



# Affective Labour in Milanese Large Scale Retailing: Labour Control and Employees' Coping Strategies

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## abstract

Internationalisation and rising competition in large scale retailing have led to a re-discovery of service quality as a relevant field of competition. Consequently, the affective character of frontline retail labour, inherent in the direct interaction between employee and customer, has become a focus of labour control. However, management's strategies remain contradictory and fragile, not least due to opposing strategies of rationalisation and service orientation. Conflicts could thus be expected to arise, constituting possible starting points for employees' resistance against labour control and its colonisation of affects. Against this backdrop, this paper explores employees' strategies to cope with conflicting and unsatisfying working conditions, asking what role affects play in everyday work experiences. It highlights the way coping oscillates between adaptation and appropriation of competences, and how a lack of collective experiences reduces employees' capacity to act

## Introduction

This paper explores the role of affective labour in Milanese large scale retailing. It starts from the assumption that due to rising competition, the interactive and emotional character of retail labour (re-)gains critical relevance even in a context otherwise dominated by neo-Taylorist rationalisation. The question put forward is twofold: First, what are the strategies used by management in order to control affective labour? Within these strategies, what is the relationship between direct and indirect control strategies, or between direct hierarchical control of work performances and more indirect participatory approaches that seek to manipulate employees' subjectivity? Second, how do employees deal with these strategies of labour control, and what kind of coping strategies do they develop in order to adapt or resist such attempts to colonise their affects? In other words, does a growing focus on affect within work processes open new perspectives for cooperation and collective appropriation of working conditions as Hardt and Negri imply with their concept of immaterial and affective labour (Hardt and Negri, 2000)? Or does this focus on affect have to be interpreted as a central mechanism of labour control and social reproduction as other critics argue (Hemmings, 2005; Hartmann, 2002)?

Since the 1990s, European retail has been marked by processes of internalisation and concentration, leading to a rise in competition and a growth of outlet sizes. As national markets are now dominated by relatively few, mostly multinational companies of similar size and influence on purchase chains, competition with regard to prices is mainly fought out at the level of labour costs. Consequent rationalisation leads to an intensification of work processes and a growing use of temporary as well as part-time employment, combined with latent understaffing and a search for maximum, unilaterally managed working time flexibility in order to cover ever longer opening hours. Due to the limits of price competition, however, service quality becomes, or even *returns* as a relevant field of competition. In clear contrast to rationalisation strategies, this development implies a re-evaluation of the customer-employee relationship, and thus of the affective character of retail work: employees are in the role of mediators between the customer's and the company's interests, and therefore their interactive and emotional competences become central for the company's market success. Such a service orientation causes an increased need for control over employees' affects and their subjectivity (Korczynski et al., 2000; Pellegrini, 2005).

In the following pages I will present some initial findings of research undertaken in Milanese large scale retailing during the summer of 2006. This study is based on semi-structured, problem-centred interviews with 30 employees in ten different outlets (in the food and non-food branches, comprising supermarkets, hypermarkets, a sports and a furniture shop) as well as 20 union representatives, including shop floor delegates and secretaries from the trade branches of all three main confederations (CIGL-Filcams, CISL-Fisascat, UILtucs).

After a brief reference to the theoretical background, analysis will proceed in the following two steps: First, I will describe management's strategies of control of employees' subjectivities in general and their affects in particular. Second, I will account for employees' reactions to these strategies and the role of affects in their working experiences and coping strategies. This second part refers to a group of five interviews undertaken with young (20-30 years old) part-time employees with open-ended contracts, working as sales clerks and cashiers in a medium size supermarket (50 employees) on Milan's periphery. This supermarket is part of a multinational company and has a long-standing tradition of labour relations as well as a high current level of unionization (60% in comparison to the sector's average of 20%).

Milan has been chosen as a field of study as it represents one of the focal points of retail modernisation in Italy – a country where the density of small scale neighbourhood stores is still quite high compared to other European countries. Transformations in the retail sector became more rapid only since the end of the 1990s, as internationalisation was fostered by extensive trade liberalisations (the Bersani reform in 1998).<sup>1</sup> Against

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1 The Bersani reform of 1998 abolished a set of regulations and the classification of retail outlets which had, until this point, restricted the ability of new (and in particular, large) retail outlets to open, in turn protecting the existing network of smaller neighbourhood stores. Previously, not only had the maximum number of outlets per city district been limited (measured in terms of outlet surface area per inhabitant); but moreover, licences were issued which dictated the range of products a given shop was able to offer for sale. This system of prescribed specialisation, however, had already begun to be

this backdrop of strong and recent sector-wide change, retailing in Milan is characterised by a particularly high density of large scale outlets, a high degree of competition and the resulting flexibility and rationalisation pressures on labour.

## **Theoretical Approach**

The theoretical background from which this research has been developed is that of labour process theory (Edwards, 1981; Knights and Willmott, 1990; Thompson and Akroyd, 1995; O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001) combined with Gramsci's concept of hegemony and his inherently subject-oriented approach to power and agency (Gramsci, 1992/1994; Kraus, 1997). Labour control is thus considered as a conflictive field, where effective control cannot be established simply by coercion but, like any other form of power, requires employees' consent and therefore has to involve their subjectivity. In other words, labour control is nothing static or homogeneous, but the outcome and object of constant struggles. As its aim is to transform mere labour power into real work performance, labour control has to assure the exclusion from the work process of all those employees' interests which do not meet the goal of capitalist accumulation. In addition it must adapt all those parts of employees' subjectivities required in the labour process to this imperative. Employees, in turn, constantly have to be able to mediate between conflicting interests in order to gain any capacity to act. These can include conflicts between work requirements and their own interests, between conflicting requirements or between different personal, instrumental, expressive or moral interests and expectations. Therefore, their everyday agency in work is conceptualised here as a process of coping with contradiction (Holzkamp, 1991; Kraus, 1996). Such coping takes two, interlinked forms: first, concrete agency, and second, coping through sense constructions guiding the choice between alternatives for action. It is on the latter form that the empirical part of this paper will focus. Sense constructions evidently are not free floating, but are themselves an outcome of former experiences and learning processes, constantly forged by employees' confrontation with their working and living conditions (Schütz, 1971). Thus, they are not only biographically, but also culturally and socially conditioned: as implied by Gramsci's term of 'common sense' (Gramsci 1992/94), they are themselves objects of struggles for consent and hegemony.

## **Transformations of Labour Control**

Since the crisis of Fordism began in the 1970s, transformations of work organisation and labour control are generally seen to diverge in two different, opposing directions: on the one hand they move towards decentralisation and flexibilisation, on the other hand they move in the direction of recentralisation and re-standardisation of work processes. The former trend is linked with the development of indirect control mechanisms based on the transfer of responsibilities towards individuals or groups of

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weakened by a series of reforms in 1988, resulting from the lobbying of large scale distribution chains and shopping centres.

employees. Beyond an increase in flexibility, such indirect control aims at a 'subjectivation' of work – that is, an internalisation of control and its transformation into self-control (Moldaschl and Sauer, 2000; Dörre, 2001; Moldaschl and Voß, 2002; Peter, 2003; Pongratz and Voß, 2003). This might be achieved by a flattening of hierarchies (organisational decentralisation) and/or more direct exposure of single work processes to market competition (economic decentralisation). Participatory management strategies, such as company-culture initiatives, quality management, re-qualification within group or project work or performance-oriented salaries, are used in the same intent. Such a reorganisation of labour control is usually associated with highly qualified so-called 'knowledge' work such as IT-programming. Recentralisation and re-standardisation, in contrast, refer to a neo-Taylorist reorganisation of work processes under the imperative of rationalisation. This coincides with a strengthening of direct, hierarchical control, not least by means of new IT and communication technologies, and generally associated with industrial production or low qualified service work (Springer, 1999; Ritzer, 1996).

These changes in the organisation of work processes and labour control can be interpreted as expressions of an overall transformation of the capitalist mode of production towards a high-tech and service based global network economy, grounded in a 'regime of flexible accumulation' (Jameson, 1997; Harvey, 1997; Castells, 1998; Boltanski and Chiappello, 1999; Candeias, 2004a). From a macro perspective it could be argued that, after a period of competition between the two different models of work organisation and labour control during the late 1970s and the 1980s (especially in industry), since the mid-90s a process of 'forced alignment' is going on under the hegemony of rationalisation processes (Candeias, 2001). The effect, however, is not a homogenisation of work organisation across and within sectors. Rather it results in different combinations of both strategies according to the concrete requirements and opportunities of distinct work processes and regulatory contexts – producing a new form of special division of work in which precisely these differences are profitably exploited.

From the micro perspective of the retail sector, the interest of this research lies precisely in such combinations of both trends, in order to assess how they interact in the control of affective labour: The question is how management's increased necessity to control employees' affects (resulting from the rediscovery of service quality as an important competitive factor) leads towards the introduction of indirect forms of control even within a context dominated by neo-Taylorist reorganisation; and how, in turn, direct control itself is extended into employees' subjectivity. This stress on interrelations instead of dual oppositions between direct and indirect forms of labour control, however, is not meant to downplay contradictions resulting from such combinations of different management strategies. On the contrary, it serves to highlight them – since they are supposed to constitute central fields of conflict with which employees have to cope during their daily work.

In large scale retailing, in fact, a combination of participatory and hierarchical forms of control over employees' subjectivity can in fact be found. More or less technically sophisticated forms of direct control are used in order to discipline employees' behaviour as well as their body and appearance. These include strict codes of conduct,

‘training’ (how to apply make up, dress and smile in the correct way) as well as overt and/or covert supervision. Supervision is realised for example by means of video cameras (officially only serving to prevent theft by customers, but experienced by employees’ as constant control), or through the use of so-called ‘mystery clients’, hidden agents testing service quality and employees’ behaviour in front of customers (see also Dowling, this issue). In addition, computer registration of effectuated sales, customer numbers and service speed of individual employees, as well as strict control over break times is in place in order to control work performances, while at the same time reducing employees’ autonomy in the interaction with clients as well as in the satisfaction of their own physiological needs. The latter is of special relevance for cashiers as they usually have to ask permission even for short toilet breaks which are often granted only after a considerable wait (Curcio, 2002).

Obviously, while codes of conduct and on the job training intend to foster internalisation of certain desired behaviours, the latter forms of strict control and supervision clearly could be expected to enter into conflict with employees’ commitment to affective labour and service quality. Therefore, such direct control is complemented with participatory strategies, generating new contradictions, as employees’ accounts of work experiences will show. On the one hand, the scope for organisational decentralisation and autonomy over the work process appears to be rather limited under the dominance of rationalisation and cost-cutting strategies. On the other, responsibility in most cases is nonetheless transferred to employees at least on a symbolic level. This is achieved for example by the formal or informal communication of sales objectives or by the use of company-culture initiatives (such as the ranking of the most productive departments and/or shops, introducing both an idea of group spirit and competition).

Beyond this combination of direct and indirect forms of control over affects, large scale retailing provides a good example of how strategies of labour control rely on the destabilisation, insecurity and uncertainty that is created by a generalised albeit gradual and differentiated process of precarisation of employment.<sup>2</sup> The result is a mechanism of ‘forced availability’: flexibility with regard to the availability to work is to a large extent achieved by the use of part time employment and ‘voluntary’ overtime work. Part-time work in particular, with its low wages, makes employees dependent on the possibility of obtaining uncertain overtime hours. As neither the amount nor the temporal location of such overtime is assured in advance, this exposes employees to an uncertainty of monthly incomes and instability of working times, as well as subjecting them to blackmailing by superiors. This is exacerbated by the tendency to assign overtime hours to individual employees’ according to a logic of merit. The latter is defined as previous availability to the company’s flexibility and performance requests. Yet, as generally no precise formalised measurements for such merit exist – or those

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2 Caffentzis also has argued that just as thermodynamics provided a uniform approach to energy in industrial labor, with the invention of the Turing machine, computers provide a uniform approach to the computational procedures of all labor usually identified as skilled labor, but which are “implicit in all parts of the division of social labor” (Caffentzis, 1997: 52). However, Caffentzis does not imagine how digital technologies would permit us to ‘see’ information at all levels of matter, that is, realize the computational skills immanent to organic and non-organic matter alike, that is, matter as self-measuring.

fixed by collective rules are undermined by the individualisation of labour relations – favourable responses to employees’ needs and demands turn into a ‘granting of favours’: they become the object of an arbitrary, disciplining decision-making power of superiors, not least based on personal preferences. Evidently, this mechanism is at work also with regard to other employees’ expectations such as the stabilisation of the employment situation, increases in contractual hours, qualification and pay levels, or the granting of more regular overtime hours or of changes in working times, places and tasks when asked for by the employee. Superficially, however, the choice to work overtime and to demonstrate the requested availability to company demands is left to the employees, as overtime is officially ‘voluntary’. In this way, responsibility for their working conditions is assigned to employees themselves, and needs and interests become conditioned by the internalisation of the company’s flexibility requests and a good personal relationship with superiors. In other words, within this mechanism of forced availability, affect – in the form of personal preferences of superiors influencing judgements of individuals’ merit – constitutes not only an object, but itself a device of labour control.

Summing up, the growing relevance of retail labour’s affective character for a company’s success, results in management’s attempts to streamline and colonise employees’ subjectivity by both direct and indirect control strategies. Moreover, it leads to an incorporation of affect as a tool for these strategies. The ‘precarisation’ of work and employment functions as a catalyst for a double colonisation of affect, sustaining the ‘subjectivation’ of labour control (even) under the dominance of rationalisation and neo-Taylorist re-organisation. Yet, the contradictions inherent in such a combination of contrasting management strategies could be expected to create conflicts and thus possible points of departure for resistance and the appropriation of the collective capacities to act. Let us therefore now turn to the role of affect within employees’ work experiences and the strategies they develop in order to cope with and make sense of labour control.

## **Employees’ Coping Strategies**

Three levels can be distinguished in which affects play a role for employees’ everyday work experiences. First, their contact with clients; second, the relations employees establish with the company as well as with concrete superiors; and, finally, interactions between colleagues. As a result of contradictions between management’s strategies of rationalisation and service orientation, relations with customers constitute a central line of conflict within employees’ work experiences. Stories about quarrels with customers and criticism of reduced service quality caused by management’s orders are recurrent themes in employees’ accounts of working conditions.

Overall, their experiences are marked by strong feelings of precariousness and vulnerability due to the mechanism of forced availability described above. This results in the pressure of blackmailing, dependence on uncertain overtime hours and low wages, and blocked paths to professional growth. All interviewees describe themselves as initially having been willing to show commitment and responsibility, and to fulfil the

company's flexibility requests. Yet they would quickly grow disappointed as their expectations in professional growth and employment stabilisation – to be obtained according to management's rhetoric by such availability demonstrations – reveal themselves as empty promises. As a consequence, a feeling of disrespect to their commitment prevails.<sup>3</sup>

It happened to me then that I had to do tasks I wasn't supposed to do [according to my contract/pay level]. I asked several times: 'Listen, shouldn't I get the third level [of pay]?' But they always slammed the door in my face (...).

*And does this strategy to demonstrate availability work?*

It helps to get some overtime, because if you are always available, they will always ask you, and not the other who says no (...) But, the previous times count for nothing, you say yes, yes, yes thirteen times, and when you say no one single time, for them it's like you've always said no. (Interview 9, p.4f)

But if you ask me only to come to work on a Sunday from time to time, every two or three months, only because you need to fill a hole in your timetable, for me that €50 more that you give me at the end of the month can only be used as toilet paper. It's a question of principles. It may even be that €50 is convenient for me, but what's the deal? Whenever you want; when it's not convenient for you, you don't need it; and then, because you have to replace a colleague who is ill, then you call: 'Come to work on Sunday! Kill yourself.' (Interview 8, p.8)

I stayed there, until 5 or 6pm, from 7 in the morning, maybe even for one or two weeks continuously, sometimes even without taking time for a lunch break. But that was because I did work I somehow liked [in the frozen food department] (...) When they put me as a cashier, I told them immediately that this is work I don't like (...) I've also tried to talk with the manager, but (...) With the former manager I've always been responsive to their requests (...) But with what results? That in the end I had to go to the checkout counter anyway. (Interview 8, p.5, 8 and 10)

In this context, the affective character of their frontline service work seems to constitute an important source of recognition and satisfaction. Personal relations with clients, and especially clients' gratitude for good service, are described as adding sense and pleasure to daily routine, thus sustaining the value of one's work.

Is it important for you that the customers say 'Thank you', that they recognize your work?

For me, yes. There are many others that don't care. But for me, also when I worked at the fish counter, when I did those little jobs for them, for example filleting, they told me: 'Hey, you do this very well!', this gave me satisfaction. It's not just always the same thing, the same routine. If management doesn't understand it, at least the customer does, that's a good thing. (...) At least in this work you have the distraction, the pleasure of getting to know new people everyday and so the work passes by better too. (Interview 9, p.11f)

Due to the attraction of affective labour, employees could thus be said to have internalised responsibility for service quality and to behave in line with company's interests in spite of generally dissatisfactory working conditions. However, commitment to service quality should be considered more than a simple strategy of adaptation to

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3 Although all interviewees have managed to move from temporary to open-ended employment, all but one (out of five) remain involuntarily in part-time employment. None of them has received an increase in qualification and pay levels even after more than four years of specialisation.

labour control. It also constitutes an appropriation of sense and of competences, as employees clearly identify their capacities for empathy and conflict-solving in relation to customers as production, or rather, service- knowledge underestimated and disregarded by management.

The thing [that is problematic] at the check out counters is not the control over the money, it's precisely the relation with the customers, you know. The way you talk with the customer. Because the customers go there to do their shopping, and when they arrive at the counter what do they do? They complain, because this and that is missing in the shelves, and you have to be able to keep them [make sure they are retained as customers]... not to say 'Hey, mister, what do you want from me?' (...) Ok, it can also happen [that you react like that]. But the work of the cashier is this: to keep the customers as calm as possible. (Group interview 1, p.14)

In order to make sense of quarrels with customers, however, employees rely on a strategy of personalisation. Reasons for conflicts are attributed to personal character, in this case mostly the uneducated behaviour of certain customers – despite a general awareness of contradictory management strategies and problems generated by the work organisation.

Two aspects of the interrelations between employees and management are relevant to the role of affect: one, the employees' reactions to superiors' arbitrary decision-making power based on personal preferences, and two, employee's responses to company-culture initiatives and related responsibility transfers pointing to a positive identification with the company. Employees react to the mechanisms of forced availability and arbitrary judgement officially based on merit by cultivating a sense of injustice and incorrectness: it is the disrespect to the commitment shown by the employee and the incorrect management of the shop that appear responsible for bad working conditions, and the fact that employees find themselves trapped in precarious employment situations. It is not their own incapacities to fulfil work tasks or obtain professional growth that are identified as the problem. Such criticisms could be understood as a rejection of self-responsibility inherent in the (false) logic of merit promoted by management. However, by adopting this strategy, conflicts are personalised as injustice and incorrectness linked to a specific superior's personality and incapacities.

I had a whole discussion with my manager. I work in the beverages department. One morning some colleagues were reordering all the water bottles. All the water stuff was in the place where I would have had to work. So I couldn't do my work and started to help them, to get it done quicker. It was a big mess. At eight the market opens: 'Could you help me here? We have to clean up, have to hurry. We're opening right now, shit.' There has to be some order, you know. I still had to start doing my work, [to stock up fruit juices], hey! There comes the manager, tells us that we would have to take away the posters from the last sales that had just finished. At that point I got really angry. I said, not really in a loud voice, but he heard it anyway: 'Everybody is just good for talking here (...) All the shelves are empty here, plastic and cartons everywhere. You tell us to do this and that, but you are talking from the outside, you don't know what's really happening in here' (...) He is just not competent; the manager we have now is just not competent. Before he was a supervisor, there he didn't do anything really (...) The other day, at the counters, I finished the receipt roll, the paper for the receipts. I asked him: 'Do you know how to change the roll?' He looked and me and said: 'No.' Did you get it? That's the manager, he doesn't know how to do things (...). He doesn't know how things work and so he causes a mess. (Group interview 1, p.19f)

Attempts to transfer responsibility for a company's success to employees and to integrate them into a company culture based on feelings of emotional belonging, is met by employees with a

rather traditional work ethic upholding the rights and duties of a worker and promoting the idea of a fair exchange between employee and employer.

What I think is: A company that gives the worker a salary at the end of the month, why shouldn't the worker have to give his [sic] work, too? Why not, why shouldn't he [sic] be interested in the company? He [sic] has to give. How should I put it? I feel that in order to receive you have to give, too. It's not that one can only take, take, take; no, you have to give. (Interview 6, p.12)

When I started working at the fish counter I did it because they told me that I would have my hours increased. But not everybody does this. I see certain guys and not all are interested in having more hours. They just want a calm job. But this can't work out; because at work, if you are ready to give, I don't say that you'll always receive what you want, but you will have more possibilities. But if you always block everything, if you always close the door to any requests, forget about any favour from the company. Not favours, actually; things you deserve. (Interview 9, p.1)

While on the one hand such a moral work attitude underpins employees' adherence to a logic of merit and their sense of duty to fulfil flexibility requirements, on the other it also sustains consciousness of their own collective rights and an identification with an (abstract) workers' collective rather than with a company's interests. Consequently, the assumption of responsibility evident in employees' accounts seems to be motivated by their own interests (worker's instrumental interests in the company's well-being and/or an expressive interest in doing a good job as demonstrated with regard to customer service) and values (moral expectation in a fair exchange and integrity to fulfil one's own duties).

A further strategy to limit both the company's flexibility requests and the intrusion in employees' emotional attachment is a clear boundary-drawing between work and private life, between work experiences and one's own personality, resulting in a disaffection with work.

The day after I had failed [to obtain the recognition of certain tasks as requiring a higher qualification and pay level], I went to the head of our department and I told her: 'Look, the company doesn't consider me a specialist. A specialist does this and that. A salesclerk at the fourth pay level does this and that. I'm only a simple sales clerk at the fourth pay level, I do exactly these things. All the other things - I won't do them anymore'.

*Did it work out?*

Yes, I didn't do the work of a specialist anymore. In the end they got tired, they sent me to the checkout counter. Because they wanted me to be available to their requests (...) To think that I'm always at the checkout counters now, it's true, it's getting on my nerves. But at least I do not destroy my health anymore [as with the work at the fish counter, where the hands are always in contact with ice]. If it's like that, well, then I prefer working as a cashier. (Group interview 1, p. 10f)

*When you do your work at the checkout counter, do you feel responsible somehow for customers' satisfaction or for how the shop goes?*

No, lately I do not give a damn, I really don't care about anything. I don't feel responsible for anything. I'm negligent, I do that work only because I have to do it. Because, because you do not feel, I don't know how to explain. They do not even try to draw you in... You, you don't have, you don't see any prospect for growth (...) It becomes something you do because you know that at the end of the month you bring home your salary. And you say to yourself: Ok, now, for the

moment, as long as it will be, I'll do this. With the hope that maybe one day something will change or that I might find something else. (Interview 8, p. 10)

Given the vulnerability to blackmailing, such border-drawing is however mostly limited to a mental opting out, thus fostering a simultaneous distancing from and enduring of unsatisfactory working conditions.

At the third level of interaction (between colleagues), it must be stated first that the individualisation of labour relations put into practice by management strategies (mechanisms of forced availability and the false logic of individual merit), pushes employees towards a search for individual solutions only in the first instance. Employees value the (rhetorical) possibility to voice personal problems in direct individualised negotiations with superiors, and display an interest to 'care for themselves'. Yet, experiences of limited success of such individual strategies (due to the lack of any position of power and individual vulnerability) make them turn to unions and shop floor delegates for help – a behaviour that underlines the continuous subjective relevance of collective interest representation as a resource for individuals' coping strategies.

Generally I try to get by on my own. In the sense that, if I have a problem, I don't call the unions immediately. But, I've also realised that, once you involve the unions, things are told in a different way. If you go on your own, they'll never give you a clear answer, because they know that you are not well informed enough to contradict them. (Interview 8, p.14)

The only valid thing is to go talk to the unions. It's them who made me evolve a bit. (Interview 5, p. 3)

While the above mentioned identification with one's own position as a worker fosters such a positive approval of collective interest representation, it also goes along with a rather passive and distanced perception of collective action for which affects such as feelings of solidarity or emotional belonging seem to play only a minor role. Instead, participation in collective action is phrased as a moral duty (as part of the rights and duties of a worker) and as an instrumental interest in the effective defence of interests. Responsibility for the success of such interest defence is delegated to the unions who appear like a third, external party and are seen basically as a service provider. Such a passive service attitude is a result of and at the same time clearly at odds with employees' daily experiences of lacking solidarity on the shop floor: They complain about mistrust, deceitfulness and competition among colleagues and criticise 'exaggerated' individual availability demonstrations in front of management as well as consequently low participation in collective action.

You know, everybody only cares for themselves. For example there is the cashier who wants to have a good image in front of superiors, because then they let her get out of the counter from time to time to do some other kind of work, filling up the shelves or stuff. That's why she wants to show that during a strike she's there, at work. Or there is the one who can't wait until the next strike, because then there are people missing and she can do 10 hours of overtime work (...) What do you think, what kind of atmosphere is there? I could eat them all, fuck! (Interview 5, p.5f)

Demonstrating availability is one thing; pulling down your trousers in front of the company is something else. I am available, but only because I have my interests too. But doing certain things, such as spying, going around telling superiors that this and that person is stealing (like some colleagues do), that's not my character. That really doesn't have anything to do with work, that's

not availability. (...) I don't say you shouldn't do any overtime at all, you just don't have to monopolise that 100, 200 hours for yourself; it should be an equal distribution for all. Instead, there is lots of egoism. (Interview 9, p. 4f)

Against this backdrop, affective relations among colleagues gain special importance as employees tend to rely on smaller, exclusive networks based on friendship in order to cope with the lack of overall shop floor solidarity. The non-existence of wider mutual support, as well as the limited participation in collective agency, in turn, are ascribed to personal character – this time of specific colleagues considered as mean, self-interested etc., and to resulting personal aversion. The issue of solidarity is thus 'privatized', as it is transferred in such a double way on the level of personal affective relations. Again, structural conditions (such as pressures towards individual demonstrations of availability especially during strikes) remain obscured and beyond employees' (collective) acting capacities – despite a general awareness about them, and in this context of high unionisation.

## Conclusion

In sum, affects seem to play an important role for employees' cognitive coping strategies as conflicts on all three levels of interactions are transformed into questions of personal character and preferences. Such a personalisation leads to a naturalising and an individualisation of conflict which makes it difficult to conceive any common opponent against whom collective action could be directed (Ferreras, 2004). The reasons for conflict appear out of the reach of any agency as personal character is taken as a given and unchangeable private matter. Therefore, reference to affective relations seems to result in a channelling of conflicts, entailing a disguise of structural power positions and contradictions. Reliance on restricted friendship-based collective support networks in this context turns out to represent more a means of survival in the face of individualising management strategies than a sign of new perspectives of autonomous and spontaneous cooperation among affective workers.

Nevertheless, coming back to the functioning of labour control, what the analysis of employees' coping strategies reveals is the extent to which work organisation and labour control depend on employees' development of coping capacities. Work organisation and labour control depends both on their capacities to reconcile conflicting interests, and their ability to construct consent. It also depends on employees' abilities to counterbalance the shortcomings of and tensions between different management strategies. This is to say that management's strategies by themselves are fragile and kept together only by employees' compensating agency and sense constructions.

At first glance, these different sense-making strategies might seem to contradict each other, especially because they appear as linked to contrasting work attitudes: an instrumental perception of work consistent with disaffection-strategies, a moral conviction sustaining employees' sense of (in)justice, and expressive interests linked to the affective character of retail labour. However, what emerges from the interviews is how these different strategies actually work together within single individuals. Thus, disaffection from work, the attempt to draw clear boundaries between one's sense of

self and one's work, is far from being necessarily in contrast to the described work ethic and its moral requirement of 'doing a good job'. The latter also includes the capacity to distinguish between 'work' and 'life' whilst leaving personal problems at home in order to deliver an unrestrained work performance. Moreover, cultivating a sense of injustice and/or bad management does not contradict the idea of a fair exchange as embedded in the work ethic. Rather, it contributes to the construction of the company and/or one's actual superiors as 'other', as not conforming to the ideal expressed in this very work ethic. Thus it allows for a distancing from unsatisfying working conditions without giving up one's own concepts of justice. Once such a distance is established, it is possible to identify with individual aspects of the work environment, and therefore to maintain some motivation and positive feelings towards work. In a word, it seems to be precisely employees' capacity to combine, to tolerate and/or reconcile contradictory and conflicting work requirements, sense constructions and interests, which forms the basis of their capacity to act.

Additionally, the transfer of responsibility for the (company's) flexibility requirements to the employees is achieved only by a combination of employees' different sense constructions:

- a) their perception of their precariousness and their need for more stable working conditions as a private problem, meaning that they understand their response to the company's flexibility needs as a personal interest;
- b) their moral work attitude based on a belief in worker's rights and duties, which compliments the logic of merit, combined with an instrumental interest in being a dependent worker in relation to the economic success of the company offering employment and salary;
- c) their will to do a good job not only as a moral or economic obligation, but also as an expressive interest in recognition and satisfaction which is reflected in the positive accounts of affective front line retail labour.

In the light of these cognitive coping strategies, compliance with work requirements reveals itself as more than simple subjection under labour control obtained by coercion and/or internalisation of a (company's) interests. Instead it entails a process of subjectivation, that is, a constant struggle over identification and self-construction. As can be seen not only from the strategy of boundary-drawing, but also from the described work ethic and their subjective interpretations of responsibility and identification, employees constantly position themselves both within and outside the work context and management's offers of identification. In other words, their subjectivity and their self-constructions are not reduced to a presupposed company identity. In contrast, as already explained with regard to management's strategies, employees' coping strategies are also in themselves contradictory and fragile. This leaves margins for adaptation as well as dissent, demonstrated by the double function of a moral work attitude upholding both rights and duties, or by the ambiguity of mental boundary-drawing. Nevertheless, the overall effect of these strategies seems to be primarily a reduction of the overall sense of having one's interests frustrated, which leads to the endurance of dissatisfying working conditions and prolonged precariousness (be it through distancing oneself from work or through reference to alternative sources of recognition within the work context).

In other words, possible breaks or points of conflict exist both on the level of management strategies as well as employees' sense constructions – the colonisation of affect is nothing stable or homogeneous. Yet, as the 'privatisation' of solidarity shows, there is a lack of collective resources which would be the precondition for, first, an expression of such latent conflicts and contradictions, and, second, for countering the pressures resulting from the individualisation of labour relations. This is to say that the development of cooperation and collective agency is no spontaneous process, inherent in the logic of post-Fordist reorganisation of work, but requires the appropriation of collective acting capacities by employees' themselves – starting from the exchange of individual and common experiences, and the creation of practical experiences of solidarity, collective struggle and self-organisation.

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