fosters submission in the consumer and political spheres. Submission through participation in consumeristic behaviour supports concentrations of wealth and power that wield influence in the political sphere. Acceptance of a commercially driven political sphere, in turn, fosters public consent to law and policy which underpin a capitalist agenda. Thus, submission and consent to economistic ideology, hierarchy, and extremes of inequality in wealth and power support a unified capitalist culture.² And by creating conditions that make the

¹ I am not arguing that employment fosters the authoritarian personality in toto but rather highlighting research that associates submission and conformity with chronic domination.

² *Capitalist culture* is herein defined as culture reflective of the relations of production which are defined by Althusser (1971/2014) as “relations of exploitation” (pp. 27–34).

wage relationship virtually unavoidable, these features of capitalist cultural generate their own reproduction.

Capitalism has historically been posited as a departure from feudalism, associated with market freedom and individual liberty. Likewise, employment is characterised as a source of freedom in the choice of occupation.³ But the break from feudalism was not as complete as some have asserted. When viewed historically, employment relations reveal the persistence of a feudal power structure within the modern capitalist framework. While industrial capitalism gained ascendancy in the early nineteenth century, the legal doctrine of master and servant that once regulated relations between apprentice and master, was applied to wage workers in both England and America. And even as the enforcement of this legal doctrine began to disintegrate by the mid-nineteenth century, its spirit remained embedded in Anglo-American workplace culture, institutionalising the attitudes and conventions of apprenticeship but without its traditional path to independence. The subsequent history of employment has been the history of a persistent paternalism that elicits and normalises workplace discipline, obedience, and fidelity alongside a discourse of freedom and opportunity—the rationalisation of domination and dependency within an illusion of agency and independence.

Feudalism persisted in both Britain and America through the paternalism embodied in the doctrine of master and servant. This doctrine, handed down from medieval times with few alterations, was used to define and delimit worker freedom (Horwitz, 1977; Steinfeld, 1991; Tigar & Levy, 1977). Indeed, the first printed version of master and servant by the seventeenth-century jurist Sir Matthew Hale (1713/1820) retained a feudal vocabulary. By the eighteenth century, master and servant served to regulate the institutions of bound labour and apprenticeship—both, *temporary* forms of unfreedom. Its core principles, according to jurist Mathew Bacon (1740, p. 544), created a “superiority of power” over the servant in which was demanded “duty, subjection,” and “allegiance.” When a nascent wage regime emerged in America at the end of the eighteenth century, the doctrine’s jurisdiction was expanded to include free labour. At which time, asserted Tomlins (2010), “the ambit of master and servant law steadily widened until it absorbed the employment contract as a whole . . .” (p. 330).

What were once temporary conditions of the dependent apprentice became the perpetual reality of the permanent employee. Employment continued to resemble apprenticeship through the circumscription of autonomy and habitual subjection to employer domination, leaving many to rationalise dependency and subordination by associating freedom with conformity to paternalistic authority (Fromm, 1941/1994).

This cultural environment of employment helps to perpetuate obedience to paternalistic authority outside of the workplace in economic, political, and social spheres. Three hallmarks of apprenticeship, *discipline*—adoption of the methods, rules, procedures, and technical values of production, *obedience*—a priori recognition of the master’s authority, and *fidelity*—commitment, and faithful identification with

³ Throughout this chapter the term employment will denote work performed for wages or salary exclusively.

the interests of master and trade, characterised classic apprenticeship. These features persist within the institution of employment, cultivating transferable behaviours. Capitalist culture is reflected and reinforced when *discipline* becomes the internalised adoption of corporate/capitalist methods and values (Graeber, 2018; Hochschild, 1983; Mills, 1951); *obedience* is exhibited in apathetic political conformity and deference to authoritarian hierarchy (Elden, 1981; Jackall, 1988; Pateman, 1970; Solt, 2012); and *fidelity* is manifest in personal identification with power, corporate or political, which rationalises a restricted interpretation of one's agency and freedom (Casey, 1999; Fromm, 1941/1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Marcuse, 1964; Willmott, 1993). These conditions, in turn, influence the behaviour of employees in other social spheres (Gini, 1998; Jackall, 1988; Marcuse, 1964). In this way a persistent paternal-feudal influence within the modern workplace paradoxically contributes to the reproduction of a culture thought to be liberal and democratic.

From feudal law to management discourse

Master and servant law, argued Orren (1991), represented an unbroken chain of feudal discipline stretching from its misty beginnings in fourteenth-century Britain into nineteenth-century America. Orren observed this feudal artefact, where it resided for so many centuries, in the hands of local jurists serving as an instrument of power and control. She argued that master and servant law met its demise in 1930s America with a series of federal acts through which the regulation of workers by common law was repudiated in favour of a legislative approach that would address labour in broadly political and anonymous terms.⁴ But already by the end of the eighteenth century the exercise of disciplinary power had evolved from physical compulsion to more indirect, psychological forms of coercion (Elias, 1939/2000; Foucault, 1995; Gellner, 1983/2006). This trend was reflected in workplace discipline in which direct compulsion was abandoned in favour of economic coercion (Young, 2023). As nineteenth-century economic conditions increasingly made wage work unavoidable, the locus of discipline passed from law, imposed by jurists, to anonymous economic power commanded by employers.

Consequently, what Orren (1991) saw as the decay and ultimate demise of master and servant signalled its completed transfer to more indirect modes of enforcement rather than the end of feudal power over workers. Her assessment inadvertently implies an association of freedom with wage labour by positing the end of feudal employment relations. But while the mechanisms of disciplinary power were no longer legible in the official documents of the state, the persistence of the master-apprentice power relationship may be traced through employment-management discourse into modern times as it gradually migrated from law to a more general and rationalised workplace culture—a migration that only *appeared* to leave feudal forms behind.

⁴ Orren (1991) posits the end of feudalism in America with the demise of master and servant through the 1937 Supreme Court ruling in *National Labor Relations Board v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp.*

Originally, the relationship of master and apprentice was more than economic; it prepared the apprentice for an independent assimilation into society. Paternalistic power was legitimised by the master's function as role model and educator, *in loco parentis*. The apprentice studied the techniques of a trade in its entirety but also, as a member of the master's family, received training in self-discipline and moral comportment (Laslett, 1965; Rorabaugh, 1986). And while the apprentice was expected to conform to strict hierarchy under the master's command, once their term was completed and after a period of journeyman status, the former apprentice ideally became an independent, autonomous member of society (Morris, 1946).⁵ Apprenticeship remained the dominant form of vocational training throughout eighteenth-century Anglo-America. With the advent of industrialisation, however, social conditions began to change.

In the late eighteenth-century, following the American revolution and independence, a new spirit of individualism initiated a decline in the master's authority. Lured by immediate economic autonomy and a chance to participate in rising consumerism, many young workers chose wage-paying jobs over apprenticeship (Rorabaugh, 1986). At the same time owners of capital and champions of laissez-faire economic policy, annoyed with the old guild craftsmen's power to regulate labour and set their own wages sought to supplant trade masters. "[C]ertain employers, calling themselves masters, after the fashionable aristocratick slang of the day," fumed one group of New York carpenters, in 1836, "have unwisely pretended to regulate the price of journeymen's labour, and if possible set aside our regulations..." (House carpenters, 1836). Eventually the capitalist-masters succeeded in weakening traditional craft associations and the artisan became the "permanent journeyman" of capital (Mill, 1848, p. 283; Ware, 1924).

Lost with the guild tradition were provisions for education and training that prepared the apprentice for independence. The (capitalist) master and servant relationship became strictly pecuniary. But those who objected to this new relationship were often not disputing the economic dimension of wage labour. Instead, they were protesting, as Ware (1924, p. xiv) noted, "a loss of dignity and independence." Dependency, described in the nineteenth century as "industrial feudalism" (Chevalier, 1839, p. 204), has characterised employment ever since, manifest in the paternalistic hierarchy of the modern workplace which, as Jackall (1988) observed, resembles the feudal structure of a medieval fiefdom.

Under such circumstances it was difficult to equate freedom with employment. To legitimate conditions under which the apprentice as employee would no longer progress to independent status, freedom had to be *discursively* connected to employment. This was accomplished, in the nineteenth century, by redefining

⁵ Eighteenth-century indentures (contracts) stipulated that the graduated apprentice would receive not only tools of their trade but in many cases clothing and farm animals. These stipulations demonstrate that apprenticeship was not intended to merely produce industrious workers but to provide a foundation for independence.

freedom as a *chance* of freedom, an unfalsifiable lottery of independence.⁶ This discourse of opportunity would legitimise domination under wage labour with the implication that employment was only a temporary prelude to freedom, substituting the apprentice's path to independence with vague and imprecise notions of striking it rich.

The transition from a discourse of individual independence to one of opportunity is illustrated in an 1842 legal treatise which obscured the distinction between apprentice and worker, implying that hired servitude (employment) under a paternalistic master, like apprenticeship, was merely a temporary condition. "As a permanent arrangement, where servitude is the *unchanging* and inevitable lot of one class," insisted Silas Jones (1842), "it cannot be justified, but what is more rational than that the young man ... should contract to serve and assist the gentleman of wealth, until he can safely command the means of being his own master!" (p. 81). It is here we see the shifting locus of feudal authority as it began to leave the legal domain and gradually take the form of management discourse. The abstraction of opportunity veiled the incremental establishment of permanent worker servitude as it was ideologically transfigured into a kind of freedom to participate in an uncertain, but ostensibly democratic, chance. Opportunity helped to relocate the locus of power, from direct, legally supported, discipline to the indirect, psychological coercion of an abstract economic system. In so doing, it accommodated a growing reliance, by the end of the nineteenth century, on workplace discipline through psychological manipulation. This manipulation included the characterisation of the employer, first as an individual, later as company, as a paternal figure whose authority was validated through implications of moral and intellectual superiority. The employer thus assumed the permanent role of master in the master/apprentice relationship.

The changing face of paternalism

Early examples of workplace paternalism were directly related to authority figures who saw themselves as moral superiors whose rule was supported by law. They regarded their employees, much like the apprentices of the past, as "dependent and requiring the moulding influence of a benevolent owner" (Anthony, 1977, p. 75). Directly analogous to the proscriptions written into the old indentures, employees were characterised as incapable of self-discipline and independence. Throughout the nineteenth century paternalism was facilitated by the worker's increasing dependency on wage labour. Employers exercised control either as a condition of employment or through the restriction of wages. A common attitude of the time was expressed by a British employer who insisted that if he paid workers more than subsistence wages, they would only waste their money on "bottles of whiskey, bags of sweets, or fat geese for Christmas" (George, 1909, p. 196). Paternalism in Britain also took the form of factory

⁶ It was a common belief of the age that most individuals held, as Smith (1776, p. 155) remarked, an "absurd confidence" in "their own good fortune," making this discourse readily acceptable.

festivals and group excursions. These precursors of modern, corporate-sponsored events included ritual enactments of obedience and fidelity which diffused the feudal-like hierarchy of the workplace into a more general community culture. In these group activities workers publicly honoured employers with song, poetry, or gifts, mimicking feudal patronage, “affirming their unwavering allegiance ... and their acceptance of paternalistic practices” (Moine, 2023, p. 214). These activities also inspired the fantasy of illusionary participation in the personal lives of their employers which encouraged fidelity and diverted attention away from class conflict and oppression.

Paternalism was enthusiastically adopted in America and implemented in factory towns such as Lowell, Massachusetts, where employee’s non-working hours were subject to strict regulation. When the economist Richard Ely (1885) visited the company town of Pullman, Illinois, he encountered a “dependent and servile people” living under a “benevolent, well-wishing feudalism, which desires the happiness of the people, but in such a way as will please the authorities” (pp. 464–465). Direct interference with employee’s personal lives persisted into the twentieth century. As late as 1914, Henry Ford, under what one newspaper called “Ford’s Feudal System,” employed a squadron of investigators to visit employee’s homes and determine if their marital status, hygiene, and moral comportment conformed to company standards (“Ford Methods of Handling Men,” 1914; Watts, 2005, p. 220).⁷

Modern employers continue to “regulate workers’ off-hour lives,” observed Anderson (2017), “—their political activities, speech, choice of sexual partner, use of recreational drugs, alcohol, smoking, and exercise” (p. 39). But many rationalise or are unaware of the extent of this power as it has assumed a less obtrusive, benevolent character. In the early days of industrialisation such presumption was regarded as an affront to worker independence and dignity, outrage that is conspicuously absent from modern employee attitudes. Early nineteenth-century English workers openly rebelled against paternalistic intrusion into their private lives (Alton, 1824). These employees were not protesting low wages or long working hours but, rather, assumptions that they were not capable of self-governance. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, in many American and British centres of industrial activity, criticism and strikes were more likely directed towards technical aspects of work such as length of workday or rate of pay as paternalism was gradually rationalised within workplace culture.

In both Britain and America, master and servant law underpinned the paternalism and authority of the employer. Within nineteenth-century American courts, Groat (1911) observed: “The spirit of medievalism with its antagonism to the working classes and its ingrained feeling that in some way the labourer must be controlled by his employers, somewhat after the manner of a serf by his lord or an apprentice by his master, survived” (p. 50). But by the end of the century, master and servant was less frequently evoked to discipline workers. Discipline shifted to more abstract and anonymous forms of economic coercion. At the same time the exercise of power

⁷ Here the mass production and standardisation associated with Fordism was applied to the social lives of employees. And even as the overt practice of paternalism under Ford was short-lived, it demonstrated that the standardised, mass-produced (conforming) employee was becoming a desideratum of the large organisation.

within the workplace became increasingly indirect, a matter of procedure, policy, and economic rationalities.

By the end of the nineteenth century disciplinary power, in a general context, was no longer personal but had become an anonymous machine (Foucault, 1980). This was reflected in the twentieth century exercise of company power through which paternalism was realised in seemingly innocuous benefits such as company meals, vocational guidance, savings plans, health care, guaranteed employment, and other services and incentives (Devinatz, 2012; Mayo, 1933). Still, these less intrusive forms of paternalism continued to encourage dependency and legitimate employer authority, throughout the twentieth century, operating on the old assumptions that characterised employees as irresponsible and untrustworthy. Peters and Waterman (1982) underscored the continued prevalence of these assumptions insisting that most modern “organizations are governed by rules that assume that the *average* worker is an incompetent ne’er-do-well, just itching to screw up” (p. 236). Recent scholarship echoes these themes observing that employees continue to be the targets of routine manipulation and deception (Gottschalk, 2018).

The transformation of paternalism to an anonymous system of rules and policy obscured the locus of authority, blunting the ability to effectively recognise or challenge conditions of dependency. When an early nineteenth-century factory town in England was criticised as a “nursery for men” it was because the paternalistic employer, whose workplace authority was supported by local law, directly sought to regulate workers’ private lives as if they were his apprentices or wards (Wooler, 1817, p. 469). But an eerily similar characterisation was repeated over a century and a half later in a poem by an American auto worker: “Are these men and women Workers of the world? Or is it an overgrown nursery with children ... What is it about the entrance way, those gates to the plant ... that instantaneously makes a child out of a man?” (Jones, 1977, p. 30). In the latter critique the authority of the master is replaced with an ambiguous, indefinable spirit, one that was no longer challenged but accepted with resignation. The direct paternalism of the earlier employer was gradually subsumed by a permeating employment ethos, no longer enforced by authoritative figures or conspicuously supported by legal doctrine. Criticism therefore lost its target, and its vitality melted into cynicism and submission. Dependency on an anonymous system masked the domination that was once so poignant under direct, personal control.

“Humane” paternalism legitimises permanent apprenticeship

By the early 1900s it could no longer be claimed that employment was a temporary stop on the way to personal independence. Growing class consciousness and increasing economic inequality demanded new methods of employee pacification. Industrial psychologist Charles Myers (1922), speaking before a group of British elites alarmed by the rise of Bolshevism in Russia, insisted that, in the twentieth century, “the mind of the worker would receive paramount attention.” (p. 62). Industrial psychologists

sought to encourage solidarity among workers and between owners and workers through the manipulation of emotion. But this strategy was not only intended to improve workplace harmony but to foster broader social cohesion (Myers, 1922). The intent was to ameliorate potential class conflict by connecting the capitalist mode of production to the well-being of the country. As another industrial psychologist put it, in their work “the social well-being of the nation is the only legitimate end” (Farmer, 1924, p. 78).

One way to promote social well-being, it was thought, was through paternalism. Workers identified with companies that promoted a “humane,” paternalistic image (Mayo, 1933). Morale (fidelity) could be improved by artificially cultivating meaning and cohesion within the workplace and beyond. It was an attempt, observed C. Wright Mills (1951), to paradoxically “conquer work alienation within the bounds of work alienation” (p. 235). The serf was connected to the manor; the apprentice was part of the master’s family; the modern employee would become part of the company team under leadership that was no longer repressive but caring. Originally, within apprenticeship, discipline and obedience were emphasised and fidelity grew naturally as the apprentice identified with the master and other workers in pursuit of a common trade (Wilentz, 2004). But industrial psychologists reversed this sequence with a manipulated fidelity (morale) to foster obedience (reliability) and discipline (increased production). Around the same time, much as the demise of apprenticeship signalled an expansion of feudal authority over adults, changes in twentieth-century management introduced a new class of employee to the lockstep of workplace discipline.

At mid-century Mills (1951) raised the alarm: white-collar and professional workers were gradually sinking into the quicksand of what he called the “managerial demiurge” (p. 77). These workers were increasingly disciplined through management manipulation and subjected to the bureaucratic rules of business and government. The locus of industrial authority became more integrated, nebulous, and anonymous. And as more people were subject to psychological management, social interaction outside the workplace was increasingly influenced by a corporate-commercial morality.

The cultural effects of the managerial demiurge emerge, not only from the subordination of the employee, but through the mercenary ethic it elicits. Salesmanship, argued Mills (1951), became an essential personal ethic for those on the company payroll. The worker’s very identity was subsumed by false politeness and calculated interest in others (Bagraim, 2001; Fromm, 1941/1994; Hochschild, 1983; Schachtel, 1961). Consequently, “[t]he managerial demiurge extends to opinion and emotion and even the mood and atmosphere of given acts” (Mills, 1951, p. 110). This phenomenon, observed Mills (1951) like Smith long before him, arises from the daily experience of employment. And it is a powerful influence in capitalist culture as values acquired in the workplace are transferred to other social contexts. As Stanojevic et al. (2020) have argued, conditions in the workplace such as task structure, authoritarian rule, and restricted autonomy, influence employee behaviour in society at large. The disciplined use of emotion and affection; a cultivated obedience to rules, policies, and

hierarchy; and fidelity to company ethics and mores condition one's approach to life to be performative, uncritical, conforming, habituated to fantasy and illusion—not only a disciplined employee but an obedient consumer target and faithful political subject (Barber, 2007; Shankar et al., 2006; Solt, 2012).

Manufacturing freedom in the workplace

As more and more professionals during the second half of the twentieth century sacrificed autonomy to company discipline, management looked for ways to disguise domination by restoring the employee's sense of control—to vanquish servitude without challenging authority. “Managed autonomy” became the watchword of a new age of illusional freedom (Wallace, 2022, p. 32). Researchers rediscovered the problems associated with workplace domination that Smith (1776) and Millar (1803) had identified and set about finding ways to empower employees by *simulating* autonomy in the workplace (Wallace, 2022).

Influenced by Abraham Maslow, who demonstrated the importance of individual freedom and autonomy in psychological development, management scholars hoped to improve productivity by providing workers with a scripted path to self-actualisation (Wallace, 2022). But beneath the surface of this stylised freedom remained the paternalism of the old apprentice's master—the company, *in loco parentis*. In fact, Peters and Waterman (1982), in their influential analysis of management strategies, used the analogy of a schoolroom to underscore the importance of *disciplined* autonomy in the workplace. Worker autonomy, they explained, must be “simulated” along lines of shared company values. A mid-level manager is “anything but a swashbuckling entrepreneur,” they elucidated, but the company's socialising process “is aimed at making him believe that that's exactly what he is, a hero” (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p. 213). At the same time, however, “his autonomy is in reality extraordinarily limited” (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p. 214). Employee freedom, once circumscribed through the discipline of legal proscription, was now restricted through a psychological feudalism in which autonomy, as it was within apprenticeship, would be permitted only under disciplined circumstances. Autonomy became associated with the internalisation of capitalist-economic rationalities, broadly, and company aspirations, more narrowly. Individual freedom thus became synonymous with disciplined conformity. When company values become worker values their observance is, in a formal sense, autonomous.

The exercise of this type of power parallels what Foucault (1991, p. 102) referred to as “governmentality.” Governmentality operates on individuals to promote an agenda through standardised systems and diverse channels of discourse that encourage self-regulation in conformity with political, economic, and cultural norms (Miller & Rose, 1990). Employee autonomy based on this premise anonymises power to obscure domination. The instrumentalisation of individual aspirations of freedom confuses freewill with conformity, removing vitality and force from critical thinking. “By

defining autonomy as obedience to the core values of corporate culture,” argued Hugh Willmott (1993, p. 527), “the meaning and possibility of freedom is tightly circumscribed ...” (p. 538). In this way, argued Wallace (2022), “employee self-fulfilment becomes a means of their subjection” (p. 34).

And this subjection encourages conformity beyond the workplace. Management theorists, like earlier industrial psychologists, attempting to make their work relevant connect their strategies for governing individuals with national economic concerns and the aspirations of industrial leadership (Miller & Rose, 1990). This type of self-regulated freedom conditions the subject to conformity, not only in the workplace but in the consumer and consent-based political spheres in which the exercise of freewill is restricted to carefully curated choices. “Industrial psychology,” asserted Marcuse (1964), “has long since ceased to be confined to the factory” (p. 10). The ethos and structure of employment influence ethical norms beyond the workplace, shaping morality of society at large (Gini 1998; Jackall, 1988). The ethic that management cultivates is submission to authority, both legitimated and obscured through psychological manipulation, whether in the workplace, the marketplace, or the polling place.

Rehearsing subjection

Even as the apprentice’s path to freedom was substituted with the simulated independence of managed autonomy, employer paternalism continued to shape the employment relationship as one of master and servant. Late twentieth-century corporate executives raved about the “wonderful” “paternalism and discipline of the Japanese companies” that American firms were adopting (Friedman, 1981, p. D2). At the same time, dependency was obscured through contrived competitions that psychologically replaced the substantive progression towards independence that the apprentice formerly experienced. Within the workplace, meaning was artificially introduced with superfluous awards, false status symbols, and theatrical elements that Peters and Waterman (1982), referred to as “hoopla and razzle-dazzle” (p. 241). Group events that glorify the company’s mission or its products, often taking the form of child-like theme parties, both trivialised and normalised employee subordination while diverting attention away from dependency and domination. And those employees who were not deceived by such manipulation but, nevertheless, endured management practices embraced a subculture of cynical submission. This performative adaptation, much like the identity-alienating salesperson ethic observed by Mills (1951), influenced social interaction outside of the workplace.

During the final decades of the twentieth century growing employee cynicism encouraged indifferent obedience to company culture, a fantasy orientation to workplace reality. Corporate culture, according to Willmott (1993), inspires workplace dramaturgy in which employees instrumentally conform to expected roles and thought while internally rejecting them. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966),

this phenomenon generates a culture of reciprocal manipulations among workers. "What is obscured, if not lost from such consciousness," argued Willmott (1993), "is a capacity to reflect critically upon the sense and impact of being in control" (p. 538). This fantasy orientation not only encourages a dramaturgical approach to the workplace, but also the adoption of a self-alienating, instrumental posture in other social contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Self-alienation supports capitalist culture outside the workplace by encouraging the acceptance of performative reality—a reality scripted through public political and marketing discourse. This "controlling" language, argued Marcuse (1964), manipulates reality by "denying or absorbing" opposing facts and contradictions: "it does not search for but imposes truth or falsehood" (p. 103). And however dismissive the public may be of this ritualised discourse, they, nevertheless, play their expected roles and conform to its directives.

This acceptance of manipulative discourse facilitates compliance to a "designed" workplace culture (Casey, 1999, p. 159) which, like early twentieth-century industrial psychology, cultivates fidelity through emotional manipulation to simultaneously drive and obscure discipline and obedience. Intense allegiance to the company is fostered through a discursively constructed corporate family and team-based work configuration which purportedly levels hierarchy (Bagraim, 2001; Casey, 1999). But behind this discourse of equality is a powerful mechanism of neo-feudal domination. Many employees demonstrate intense corporate loyalty and adopt a paternalistic fantasy of corporate compassion that they steadfastly maintain even when faced with factual evidence to the contrary (Casey, 1999, 1996; Jost & Hunyady, 2002). And in conditions analogous to nineteenth-century industrial workers who vicariously shared in the personal lives of wealthy company owners, many modern employees display a sense of fealty through their identification with the wealth and power of the corporation. "Identification with the greatness of [the company], even when self-narrated as 'maturity' displays a dependent, narcissistic, effect of corporate culture on employees" (Casey, 1999, p. 165). This sense of fidelity and obligation cultivates an intense desire to compete with other workers through performances of self-sacrifice, such as working overtime and weekends, which are conspicuously displayed before peers and superiors. Through these ritualised performances employees attempting to assuage their own feelings of powerlessness conform to company culture, identify with corporate power, and submit to workplace authority (Fromm, 1941/1994). Thus, a cultivated fidelity delivers production-increasing discipline and unquestioning obedience. The feudal residue of apprenticeship persists in a corporate culture that elicits and demands discipline, obedience, and fidelity. But perhaps more telling evidence of feudal power relations within employment is found in the *non-productive* exercise of power.

In the late nineteenth century Thorsten Veblen (1899, p. 78) identified a penchant among the wealthy for employing honorific "henchmen and retainers" to bolster their status as employer/patron. Over a century later, the employment of superfluous staff continues to represent a sort of organisational conspicuous consumption. Like

symbolic feudal retainers, many modern workers enact a daily fiction within which they understand their job to be completely without meaning or value, and yet, are compelled to *pretend* that it has both. David Graeber (2018) estimated that 37–40% of employees in the northern Atlantic world hold what he called “bullshit jobs.” Meaningless employment becomes a degrading drama of workplace discipline, obedience to rules and procedures, and fidelity to a culture of fantasy. “Being forced to pretend to work just for the sake of working ... [is] the pure exercise of power for its own sake ... the purest expression of lack of freedom” (Graeber, 2018, p. 85). Previously, workplace domination was obscured under the thin veil of psychological manipulation. But in the “bullshit job” the employee has no choice but to rehearse their own subjection, apprenticed to a “make-believe” world that celebrates submission and dependency from which “the overwhelming majority of us” will be freed only “on retirement, if at all” (Graeber, 2018, pp. 85, 256). Consequently, the employee becomes habituated to ignore meaning in life tasks, embracing a ritual acceptance of hierarchy and authority. This workplace dramaturgy prepares the employee to interpret the world, both inside and outside of the workplace, as an illusion in which she has no agency, a spectator who only finds meaning in obedient and faithful conformity to the discipline of capitalist culture.

Servant-entrepreneurship

Pointless employment may represent the apotheosis of subordination and dependency, but it is the new digital work frontier and the rapidly emerging gig economy that promise new extremes of illusional freedom under a paternalism that shifts authority to the anonymous sphere of computer-generated discipline. Here, domination is once again characterised as independence through the anonymisation of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1995; Habermas, 2005). And the same old legitimising discourse of the nineteenth century—of freedom through opportunity—is recycled as if new. “No boss, No shifts, No limit” boasted one platform company succinctly associating freedom, autonomy, and opportunity with employment that enforces discipline and obedience automatically through an algorithmic digital master (Ravenelle, 2019, p. 269; see also Wood et al., 2019).

Gig work offers the appearance of freedom combining indirect management with the internal discipline of governmentality (Schor, 2020). It accommodates a psychologically defensive, ego-saving interpretation of domination as *liberation* (Thompson, 2019). What Vallas and Schor (2020, p. 282) called “permissive power,” is a digitally surveilled variation of managed autonomy. It creates the illusion of autonomy, the illusion that the worker is an entrepreneur (Ravenelle, 2019). Control is “radically redistributed” but still governed by “centralized power” (Kornberger et al., 2017, p. 79). “The growing literature on deteriorating conditions for workers in ride-hail and delivery suggests the exercise of power, rather than a shift to a new kind of peer-based capitalism” (Vallas & Schor, 2020, p. 278). Yet, the discourse of freedom and

opportunity persists to legitimise what might be called servant-entrepreneurship. Once again, the discourse is focused on the production of the elusive, self-actualised employee through an entrepreneurial fantasy—pretend autonomy masking the dominion of apprenticeship.

And once again this approach, insofar as it is applied to other spheres of activity, shapes and influences society. Working under digital surveillance and algorithmic management habituates one to an illusionary conception of freedom, permitted only within prescribed parameters. Such conditions promote a culture in which independence and autonomy are reduced to the choice of servile roles or the selection of consumer products. If one's orientation to life is dramaturgical, as Maslow's (1954) scholarship demonstrated, self-actualisation becomes as meaningless as it is unattainable. Concepts such as managed autonomy and servant-entrepreneurship, as modes of identity-alienating conformity, do not promote but suppress the individual's capacity for truly autonomous agency.

The reproduction of capitalist culture

Ironically, management psychologists, addressing the demoralising effects of workplace domination, seemingly ignored Maslow's assertion that freedom and autonomy cannot be manufactured. "Self-actualization," according to Maslow (1954), "is more akin to growth and maturation than it is to habit formation or association via reward, that is, it is not acquired from without ... it is the contradiction of motivation" (p. 296). The very definition of self-actualisation precludes the acceptance of paternalistic authority and describes one who is resistant to "fantasy" and manipulation (Maslow, 1959, p. 24; 1954). Much as Smith (1776) before him, Maslow (1954) argued that the "overcoming of obstacles" and the development of "potentialities like intelligence" are indispensable to psychological development (p. 340; see also Fromm, 1941/1994). Modern scholarship has confirmed that truly self-directed or entrepreneurial work promotes psychological well-being even when financial rewards are lower than those under similar employment (Shir et al., 2019). But autonomy cannot be managed or corralled within company policy. Self-actualisation, therefore, is incompatible with employment.

Employment, as a never-ending apprenticeship of circumscribed freedom and imaginary autonomy, fosters authoritarian personality traits which facilitate acceptance of the political, economic, and social domination associated with capitalist culture (Fromm, 1941/1994). There is a reciprocal relationship between these traits and the reproduction of relations of domination within the workplace and beyond (Kohn & Schooler, 1983). According to Maslow (1954), those unable to achieve self-actualisation see reality less clearly and are prone to over-socialisation and conforming behaviour. Employment, by preventing self-actualisation through the restriction of true autonomous agency, reproduces and secures the acceptance of domination. Indeed, Maslow (1954) warned that psychopathology has been "produced

in intelligent people leading stupid lives in stupid jobs” (p. 95). Recent scholarship only emphasises the modern-day salience of Maslow’s assessment (Graeber, 2018; Gottschalk, 2018). And the ubiquity of this individual psychopathology influences behaviour in other domains to produce a broader *social* pathology (Thompson, 2019). When individuals are guided by others, insisted Maslow (1954), they increasingly adopt feelings of powerlessness and lose confidence in their ability to make decisions. In this way, workplace hierarchy contributes to a society-wide pathological sense of powerlessness.

Populations plagued by feelings of powerlessness are more likely to rationalise and accept further authoritarianism and domination while believing they are free (Fromm, 1941/1994; Lipset, 1959; Maslow, 1954; Solt, 2012; Yost & Hunyaday, 2002). Employees whose workplaces in many ways “resemble the religious orders [and] totalitarian parties” of the past (Bagraim, 2001, p. 47) become accepting targets of authoritarianism outside the workplace. “It is difficult,” argued Frederick Solt (2012), “to view one’s employer as a superior whose orders must be obeyed without question without viewing government officials similarly” (p. 704). Authoritarianism, within the hierarchy of employee-apprenticeship, no matter how indirect, obfuscated, or rationalised, encourages passivity, political apathy (Elden, 1981; Napier & Jost, 2008; Pateman, 1970), and cultivates a pervasive ethos of conformity and subordination (Thompson, 2016).

Domination associated with hierarchy, argued Thompson (2019), supports a reification of consciousness that inhibits critical thinking and simplifies cognition. Consequently, a unidimensional world view undermines the capacity for complex reasoning in a way that, much as Smith (1776) implied, is incompatible with democratic citizenship. The ability to safeguard and participate in democracy is threatened when one spends the bulk of their waking hours acting out prescribed behaviour under a regime of authority and hierarchy. Such conditioning supports a cultural atmosphere in which the struggles and burdens of democracy are permitted to degenerate into the comfortable repetition of simplistic slogans and platitudes.

The workplace, for many, is the most important influence on adult conceptions of political, economic, and social reality (Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Stanojevic et al., 2020). And “exposure to hierarchical experiences ... is complemented by more complete cultural domination” (Solt, 2012, p. 704). Feudal discipline persists in an ethos of apprenticeship which confines the individual’s freedom to paths of innocuous action worn smooth by workplace ritual (Roth, 1995; Smith & Stewart, 2011). Fidelity, cultivated through company allegiance, resurfaces as dedication to the brand, whether as a product or political party. Discipline emerges as behavioural compliance with party dogma or advertising slogans. Obedience is manifest through deference, respect, and adulation for political figures or celebrity marketers. Bonds of paternalism are cemented through fantasised solidarity and vicarious participation in the agenda of the wealthy, powerful, and popular. The employee’s rationalised dependency is exploited through the marketplace that treats its customers as “needy children” (Barber, 2007, p. 316) and the political arena where leaders assert authority

by cultivating a parental image (Lakoff, 2005; Marcuse, 1964; Moses & Gonzales, 2015). Habits of submission seamlessly integrate with institutional regimes of compliance and conformity that reproduce the relations of production throughout capitalist culture (Mortimer & Simmons, 1978; Shepard, 1987).

By tracing the historic evolution of paternalism, this chapter advanced two theses. First, vestiges of feudalism shaped employment relations under capitalism throughout the history of modern wage labour. This phenomenon casts doubt on popular assumptions that employment, and capitalism more broadly, are engines of democratic freedom and economic opportunity. Second, authoritarian personality traits, developed under employment, influences social behaviour beyond the workplace, supporting the reproduction of capitalist culture by discouraging critical analysis and fostering compliance and conformity within social institutions that mirror the hierarchic and authoritative structures of employment. Thus, the apprentice of the workplace becomes the apprentice of capitalist culture. At one time apprenticeship was an education in agency and independence, but when its power relations were made permanent, workplace training became always and everywhere a lesson in domination. “[A]n apprentice is a servant for a time,” wrote the early-American jurist Tapping Reeve (1816), “and the slave is a servant for life” (p. 341).

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