(Un)Making Europe: Capitalism, Solidarities, Subjectivities

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Retail shift workers: 
the times and rhythms of working with customers. 
Two European case studies.

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Qualitative Research

RSWs’ - retail shift workers’ - perceptions and representations about the times and rhythms of working with customers in two shopping streets of European metropolitan cities (service economy)

**Times** → working time, flexible schedule, Sundays/holidays shifts

**Rhythms** → pace of work conditioned by the affluence of customers

2011-2014 participant observation and choice of the first case
2015-2017 PhD qualitative research – fieldwork, interviews, focus group

2 streets: Corso Buenos Aires in **Milan** (1) + Oxford Street in **London** (2)

2 sectors: fashion (A) and phone/ICT services (B)

Methods → 1 year ethnography, 50 interviews, 2 focus groups (RSWs, 20 in each case and 20 in each sector, + 10 unionists)
Economic and Social Relevance

Post-Fordist Society

Deindustrialization Delocalization Automatization
-> expulsion of blue collar workers from the productive system
Mass consumption and increasing of shops and shopping centres
Growth of employment in the service sector

Neoliberalism and 24/7 Service

Deregulation of shop opening hours
Flexibility – of contract terms and schedules
Working time, Social time, time for ourselves
-> ALIENATION AND IDENTITIES PROBLEMS
ESPECIALLY FOR YOUNG RETAIL WORKERS
Theoretical Framework 1/3

Emotional Labour and Alienation

Estrangement from the product + the act of work + themselves disjunction between “the person” and “the worker”

Alienation as: powerlessness, meaninglessness, self estrangement (Marx, Seeman)

“jobs of this type have three characteristics in common. First, they require face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public. Second, they require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person—gratitude or fear, for example. Third, they allow the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees” (Hochschild)
Theoretical Framework 2/3

Routinization and Structuration Theory

The society needs ciclycal times and rhythms, the Structuration process is the recursive ordering of social life. The society is everyday produced and re-produced through the routine of the social actors and the possibility to form relationships (Giddens)

Mass-consumption and Consumerism

The phenomenon of consumerism changed behaviors, social interactions, self-presentations (E. Goffman 1954) and performances. We can observe a «reification and objectivation of Self» in the Postmodern Everyday Life (Langman)
Theoretical Framework 3/3

Fast Social Time

Social Acceleration
the speed of transformation in social life (Rosa)

Liquidity
Instability and uncertainty of relationships (Bauman)

Condition of immediacy
«closure of the gap that has historically separated now from later, here from elsewhere, desire from satisfaction (...) not just an acceleration in culture, but a distinct quality to cultural experience» (Tomlinson)
Opting out of Sunday working

All shop and betting shop workers can opt out of Sunday working unless Sunday is the only day they have been employed to work on.

An employee can opt out of Sunday working at any time, even if they have agreed to work on Sundays in their contract.

The employee must give their employer 3 months’ notice that they want to opt out of Sunday working. They must continue to work on Sundays during the 3 month notice period if their employer wants them to.

An employer who needs staff to work on Sundays must tell them in writing that they can opt out. They must do this within 2 months of the person starting work - if they don’t, only 1 month’s notice is needed to opt out.

Staff who opt out of Sunday working mustn’t be treated unfairly.
Results 1/3 (themes):

1 - Times and Rhythms of Working with Customers

ITALY (older): The most important problems: working days (Sundays, holidays) and the pace of work

They feel themselves alone, «outside the society» because they work during the so-called unsocial hours

They think that they are perceived by the customers as «slaves» because they are always in the shops, «always ready to serve»

Staff cuts, consequent lack of workforce
RSWs are often alone in the shop - often they cannot have a break for many hours depending on the costumer traffic
Results 2/3 (themes):

2 - Selling the Self and (not) Planning the Future

UK (younger): They say that they live «day by day»

They firstly told me that «flexible shifts are ok»
Whereupon they assert that they will «absolutely change to a 9-to-5, Monday-to-Friday job»

But they are «planning nothing», they are not thinking about the future or looking for a different job

The economy is stronger, there are more RSWs in each shop and often a security guard, but there is also a great turnover and RSWs are younger than in Italy
Results 3/3 (themes):

3 - Practices of Resistance and Resilience

ITALY (older): groups of RSWs - to face up the deregulation
Really different political parties follow the protest
(bottom up movement)

UK (younger): campaign called Keep Sunday Special
Unions and the Church of England - but RSWs know nothing
(top down movement)

Resilience: good customers and work-team - these are the
two things they like most about their job, the first one can
«change your day», «the team make the difference»
Discussion 1/3
Alienation in Postmodern Society

Alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, self estrangement
Estrangement from the product - where employees lack a sense of ownership and control over the product and its quality
Estrangement from the act of work - where employees experience work as totally separate from the rest of their existence

Smiles as work tools for RSWs - from the quality of the product to the value of brands and the empathy - strategies of interaction of RSWs

In the first modern age selfhood was found in reflective thinking. Now people want to “see and be seen” to find a sense of creative self production that brings emotional gratification in their recognition by other (Goffman)
Discussion 2/3

New elements of work alienation

«The disjunction between “genuine” Self and its expressions and performances, the truncation of selfhood, was integral to Marx's concept of alienation» (Langman)

RSW in Oxford Street, London, F26: “Maybe they [the customers] think it’s a low skill job and you have to serve them (...) for the most part, when you show your *genuine* empathy for people they respond back in the same way”

Alienation over their emotions and over their time
Selling the self: teamwork as an anchor to reality?
Discussion 3/3

The phenomenon of immediatization, Alienation of times and rhythms that affect all of us

Everyone and everything seems to must be:
**Forever Young** → RSWs and customers, as the products
Forever Fast → production and service, new models, Fast Fashion/ICT

24/7 Service: Sundays and holidays work – Flexible Schedules → Destructured and commodified times and rhythms

Fast capitalism, consumerism, demand of instant satisfaction → influence not only RSWs’ work but the whole society

Neoliberalism → deregulation → destructured times and rhythms
Retail working time → consumption time → affect the whole society

*POLICIES* → REGULATION Versus Neoliberalist DEREGULATION
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THANK YOU

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