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The moral and political economy of producers and consumers

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Abstract. There appears to be a kind of *master discourse of consumption, consumers* and *consumer society,* generated and sustained, primarily, by discourses of consumer sovereignty, and the customer-driven firm. To the extent that we, as consumers, accept (all or some of) this master discourse then we are partly responsible for the negative consequences that befall many workers producing the goods and services we consume – e.g. we often see relatively inexpensive commodities in terms of a 'bargain' rather than the result of someone else's low pay. There is, however, a contradiction at work because we often do not accept all (or some) of this master discourse. We often do care about the plight of those who produce the goods and services we consume. The problem is the master discourse does nothing to encourage these ethical predispositions or to challenge us to probe our ignorance. The aim of this paper is to explore this contradiction. After reminding ourselves, in part one, of some fundamental facts of political economic life, part two introduces moral economy. Part three uses this political and moral economic perspective to focus attention on the negative consequences that can arise for workers, when consumers accept (all or some of) this fetishized master discourse. Part four explores the contradiction by considering cases where consumers do care about the plight of those who produce the goods and services they consume.

> *In all buying, consider first, what condition of existence you cause in the production of what you buy; secondly, whether the sum you have paid is just to the producer, and in due proportion, lodged in his hands (John Ruskin, [1862] 1997: 227)*

Discourses of *consumption, consumers* and *consumer society* are ubiquitous. They are generated not only by corporations and their spokespeople, management consultants, think tanks, the media, consumer groups, economists, policy advisors and the government, but also by social scientists. In *Consumption and Identity at Work* (1996) Du Gay has done an excellent job of assembling commentaries from some of the most influential social scientists in the field (such as Bauman, Deleuze, Hoschild, Keat, Rose, Peters & Waterman, Sabel, and Urry), and weaving them into a coherent narrative. The following excerpts from Du Gay (76-80)[1] should provide a 'feel' for these discourses:

> As the language of the market becomes the only valid vocabulary of moral and social calculation, the privilege of the producer us superseded by the sovereignty of the consumer with civic culture giving way to consumer culture as citizens are reconceptualized as enterprising consumers.
>
> Consumer culture is a culture of men and women integrated into society as, above all, consumers.
>
> The primary economic image offered to the modern citizen is not that of the producer but of the consumer. As consumers people are encouraged to shape their lives by the use of their purchasing power and to make sense of their existence by exercising their freedom to choose in a market.
>
> [A]n active, enterprising consumer is placed at the moral centre of the market-based universe. What counts as 'good' or 'virtuous,' in this universe, is judged by reference to the apparent needs, desires and projected preferences of the sovereign consumer.
>
> [I]n order to guarantee that the optimum benefits accrue from the workings of this intrinsically virtuous system, it is the moral obligation of each and every commercial organization, to become obsessed with staying close to the customer.
>
> The relationship to self that the employee is expected to develop, builds upon and extends the identity he or she is deemed to have as a consumer.
>
> [T]he primary image informing representations of economic life is that of the 'sovereign consumer,' and…the organization and the experience of work is increasingly structured around staying close to the customer.

Whilst we might doubt the extent of the shift these comments suggest, there can be no doubting the extent of their influence. An indication of just how influential these discourses have become in Britain is the extent to which they are now central to the vision of New Labour's neo-liberal policy agenda, as the following clips from speeches by Tony Blair show:

> Public services need reform if they are to deliver the uniformly high standards and consumer focus that people expect in the 21st century (Blair, 2001).

> The services urgently need change, redesigning them around the needs of the consumer, making them fit for the new age of high expectations in which we live (Blair, 2002).

> We have opened up the telecommunications market. The gas and electricity markets have been liberalised, bringing new choice to consumers. Air travel has also been opened up, bringing cheaper air tickets (Blair, 2005).

There is, then, what appears to be a kind of *master discourse of consumption, consumers* and *consumer society*. And this master discourse is, arguably, generated and sustained by four sub-discourses. Whilst the first two, consumer sovereignty, and the customer-driven firm, are neatly referred to by Du Gay (1996: 76) as 'primary image[s] informing representations of economic life,' another two sub-discourses are involved: the (alleged) change from a modern, producer society to a postmodern, consumer society; and a change in the dominant mode of social theorising from modernism to postmodernism and/or poststructuralism. [2]

As socio-linguists like Fairclough (2003) argue, discourse is causally efficacious: it defines and influences our social, psychological, and material activities. The master discourse of consumers, consumption and consumer society, therefore, shapes our consumptive and productive actions, as well as our attitudes towards them. It encourages us to fetishize consumption, consumers and consumer society, to the neglect of production, producers and the productive aspects of society. It encourages us to orientate ourselves one-sidedly, around the axis of consumption rather than the axis of production. It encourages consumers *and* workers to interpret the world through the lens of the consumer, not through the lens of the worker as well.

To the extent that we, as consumers, accept (all or some of) this fetishized master discourse, orienting ourselves around the axis of consumption, and interpreting the world through the lens of the consumer, we are partly responsible for the negative consequences that befall many workers producing the goods and services we consume. This master discourse encourages us, for example, to see relatively inexpensive commodities in terms of a 'bargain' rather than (often) the result of someone else's low pay; to see our consumer convenience almost in terms of a 'natural right' rather than the result of someone else having to work unsocial, hours; to treat workers in an undignified manner because we see their role as one of serving our consumer wants; and to treat workers unethically by refusing to recognise them as (genuine) equals.

There is, however, a contradiction at work here – a contradiction that is missed by exaggerating the role of consumption, consumers and consumer society. We, as consumers, often do not accept all (or some) of this master discourse. We often do care about the plight of those who produce the goods and

services we consume. Sometimes this is implicit, and is simply part of being human. Other times it is explicit, for example, when we insist on buying fair-trade goods. Often we are simply ignorant of the unintended consequences of our consumer actions. The problem is, however, the master discourse does nothing to encourage these ethical predispositions or to challenge us to probe our ignorance.

The aim of this paper, then, is to explore this contradiction. Part one reminds us of some fundamental (if unfashionable) facts of political economic life, whilst part two introduces us to a discipline that was once, considered part and parcel of political economy, namely, moral economy. Part three uses this political and moral economic perspective to focus attention on the negative consequences that can arise for workers, when consumers accept (all or some of) this fetishized master discourse, orientate themselves around the axis of consumption, and interpret the world through the lens of the consumer. Part four explores the contradiction by considering cases where consumers do care about the plight of those who produce the goods and services they consume.

1. Political economy

The aim of this section is to consider some of the political economic categories necessary for a more nuanced analysis of consumers and producers.

Consumer sovereignty

There are many definitions of consumer sovereignty (first coined, according to Penz 1986: 12, in 1936 by W.H. Hutt) and the concept is far from incontrovertible, but we might define it as follows:

> Consumer sovereignty refers to the sovereign-like rule of consumers over producers in markets. Those with money are able to use their purchasing power to provide producers of commodities with information to inform the latter's decisions over what to produce and in what quantities. Consumers do not have to translate their demands into actual purchases, of course, they can take their custom to another producer. Feeling this as the force of competition, producers aim to provide appropriate quantities of their commodities, with the appropriate quality, at the lowest possible price. In responding to consumers demand, then, producers are also driven to make efficient use of scarce resources.

More important than the technicalities of economic theory, however, are the normative messages that have steadily, and relentlessly, seeped out from the discipline of economics, and found their way into popular discourse. And the dominant message is this: consumption is not only good for you as an individual, it is good for the economy as a whole. Consumers should feel no shame or guilt when

4

asserting their individual, perhaps even selfish, wants, because, as Mandeville taught, collective virtue arises from individual vices (Carrier & Miller 1999).[3]

Consumer or customer driven or orientated firm

Consumer sovereignty has been given a new twist recently with the discourse of the consumer or customer-driven company.

> Good companies are customer focused. Great companies are customer-driven. What's the difference? Great companies don't just focus on the consumer. Great companies develop a relationship with their customers. They listen. They commit to making their customers happy. Every decision they make is driven by giving their customers what they think they want (*College of Extended International Education*, 2005).

The customer-driven firm encourages 'workers…to put themselves in their customers' shoes, and offer them the sort of service they themselves would ideally like to receive' (Du Gay 1996: 79). The doctrine is encapsulated in the following advice to businesses from *Spacia*, (the property division of *British Rail*) a founder member of the *Institute of Customer Services.*

> Try to be as flexible as you can. Make it clear to your customers that your business is run to suit them – not for *your own* convenience. Provide the most convenient service you can:
> - Organise delivery schedules that take account of your customers' needs.
> - Offer the longest and most convenient opening hours you can afford.
> - Make life as easy as possible for your customers – the easier it is for them the more likely they'll return time and time again (*Spacia* 2005, emphasis added).

The choice of language is instructive, especially the deliberately vague term 'your own'. Notice the change in emphasis that would arise from using the phrase 'your workers' instead of 'your own' and advising businesses to: 'make it clear to your customers that the business is not run for *your workers* convenience.' Whilst putting matters like this reveals the expectation that workers, not customers, will be inconvenienced, no sophisticated HRM professional would be so naïve as to let this particular cat out of this bag.

Profit

A company's primary objective is to make, and sustain, a rate and mass of profit sufficient to keep it trading – although clearly there are various ways of meeting this objective. Reminding ourselves of this fundamental (if unfashionable) fact of political economic life discourages us from ignoring two things. First, it discourages us from ignoring the fact that *consumers* often get a poor deal out of this consumer society and, thereby, from believing that a society of this nature has, as its primary objective, the satisfaction of consumer wants. The point is not lost on Abernach & Christensen (2005: 237) who write:

> [P]rivate firms place as much importance on shaping customer expectations and preferences as they do eliciting satisfaction…Private firms exist to make sales and profits. Customer satisfaction is a means to an end, not an end in itself. This legitimates a much higher level of customer manipulation than one expects…

Second, it discourages us from ignoring the fact that the master discourse is not neutral. The master discourse, aided and abetted by neoclassical economic theory, strongly implies that the interests of an undifferentiated group called 'producers' exist to serve the needs of another undifferentiated group called 'consumers.' When we unpack and differentiate these categories, however, an analytical space opens up and we can see matters with more clarity.

The traditional *dichotomy* between undifferentiated consumers and producers, can be transposed into a *trichotomy* between (i) consumers; (ii) producers as the owners or controllers of capital or employers; and (iii) producers as workers. I will divide the category 'producer' into two and refer, where necessary, to producer (worker) and producer (employer).

Transposing the dichotomy into a trichotomy in this way reveals two things. First, the master discourse primarily serves the needs of employers, by encouraging the Unitarist ideas, peddled by many managers and consultants, that 'we' should all 'pull together,' because 'we' are all 'in the same boat' or whatever. Second, as Carrier & Haymen (1997) have noted, that *most people, most of their working lives, are simultaneously consumers and workers (producers) or reliant on workers (producers) whereas only a small minority are simultaneously consumers and employers (producers)*.

> Construing people-as-consumers rather than workers is a local manifestation of a larger shift in perception that ignores the fact that *almost all Westerners work, or depend upon a worker for their consumption* (Carrier & Haymen 1997: 370, emphasis added).

The fact that both workers and consumers are treated as *means to an end* (the end of profit making) and not ends in themselves often leads to a '*point of fissure*' between the spheres of production/producers and consumption/consumers (Korczynski & Ott 2004: 591). In pursuing their prime objective, companies often create situations where workers end up carrying the can for shortcomings originating in the management of the company. Examples of this include leaving customers without adequate assistance due to inadequate staffing levels; leaving customers to face tired or bored workers who have not had proper breaks; leaving customers to face inappropriately skilled workers; selling inferior quality, or adulterated, commodities; not having adequate stocks and so on. And here is where the master discourse of consumption, consumers, and consumer society comes in.

> Management promotes the *enchanting myth of consumer sovereignty* as a way of managing the cultural contradictions that occur when production meets

consumption…Contradictions, however, are by their nature hard to manage (Korczynski & Ott 2004: 590, emphasis added).[4]

This 'enchanting myth of consumer sovereignty' is part of the master discourse of consumption, consumers, and consumer society. To the extent that the master discourse is internalised and acted upon by workers, they end up trying to manage the contradictions. Moreover, the whole idea of the customer-driven firm is to inculcate the master discourse so that it becomes taken-for-granted, indeed embodied, by workers. This does not mean that workers passively internalise this master discourse, or do so entirely without dissent, and neither does it mean there are no tensions, contradictions and fissures. But to the extent that the discourse is (even partly) internalised, and the myth succeeds in enchanting, the discourse is causally efficacious.

2. Moral economy

People, real people, human beings, actors, agents, lay actors, lay agents, human agency or whatever we choose to call those we study, have not been well treated by social scientists – with notable exceptions of course. Many social sciences (e.g. economics) remain committed to *homo economicus*, a conception recognised, even by most of those who use it, as a convenient fiction. Many other social sciences (e.g. sociology) have abandoned this modernist conception, only to have deconstructed and decentred the self to the point where there is no self, and in the process reduced human beings to bloodless entities that simply internalise shifting, fluid, discursive scripts. Unhappy with Hobson's choice, some theorists (e.g. Archer, 2002; Davis 2003; Layder 2004; Sayer 2005) seek a more plausible notion of human beings. In what follows, I make specific use not only of Sayer's ideas about human beings who *care* about *flourishing,* but also the connected idea that the pursuit of human flourishing demands normative and evaluative judgements.

What, then, do lay actors care about? They care, fundamentally, about things that affect their wellbeing and the wellbeing of others: they care about *human flourishing* as Aristotelians often put it. Human flourishing is a deliberately ambiguous term that allows us to refer to the kinds of processes that allow human beings to live well; not only to live with adequate levels of food, shelter, clothing and other basics, but also to live fulfilled social, cultural and political, lives. It does not matter, at least at this level of analysis, what constitutes human flourishing, but we need the category to differentiate it from its opposite state of affairs, namely suffering – a term used to denote all activity that causes physical or psychological harm to people. Flourishing depends upon a range of organisational forms such as democratic and empowering institutions through which we can manifest things like our political concerns. Flourishing in this sense refers to a kind of empirical claim about human beings and ought not to be confused with individualistic, utilitarian, notions and/or reduced to 'happiness' or to emotivist expressions of 'affect' or some such. [5]

People also care about *normative* and *moral* issues: what is of value, how ought we to live, how ought we to behave, how ought we to treat others, how ought we to be treated, what is (and what is not) worth striving for and so on. Even seemingly economic matters like class, gender and race based income inequality are often driven by a sense of injustice, a kind of moral sentiment. Indeed without this, any normative claim could founder on the 'so what' argument. Sayer (2005: 99) not only makes this point, he also suggests what is wrong with this argument:

> Logically, we could react to references of domination by saying: 'Yes, why not? – what's wrong with domination?' That few readers are likely to respond in this way reflects the fact that in such cases, description and evaluation are inseparable.

Notice that in opposing injustice of this kind, we very often appeal to values and not to personal preferences and/or mere convention. After all, if paying women less than men was actually not a bad thing to do, then it would be pointless pursuing equal opportunities policies. Normative morality for Sayer, then, is *ontological*. In ways reminiscent of Heidegger's *dasein*, he suggests that human beings simply *are* normative, moral entities.

Human beings are, of course, not only capable of flourishing (and restricted flourishing) but also of suffering. To claim that some person or group is being 'oppressed' and therefore undergoing harm or suffering, has the following implications – which are no less important for being stated rather simply:

- Suffering is a bad thing as it prevents human flourishing.

- Anything that promotes suffering and prevents human flourishing ought, *ceteris paribus*, to be resisted and, where possible, prevented.

This runs straight into the 'naturalistic fallacy' that is, the idea that we cannot logically deduce an *ought* from an *is*. Whilst much ink has been spilled by philosophers on this issue, I follow Sayer and make the following move – but see also Anderson (2004). If we substitute concrete examples for generalities, then philosophical objections have a habit of disappearing. Consider the following concrete example:

- Discrimination against women in the workplace is a bad thing because it causes women to earn relatively less, suffer relatively worse conditions, not be taken as seriously as men and, thereby, prevents women from flourishing.

- Discrimination in the workplace promotes suffering and prevents human flourishing, and ought to be resisted and, where possible, prevented.

It would be bizarre in the extreme to deny women equal treatment in the workplace, when we could provide it, simply on the grounds that we could not logically demonstrate that we should. Not only would it be bizarre, we simply do not come across denials of this kind.[6] Clearly, this kind of qualified ethical naturalism, as Sayer (2005: chapter 9) calls it, does involve 'sticking our necks out' and making claims about what we ought to do. But in our day-to-day lives, the fact is that we just do stick our necks out and make these kinds of claims. [7]

Human flourishing clearly depends upon, phenomena ranging from material phenomena like food and shelter, through socio-economic phenomena like employment and income, to social-psychological phenomena like *recognition*. To deny a person recognition (when they deserve it) is a kind of social-psychological domination. (See Taylor 1994, Honneth 1995). The kind of recognition Sayer is concerned with has a:

> necessary psychological dimension to it that is sometimes overlooked…Recognition matters to people, not just for their status in adulthood, but as a condition of their early psychological development as subjects and for their subsequent well-being. They need recognition of both their autonomy and an ability to reason and their neediness and dependence on others – indeed, recognition of their need for recognition…[I]t is important to note that recognition is not a luxury that ranks lower than the satisfaction of material needs, but is essential for well-being (ibid: 54).

> This account of recognition involves a strongly social conception of self-hood, and yet one which does not wholly reduce it to a product of external forces, as if each individual were a passive object lacking any powers of its own. It also implies that individuals depend on external social relations for the development of some of these powers (ibid: 57).

In sum, people care about flourishing, and the pursuit of flourishing demands normative and evaluative judgements about what we ought and ought not to do, and is a necessary if not sufficient condition for political intervention. I will return to this issue below.

3. The moral and political economy of producers and consumers

We considered moral economy to acknowledge that people care about human flourishing and suffering; and political economy to remind us that the master discourse primarily serves the interests of the owners and controllers of capital, not workers. Instead of elaborating further upon the conflict between capital and labour, however, I want to take a different tack and consider a form of conflict that can, and does, arise between workers and consumers. Before doing this let us note, for the record, that there are many cases where workers suffering *is not* caused by consumers. Take, for example, the case of having to work unsocial hours. This situation could be caused by people's need for emergency services; by the social norms governing eating or travelling times; or by reasons related directly to the drive for

profit. Moreover, many workers have to shop at unsocial times because they are locked into certain shift patterns. Important as these cases are, and there are many others, they are not my concern here.

The section starts by dealing with the material and practical dimensions of how workers may suffer at the hands of consumers, before considering the social-psychological dimensions.[8]

Pay levels and types of payment systems

A simple but important point relates to pay levels. Whilst the cause of relatively inexpensive commodities can be factors other than low pay, there are many instances where the latter is the primary cause of the former. Many consumers are able to take advantage of relatively inexpensive commodities precisely because these commodities get onto supermarket shelves through a chain of low-paid overseas and domestic workers – with the latter often being immigrants.

Payment systems include pensions – which can be thought of (minimally) as deferred wages. Current political debate is often framed in terms of private sector workers being consumers of services provided by public sector workers (producers) and as having opposed interests to the latter. The recent UK pensions crisis has encouraged a rather unsavoury attempt to play public sector workers off against private sector workers. Private sector workers are encouraged to think in terms of their taxes being used to provide public sector workers with better pensions (earlier retirement) than are available for (some) private sector workers. Sir Digby Jones, Director of the Confederation of British Industry recently said: 'Just who is the public sector for, the people who it serves or the people who work in it?' (Timmins 2005). What Jones fails, spectacularly, to see is that if the public sector is not run for the people who it serves *and* the people who work in it, then the latter will continually be placed at the mercy of the former.

Clearly, consumers do not set the pay levels or the pensions of workers. But this does not mean consumers are not implicated. The master discourse encourages consumers to see relatively inexpensive commodities in terms of a 'bargain' rather than the result of someone else's low pay or decreased pension provision.

Flexible working

Pressure on pay levels and pension provision is, of course, not the only way to reduce costs and provide relatively inexpensive commodities: introducing flexible working practices, especially temporally flexible working practices, is another well known route to the same objective. Indeed, flexible working practices can go hand in hand with relatively high wages (which does not mean they always do). But temporal flexibility is a double edged sword. Whilst temporal flexibility can, for instance, be a source of work-life balance for workers, it is more often a source of work-life *im*balance. Flexible working practices

such as school term-time working are potentially 'worker-friendly;' working practices like annualised hours are potentially 'worker-unfriendly' - and practices like flexible start and finish times are often neutral. My concern here is with (a) cases of worker-unfriendly flexible working practices that (b) derive from the demands of *consumers* who are under no particular constraints stemming from their own working arrangements - cases (noted above) where consumers simply 'want' to shop when it is convenient for them. Recall the advice from *Spacia*, (above) urging businesses to make clear to customers that your business is run to suit them (not for *your own* convenience) and provide the most convenient service you can by organising delivery schedules that take account of customers' needs and offering the longest and most convenient opening hours you can afford. There is, of course, no mention of the workers who will have to be available for these, often anti-social, opening hours.

Just-in-time (JiT) production systems reduce inventories, reduce costs and these savings can translate into the provision of relatively inexpensive commodities. An Annualised Hours (A-H) scheme is a form of temporally flexible working that works well with JiT systems, by building in the flexibility to respond to unpredictable patterns of product demand. Workers sign a contract for (say) 1,900 hours per year instead of 37.5 hours per week with some hours added for overtime. Shifts are worked out well in advance. There is, however, the possibility that when product demand takes an unpredicted change upwards or downwards, the workforce can be asked to work a minimum of 30 hours per week on some occasions, and a maximum of 60 hours per week on other occasions. Whilst this system of ensuring the workforce is constantly adjusted to the needs of production generates clear advantages for the employer, there are far fewer advantages for the employee. Demands like these originate not from workers, but from employers responding to competitive pressures.[9] Consumers benefit from this competition, obtaining a relatively inexpensive commodity, yet being completely unaware of the fact that there is a cost attached here: a worker somewhere was called into work at a few hours notice, perhaps having to cancel her child's day out.

Let us consider an example close to home. A recent article in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (2005), noted that 'consumer culture is changing the relationship between universities and students.' Many universities are faced with demands from their customers (i.e. students) to keep the libraries open 24-7. Some academics are in favour of this, many for the noblest of reasons, namely, they are in favour of providing students with all they need to pursue scholarship, though it will not be the academics checking out books at 4 o'clock in the morning. If this comes about, students, as customers, are highly likely to make demands that are bound to result in someone else having to work unsocial hours. The point is not altered if it ends up being other students who are working unsocial hours. In this case students as consumers are responsible for initiating the anti-social hours worked by some workers (producers). The master discourse, however, encourages students (and academics who accept this

form of managerialism) to see consumer convenience almost in terms of a 'natural right' rather than the result of someone else having to work inconvenient, unsocial, hours.

Precarious forms of work

Many consumers are able to take advantage of relatively inexpensive services such as the services of window cleaners, rubbish clearers, fence painters, weed pullers and, increasingly, child minders because they are provided by workers who are either self-employed, working in the informal economy, or employed in various forms of precarious contractual arrangements. Many are increasingly, but not exclusively, likely to be migrants. Many of these workers operate on the margins of financial viability, health and safety, legality and often have to work extremely long, intense, unsocial hours for very little reward in order to offer their services cheaply enough for consumers to use them.[10] Again the master discourse encourages those who make use of these services in terms of a 'bargain' rather than the result of someone else's precarious working conditions.

Stress, violence and dignity at work

There are cases where the mere presence of the consumer, even if she acts with integrity, intensifies the work of the worker. A good example of this is the check-out desks at large supermarkets. Even if the consumer is not rude to checkout staff, a long queue becomes a fairly blunt technique of control. Other cases arise from the fact that an explicit part of the job is to display a particular set of emotions (Bolton 2005; Broadbridge 2002). Notice that this *can* be the case even without employers consciously designing and deploying various technologies of the self.

There are, however, cases where consumer attitudes as experienced by worker (producers) are unacceptable.

> Six of the discussion groups mentioned customer attitudes as being a source of stress. This resulted in frustration, anger and displays of emotive dissonance: '*No answer is good enough for some customers—I mean it doesn't matter what you say or what you do*'. These feelings were intensified during times of peak trading (Broadbridge 2002: 179).

Not every negative comment or action directed towards workers by consumers is, of course, an example of workers suffering at the hands of consumers. Sometimes the employer is the cause of the problem by, for example, selling poor quality commodities, or maintaining less than adequate staffing levels, which can generate frustrated customers who then take it out on those they can, namely workers.

> An increasingly service orientated and customer driven retail environment (coupled with staff shortages and increased workloads) also contributed to the retail managers feelings

of stress. This was found to affect all managers in all functions, although branch level staff bore the brunt of customer complaints (*ibid*).

A recent survey by Retailchoice.com (2005) reveals not only the quantitative aspects of problems faced by workers from rude customers (e.g. 43.2% of respondents encountered rude customers on a daily basis) but some of the undignified ways in which some staff are treated by customers. These include: being spat in the face for not giving a refund for allegedly stale cornflakes when they were half eaten and not stale at all; being told to 'get on the fucking till and serve me'; customers using the fitting room for urinating; being told by a customer that if they had as much money as them, they would be on the other side of the counter; having a shopping trolley pushed into the back of their legs, and being shouted at to 'move;' being told they were thick and that's why they worked in a shop; being told to 'know my place and just do it.'

This denial of dignity occasionally spills over into violence. Tens of thousands of shop workers are attacked, abused or threatened every year. USDAW, a shop workers union, conducted a survey of representatives, revealing that that over the previous 12 months: 47 per cent of stores suffered violent attacks on staff. 72 per cent had staff threatened with violence - 25 per cent it was at least a weekly occurrence. In 86 per cent of stores there was verbal abuse of staff - on a daily basis in over a third of stores. Much verbal abuse constitutes racial or sexual harassment. 75 per cent of shop workers are very or fairly worried about attacks. 87 per cent are very or fairly worried about being verbally abused. 38 per cent of reps reported that staff complained often or very often of ill-health caused by fear of violence and abuse. 48 per cent knew of members who had taken time off sick as a result. 41% were aware of staff who had been forced to give up working or to change jobs because of the stress and pressure (Usdaw 2003).

It is, clearly, the case that the asymmetrical nature of the consumer-worker relationship can generate these pathologies quite apart from the master discourse. Bring rude to a shop assistant does not endanger the customer's livelihood, whereas replying in kind and/or refusing to be deferential might endanger the latter's livelihood, especially where the employment is precarious. The master discourse, however, encourages this, and encourages us to make demands as consumers on workers, whilst discouraging us from considering the suffering this may cause them in terms of stress, loss of dignity. It might even be, at least partly, responsible for creating an environment where some people feel emboldened to press their demands as consumers through violence.

Recognition at work
This section turns from material and practical dimensions, to issues of a more social-psychological nature and recalls Taylor's notion of *recognition* as used by Sayer. It considers ways in which

recognition can be denied to workers by consumers, especially when the latter are encouraged to see themselves as sovereign consumers. Let us make use of three of Sayer's central ideas: conditional and unconditional recognition; mutual recognition among equals; and equality of moral worth.

Conditional and unconditional recognition

> Recognition takes a number of forms. Charles Taylor draws a distinction between unconditional and conditional respect. The former is or should be granted simply in recognition of others' humanity, even in the absence of knowledge of their particular characteristics and behaviour. By contrast, the latter is conditional upon the particular behaviour of others, whether in terms of its moral or other qualities: it has to be earned (Sayer 2005: 60).

Unconditional recognition should be given simply on the grounds of another person's humanity. Conditional recognition may be granted, if earned, and earned by appropriate behaviour. Consumer sovereignty is obligatory, not conditional. The asymmetrical nature of the employment relation combines with the nature of competition to create the conditions whereby employers can exert implicit or explicit pressure on workers to provide unconditional recognition to consumers. Employers demand this not on the (legitimate) grounds that consumers are persons and as such command it; nor on the (legitimate) grounds that consumers might have done anything to warrant this recognition; but on the (illegitimate) grounds that they are consumers. Indeed, workers are often asked to provide unconditional recognition even when the consumer behaves in a totally inappropriate manner – as we saw above in cases where dignity was violated.

Moreover, no amount of pressure on workers to respect the sovereignity of the consumer will make the worker really recognise the consumer if there are no grounds for this to happen – although a charade may be maintained. Korczynski & Ott (2004: 588) make a distinction between empathy and deference, suggesting that the consumer-driven forms seek to 'structure and encourage' empathy in 'training and socialisation. The problem, however, is that empathy (but not deference) requires conditional recognition and the latter requires grounds which may or may not be forthcoming: if these grounds are not forthcoming, then empathy cannot prevail and what might result instead is mere deference, at best a charade.

Consider another piece of advice to businesses from *Spacia*.

> Use your person-to-person skills: it is often the small things that can seal the deal. Greet the customer as if you are pleased to see them, at all times - even if you're having a bad day! Learn (and remember) their name and start using it as soon as possible. The personal touch may sound like a cliché but if it is, then it's one that works, and one customers appreciate. Show a personal interest – there's always time to discuss non-

business matters. Most customers enjoy a bit of light-hearted, appropriate banter. And make sure you're a good listener as well.

This kind of advice is not only likely to result in mere deference, it also subjects workers to different, and sometimes conflicting, tendencies. Some workers are fully aware that their employer is likely to demand that they be pleasant to customers because it makes business sense. Yet, simply by being human, many workers will be pleasant to customers because this is just part of what is considered general politeness. Sometimes workers respond to demand that they be polite with cynicism as they realise their own dignity is being put in jeopardy.

The request, especially in consumer-driven firms, that workers respect consumers simply on the grounds that they are consumers, conflates unconditional and conditional recognition and turns recognition into something that is not freely given, and hence not recognition at all.

Mutual recognition among equals

> The development of a sense of self-worth therefore requires mutual recognition among subjects who are in a strong sense equal and free to exercise autonomy (Sayer 2005: 56).

> [R]recognition, is distorted by relations of domination. In relations amongst equals, where recognition is freely given, conditional recognition of someone's exceptional virtues may give rise to (conditional) deference, but this is of a different kind altogether from a deference within a relation of domination. I may defer to someone who has qualities I admire, where those qualities have in no way been achieved at my expense or anyone else's. But deferential behaviour of the subordinated towards the dominant…[implies] resentment of advantages and contempt. Even though the dominant may have certain admirable qualities, their reliance on the subordination and unreciprocated service of others is liable to taint admiration and deference from the subordinate (*ibid:* 62).

The ethos of consumer sovereignty and the customer-driven firm, deny mutual recognition among subjects who are in a strong sense equal and free to exercise autonomy. An atmosphere where the 'customer is always right (even when she is actually wrong) renders the worker a subordinate in the consumer-producer relation. Moreover, the worker loses dignity, self respect, may even be humiliated and may even be expected to put up with being humiliated.

Whilst workers are encouraged to defer to consumers, we should not make the mistake of thinking that workers are entirely passive and do not have ways of responding to awkward or bad-mannered customers. The Retailchoice.com (2005) survey lists several responses, including: mild sarcasm; overcharging; deliberately losing paperwork to delay the customer even more; finding customer's registration number and damaging their car later; running credit cards over the electronic de-tagger so the electronic strip no longer works; and spitting in a customer's mashed potato and rolling their

sausages on the floor before serving them. Whilst perhaps understandable, such responses are hardly conducive to human flourishing on the part of the worker, (clearly not on the part of the consumer) and may result in disciplinary action from the employer if he or she is aware of such responses.

Mutual recognition among equals does not, of course, mean that the related people are equal in every sense of the word, or are identical. It is often the case that recognition is granted by people in (legitimate but) unequal situations. A case in point is the teacher-student relation. Students are in a subordinate position for all sorts of reasons, without them necessarily refusing to grant conditional recognition to their teachers. Recognition is often granted because students admire certain qualities in their teachers. Conversely, teachers often realise they are in a superior position, without them necessarily refusing to grant conditional recognition to their students. Recognition is often granted because teachers admire certain qualities in their students. Indeed, the act of marking student's work is giving conditional recognition. This situation of legitimate inequality *with* mutual recognition between teachers and students can be abused, but it is certainly far from uncommon. But the consumer culture creeping into our universities, threatens to destroy this situation. Jamieson and Naidoo (2004: 14) grasp the point, writing:

> The consumerist model transforms relationships inside the university. The integrated relationships of students and academic staff, where learning was essentially seen as a joint activity with each playing multiple roles, is now rendered as a consumer nexus, and the joint endeavour now recorded as one where there are potentially oppositional interests (see also Baty & Wainwright 2005).

Customer-driven universities are likely to transform teachers (and administrators) into subordinates in a consumer-worker relation. Teachers (and administrators) will be expected to unconditionally defer to customers, thereby putting at risk the situation of mutual recognition between teachers and students.

Equality of moral worth

> Further, grounds for an egalitarian politics of distribution lie in an egalitarian politics of recognition: any arguments for distributional equality must ultimately appeal to criteria of recognition – that all are of equal worth (Sayer 2005: 65).

For workers to have dignity at work presupposes that they are treated as having moral worth, indeed, it presupposes that they are as morally worthy as consumers: this is why they ought not to be abused by consumers. Issues of *moral* worth, however, fall under the auspices of moral economy, whereas issues of *economic* worth, or, as it is more commonly known *economic value*, fall under the auspices of political economy. Whilst moral worth and economic worth/value are incommensurable, there is a tension between them that rarely surfaces because discussion of moral and political economy rarely occur together. Sayer does, however, discuss them together.

> Recognition of the level of discourse and attitudes is of course important, but it is not enough, and at worst may be tokenistic. It is easy for the dominant to grant discursive recognition and civility to the dominated or socially excluded; giving up some of their money and other advantages to them is another matter (ibid: 64).

If we were to ask a typical employer the question: Who is more worthy, the worker or the consumer? I feel sure the reply would be something along the lines of 'they are equally worthy.' Yet actions speak louder than words, especially under the pressure of adding value – as we saw with the *Specia* quotation above. Presupposed by any attempt to be a customer-driven firm is the idea that more value is added by focusing on the customer than the worker, necessarily meaning the customer must be more valuable, economically, speaking. Moral worth, is at best a secondary objective. Moral worth can, and most likely will, be reduced to a platitude when it conflicts with the primary objective of the firm. The demands of consumer sovereignty and the customer-driven firm necessarily mean that, platitudes notwithstanding, workers and consumers are not treated as being of equal worth.

Irrespective of employers, consumers may act perfectly properly in their dealings with workers, treating them as equals, while not being prepared to pay them enough so that they can be economically equal. In this case, equal recognition would be revealed as a sham via unequal distribution of income.

Exploring the contradiction

We have so far demonstrated that, to the extent that we as consumers accept (all or some of) this fetishized master discourse of consumers, consumption and consumer society, and act by orientating ourselves as consumer, negative consequences often follow for those workers producing the goods and services we consume. And yet there are contradictory forces at work because consumers sometimes reject all (or some) of this master discourse and often do care about the plight of those workers who produce the goods and services we consume. Let us consider two examples.

First, recent empirical work suggests that workers and consumers might actually relate to one another as moral agents, thereby aligning their interests. Bolton & Houlihan (2005) offer a nuanced account of consumers, dividing them into three types: (i) '*mythical sovereigns*' who seek to exercise their perceived right to demand not just service, but servitude from service providers, (ii) '*functional transactants*' who simply want to carry out a transaction in the simplest manner possible and (iii) '*moral agents*' who treat workers as human beings. Bolton & Houlihan are keen to point out that despite the master discourse, customers often treat both workers as fellow human beings, and this treatment is often reciprocated, as is evident in the following comment made by a customer:

> I must admit I find dealing with people over the phone difficult. I rang one day to sort out my insurance and felt quite put out by the whole experience. We were half-way through the list of never ending-questions and I must say I was doing a lot of sighing and so when

this girl on the other end of the phone says to me 'boring this isn't it?' I replied 'yes' straightaway. She then said to me 'well hon, if you think this is boring, think about doing it over and over again 50 times a day – now doesn't that make you feel better?' I had to laugh and agree with her. Yes she had made me feel better. It was the way she said it really (Derek, call centre customer, Bolton & Houlihan 2005, see also Carrier & Millar 1999).

This reciprocal treatment is, of course, not surprising if we accept the lessons from moral economy sketched above: workers and consumers often do grant conditional and unconditional recognition to one another, and this can be seen via acts of 'friendliness', 'empathy' or 'civility.'

Second, evidence suggests that consumers do care about workers, especially when the workers in question are performing sweated labour under appalling conditions in the developing world. Consider the public outrage when the actions of multi-nationals like Nike, operating supply chains that involved extremely low pay and appalling conditions, were made public. This is one area where the relation between worker and consumers has been explored, despite the distance between them. It does appear that consumers in the developed world are at least willing to recognise that their consumer interests in having cheap commodities, might conflict with the interests of workers in the developing world. If this were not the case, then there simply would be no fair-trade movement. It is important not to exaggerate the scale of this movement, but it is equally important not to dismiss it. Consumers in the developed world often feel morally obligated to at least try to alleviate the suffering of workers in the developed world and on occasion are prepared to initiate action ranging from consumer boycotts, to more explicit political involvement.

Prasad, Kimeldorf, Meyer & Robinson (2004) conducted an interesting experiment with (unknowing) consumers in the USA. They concluded that one third of consumers in the study were willing to pay ten percent more for fair trade products.[11] Incidentally, the fact that the fair trade movement is not bigger does not necessarily mean consumers in the developed world do not care about workers in the developing world; it could equally mean that they really do care, but they do not think fair-trade consumer actions are sufficient to make a difference. In cases like this, moral sentiments fail to manifest in moral actions because the requisite institutions are missing. As noted above, human flourishing depends upon a range of organisational forms such as democratic and empowering institutions through which we can manifest things like our political concerns.

The important point to note here is that this establishes a precedent: when it comes to workers in the developing world, we are often (quite rightly) prepared to exercise some kind of moral judgement and recognise that our wants as consumers might, at least in part, be responsible for their appalling pay and conditions. What is extraordinary is that the same kind of sentiments and actions are less likely to be found with respect to workers in the consumers' own countries, or even regions or towns. Interestingly

this case reverses the usual 'law of decreasing moral concern with distance' as people are more concerned with others of whom they have almost no knowledge.

These two examples demonstrate that we, as consumers, often do care about the plight of those who produce the goods and services we consume. Sometimes this is implicit, simply part of being human. Other times it is explicit, when for example, we insist on buying fair trade goods. Often we are simply ignorant of the consequences of our consumer actions. The problem, however, is that the master discourse does nothing to encourage these ethical predispositions or to tackle this ignorance.

Conclusion

The master discourse encourages us to fetishize consumption, consumers and consumer society, to the neglect of production, producers and the productive aspects of society. It encourages us to orientate ourselves one-sidedly, around the axis of consumption rather than the axis of production. It encourages consumers *and* workers to interpret the world through the lens of the consumer, not through the lens of the worker as well. Moreover, it encourages us to believe that consumption is not only good for us as individuals, it is good for the economy as a whole. Consumers should feel no shame or guilt when asserting their individual, perhaps even selfish, wants, because collective virtue arises from individual vices. And yet, this paper has raised serious doubts about this master discourse and the actions it engenders.

The paper has shown that from a moral economy perspective, the pursuit of human flourishing demands normative and evaluative judgements and actions about what we ought, and ought not, to do. It has raised an essential, moral, question: should our wants as consumers override the needs of workers (producers) for decent pay, pensions, working practices, working conditions, dignity and recognition at work? Would you, as a consumer of relatively cheap commodities, be prepared to earn the low pay, accept the appalling working conditions, experience the loss of dignity, or work the unsocial hours often necessary to provide these commodities cheaply? And if not, why would you expect someone else to? It has also shown that from a moral economy perspective, the pursuit of human flourishing demands normative and evaluative judgements and actions about what we ought, and ought not, to do.

What, then, ought we to do? Should we attempt to reverse the current discourse and simply replace consumer sovereignty with worker sovereignty? [12] After all, as Carrier & Haymen note:

> The interests of people-as-consumers…are presented as more uniform, universal and just than the interests of people-as-workers, presented as unjust, sectional self-interest (Carrier & Haymen 1997: 370 footnote 4).

Replacing consumer sovereignty with worker sovereignty and privileging workers over consumers ignores the point raised above, that most people, most of their working lives, are simultaneously consumers *and* workers or reliant on workers. If workers suffer because of the preoccupation with consumption, then reversing the situation would only lead to consumers suffering because of the new preoccupation with production and hence replace one problem with another. In addition, whilst we may be aware of the plight of workers, and may not want to cause them suffering, we do want the goods and services we consume, not only to be fit for purpose, but also to be delivered in a timely manner, by friendly and courteous people.

Instead of reversing the discourse perhaps we ought to try and sensitize each to the plight of all – irrespective of whether at any particular moment we happen to be working or consuming. One way of doing this is to expose the commodity fetishism that obscures the real relations between people – be they consumers or producers. Under conditions of commodity fetishism, and hence under objective conditions of capitalism, relations between people take the form of relations between people and things. Relations between worker and worker, and relations between worker and consumer (worker) are hidden, obscuring the fact that when we exchange money for a commodity we are actually exchanging our labouring activity for other persons labouring activity. We cannot, typically, see the workers 'standing in the shadows' as it were behind the commodities they produce or provide, so when we purchase commodities we do not enquire into the conditions of these workers. This is exacerbated by the fact that our purchases are undertaken in order to satisfy a want or need, not in order to provide workers with a decent income and/or conditions of work. It is these real, fetishized, marketized experiences that provide the objective basis in which the master discourse of consumers, consumption and consumer society is rooted. Highlighting the role of commodity fetishism in the conflict between worker and consumer may make it easier to see that there is indeed a person 'standing in the shadows' behind the commodities, and to see that this person, is a human being with needs just like us.

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[1] I have dropped the quotation marks and references to these commentators for ease of exposition.

[2] It is worth recording that my sympathies are more in tune with Fine & Leopold (1993); Fine (2000); Keat, Whiteley, Abercrombie (1994); Rosenthal, Peccei & Hill (2001) and Ransome (2005) who, whilst accepting that significant changes have occurred, are more sceptical about the alleged change from what is referred to as modern, producer society to a postmodern, consumer society. They, like me, are also worried by much of the postmodernism and/or poststructuralism shift in theorising.

[3] This message is often given another twist of legitimacy through a particularly selective, and arguably misleading, reading of Adam Smith. *Cf.* Heilbronner 1986.

[4] Whilst I accept their ideas about 'myth' and 'enchantment' I suspect their emphasis on management promoted consumer sovereignty is exaggerated, first because consumer sovereignty is only one of the sub-discourses at work here; and second, because it is generated by a series of agencies, not just managers.

[5] Human flourishing, necessarily I think, implies the flourishing of other non-human entities that we share the planet with - although human flourishing is the focus of this paper.

[6] There are, of course, other objections to policies to alleviate starvation or discrimination, but they do not, typically, invoke the naturalistic fallacy.

[7] I want to sidestep strong (idealist) social constructionist objections to my argument on the grounds that flourishing or suffering are not 'real' but are merely social constructs; they are merely whatever the dominant discourse defines them as; they are merely conventions. The plausibility of this idealist and relativist perspective is rooted in the (correct) observation that different cultures often provide different accounts of what constitutes suffering and flourishing. For realist defences against this, see Sayer 2000 and Fleetwood 2005)

[8] It is worth noting that the negative aspects of the working practices discussed below are very well known to those in the field, and very well documented. Because my intention is simply to draw attention to them, not to provide a detailed explanation of each one of them, I will simply provide some references for the interested reader from outside the field.

[9] Many workers have to deal with other temporally flexible practices such as: shift work, week-end work, (paid and unpaid) over-time, stand-by and call-out arrangements, temporary contracts and so on.

[10] See: Bergstrom & Storrie (2003); Burchell B. *et al* (2002); Edwards & Wajcman (2005); Heery & Salamon (2000) and Purcell et al (1999) view of flexibility and precariousness.

[11] Whilst the Fair Trade movement actually was initiated by people with moral intentions, and whilst it is used today by people with moral intentions, it has been usurped by western companies, whose ultimate aim is to make strategic use of the fair trade discourse to promote sales and boost profits; and instead of challenging consumer sovereignty, it legitimises it. See Johnston (2001: 4)

[12] The notion of 'producer sovereignty' is anyway tarnished by ideas, largely stemming from the experience of various command economies, about producers riding roughshod over consumer wants, and turning out inferior goods.

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