



The New 'Labour Aristocracy'? Aesthetic Labour In The Service Economy

Stream 24: (Re)Investigating Class in Service and Consumer Society

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Introduction

Korczynski (2002) in his recent review of human resource management in the service sector recognises that attempts to understand the nature of employment in the contemporary service economy have largely adopted two positions. On the one hand there are those who see it as the *servile* economy. For example, Rothman (1998: 134-5) argues that ‘in most cases...service workers occupy a role of implied subordination or even explicit subservience...“Customer” carries the connotation of being served and the right to define and direct the relationship. “Service” shares linguistic roots with “servant”, “servitude” and “slave”’ (cited in Korczynski, 2002: 135). On the other hand, there are the proponents of the information society, in which tertiary workers utilise their ‘thinking skills’ to manipulate symbols, ideas and identify and solve problems, being in this process ‘highly skilled, creative and increasingly autonomous’ (Castells, 1999: 45). As such they are the new ‘dominant class’. This position is evident in Bell’s (1974) seminal work on the post-industrial society and more recently in the many eulogies to the knowledge economy and network society (Despres and Hiltrop 1995 and Castells 1996 respectively). In many respects these, albeit rather archetypal, positions could be thought of as denoting a ‘pessimistic’ and ‘optimistic’ view of work and the workers who perform it in a service-dominated economy.

It is unsurprising then to see MacDonald and Sirianni (1996: 11) suggesting that ‘service industries tend to produce two kinds of jobs: large numbers of low-skill, low-pay jobs and a smaller number of high-skill, high-income jobs, with very few jobs that could be classified in the middle’. Indeed, in recognising this point as we have argued elsewhere (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001), knowledge work undoubtedly exists but the majority of current and future jobs in the service economy are much more redolent of the front line jobs which are often argued as being, low-skill, low-pay and inherently servile. Though we argue for an understanding of the contemporary service economy which recognises that most service work is likely to be in areas like retail, hospitality, call centres and financial services, we equally reject the notion that such work is likely to be inherently servile or redolent of what some think of as the ‘service proletariat’ (Bradley et al., 2000) or the ‘emotional proletariat’ (MacDonald and Sirianni, 1996)¹. That said, this notion of the ‘service’ or ‘emotional’ proletariat does have some purchase. For example, we would accept that service workers are often clearly stratified, usually on the basis of gender, race and class (for example, Leidner, 1993; Paules, 1991). Equally, job-holders are regarded generally as working class, with little or no academic qualifications and receiving on-the-job training to do the work (SOC, 1992).

Whilst we see merit in this description of much interactive front line service work as being relatively low status, we would also argue that this ‘traditional’ view fails to understand the potential for niche labour markets within this broader characterisation of front line, interactive service work. In this we agree with Korczynski’s analysis that argues that current attempts to present service work are simplistic, and we argue for a more nuanced understanding.

In particular, this paper will argue that our notion of aesthetic labour (Nickson et al., 2001; Warhurst and Nickson, 2001; Witz et al., 2003) and the workers who perform such labour offers one example of an emerging niche ‘style’ labour market in which the relationship between customer and employee is potentially more nuanced than a simple characterisation of servility would suggest. On the basis of our research we have identified three themes in the relationship of interactive service work, and particularly retail and hospitality. These themes are employee/customer subordination, parity and super-ordination, as Table 1 below illustrates.

Table 1 Typology of interaction

Interactive process	Relationship of employee to customer
Control by customer	Subordination
Correspondence with customer	Parity
Control or intimidation of customer	Superordination

At different times and for varying reasons, all interactive service jobs may manifest elements of the three relationships. The key issue is the weighting that can be accorded to these relationships for such jobs. This weighting will be shaped by the market positioning of the organisation, and the type of service encounter they aim to engender. As a corollary, this will also mean that the organisation will be looking for a ‘fit’ between their market positioning, human resource management strategies and the resultant skill set from their employees (and for a review of this issue within the hospitality sector see Nickson et al. 2002). For certain areas in interactive service work, notably retail and hospitality, this skill set increasingly relies on a range of ‘soft’ skills, including our notion of aesthetic skills, especially within the ‘style’ labour market or ‘high-end’ services. With the service encounter reconfigured, and shifts in employer needs and employee supply in the labour market, attitude and appearance become requisites of the work and employment of this aesthetic labour. As a consequence, in the first part of the paper, we show how employees combine elements of the latter two relationships to not only direct customers in the service encounter, ‘hold their own’ with customers and even sometimes intimidate them.

We develop this approach to reinterpret the place of certain groups of workers in the contemporary service economy by drawing explicitly on the notion of the ‘labour aristocracy’, and exploring this concept within the context of our research on aesthetic labour.

Generally, ‘labour aristocracy’ is offered as a term to capture the distinctiveness of a group of workers who were distinct and separate from other segments of the working and middle class during the development of industrial capitalism in the UK during the

nineteenth century (Crossick, 1978; Foster, 1974). The distinctiveness of this 'metropolitan...upper strata of the working class' (Steadman Jones, 1983: 63) was based on the possession of craft skill, higher income and employment security, underpinned by trade unionism. These workers were male, and their industries new and dependent on overseas markets (Foster, 1974). Much reference is then also made within the debates about the labour aristocracy to these workers' possession of certain ideological, cultural and social values, conditions and behaviours as well as their relations with other workers and class segments (Lummis, 1994).

Much of the work on the labour aristocracy has been within Marxist analysis of capitalism, industrial relations and class struggle and segmentation. One of the specifics within the debates focuses on whether or not this segment of the working class cooperated with and so was incorporated into capitalism or was in conflict and was an expression of the struggle against it (Foster, 1974). More broadly, however, the size, composition and function of the labour aristocracy has been questioned and a refined 'model' has been attempted with a number of sub-divisions (Lummis, 1994). Even the use and conceptualisation of the term has not gone unchallenged. Steadman Jones (1983: 62-3) claims it to be 'simplistic and misconceived'. He further notes that '...the use of this idea has been ambiguous and unsatisfactory. Its status is uncertain and it has been employed at will, descriptively, polemically or theoretically, without ever finding a firm anchorage'. According to Steadman Jones, Engels adopted the term 'from the everyday parlance of nineteenth century English trade union debate' and it was never developed in the writings of either Engels or Marx.² As a consequence it 'lacks precision' and is 'elastic' in use. Indeed, Steadman Jones argues that it is used as an explanatory device to fill a gap in understanding that is too easily over-stretched. In other words, as a term, it was adopted uncritically and then used to analyse the cultural institutions, political affiliations and work attitudes of the working class and the subsequent political dissolution of the power of the working class.

Steadman Jones does acknowledge that Foster's use of labour aristocracy as an explanatory device was experimental, and he also admits that the labour aristocracy existed. He suggests, however, that it existed more as a social and ideological phenomenon, with little material expression, for the *locus classicus* on which it was based was occupation specific – engineering. The term labour aristocracy, then, has cautious utility, requiring empirical analysis.

In this respect, we accept a definition of labour aristocracy as being a segment of employees holding working class jobs and who hold a privileged position, economically or socially, or both. As before, the type of jobs in the aesthetic labour market – waitering and shop work for example – are traditionally regarded as working class, generally requiring no academic qualifications for employment and receiving on-the-job training to do the work. Indeed, the retail industry has extremely poor take-up of even employer-driven Modern Apprenticeships (Winterbotham et al., 2003). We would accept that a large number of front-line, interactive service jobs may well be stratified based by gender, race and class – as indeed was the nineteenth century labour aristocracy. However we argue that with respect to class, the stratification is more complicated. A

number of jobs in the 'style' labour market or 'high-end' services allow for the mobilisation of a range of cultural and corporeal capitals. As such we develop the theme of aesthetic labour as a labour aristocracy in two ways, as input and output. With the first, input, the source of labour being employed is increasingly drawn from middle rather than working class backgrounds. Although our definition of aesthetic labour argues that the aesthetic is mobilised, developed and commodified by employers, it also accepts that these employers require a supply of particular embodied capacities and attributes at the point of entry. Aesthetic labour can, to some extent, be developed through training but it also requires the capitals mentioned above as prerequisites. These capitals are more obvious in young, middle class job applicants, and increasingly the 'style' labour market is drawing on workers from middle class suburbs, our case study of Glasgow suggests. With regard to the second, output, these workers, once employed, are economically and socially enhanced in relation to workers in non-style labour market jobs. For example, we will outline how our research, and others such as Pettinger (2002), reveals their remuneration and status to be distinct within the retail and hospitality industries.

This paper thus investigates the issue of class in contemporary interactive services. It does so by examining both work and workers in jobs in the 'style' labour market. Both aspects of the paper draw on an emerging body of research. With respect to the first, analysing aesthetic labour, it extends the understanding of the types of work involving employee and customer, arguing that notions of servility are too simplistic. In this respect, the paper highlights how the types of workers undertaking this work can no longer be regarded as homogenous in terms of class. Appreciation of both extends understanding of class in the contemporary service economy, particularly pointing to the need to reinvestigate and re-conceptualise the notion of class in front-line interactive service occupations.

The 'pessimistic' view of the 'service proletariat'

[Barbara, an essayist in her 50s, is working incognito in a range of bottom end front-line interactive service jobs in the US. Here she is working as a waitress at Jerry's, a restaurant attached to a budget hotel, serving steak and pizza.]

On the third night [the supervisor] pulls me aside abruptly and brings her face so close that it looks like she's planning to butt me with her forehead. But instead of saying 'You're fired,' she says, 'You're doing fine.' The only trouble is I'm spending time chatting with customers ... Furthermore I am letting them 'run me,' which means harassment by sequential demands ... She tries to say things in a nice way, but 'you get into a mode, you know, because everything has to move so fast.'

I mumble thanks for the advice, feeling like I've just been stripped naked by the crazed enforcer of some ancient sumptuary law: No chatting for *you*, girl. No fancy service ethic for the serfs. Chatting with customers is for the god-looking young college-educated servers in the downtown carpaccio and ceviche joints, the kids which can make \$70-\$100 a night. What had I been thinking? My job is to

move orders from tables to kitchen and then trays from kitchen to tables. (Ehrenreich, 2001: 35)

This experience of being a 'serf' within interactive service work is resonant of the traditional view of the occupational and class position of front line service workers that reflects a somewhat 'pessimistic' view of their place in society. For example, Rothman (1998: 169) is typical in suggesting that 'service work of all kinds has historically been low-status work, largely because of the connotations of servitude and inferiority. It has consequently been the province of people occupying second-class citizenship'. For example, in Leidner's (1991: 171) discussion of McDonald's, workers had to 'take on the role of interactive inferior, adjusting themselves to the styles and apparent preferences to their customers'. Any attempts by workers to assert themselves during the interaction were 'strongly discouraged'. Thus, although there has been some talk of the 'new' economy, most discussion of the service economy is more likely to adopt the view of Rothman, in which service work is seen as being inherently servile and low status: 'donkey work' rather than knowledge work (Warhurst and Thompson, 1999). This point about servility is particularly true of hospitality, one of the industries on which this paper is focussing. The work of Gabriel (1988) and Wood (1992; 1993) suggests that hotel and catering work is seen as lacking in status, in part because many of those who work in hospitality belong to social collectivities who traditionally have had limited social esteem and status, particularly in the labour market, such as women, the young and members of ethnic minorities. A further reason for this situation may well be the way in which organisations themselves have portrayed their employees. Paules (1991; 1996) talking about the restaurant industry notes how:

...modern service organisations must be charged with actively perpetuating the conventions of servitude and, in some cases, inventing new conventions that restate ties with the past...In promoting an image of server as servant to the public, the restaurant encourages customers to treat, or mistreat, the waitress as they would a member of a historically degraded class (1996: 269).

In support of this argument, Paules identifies several aspects in which organisations are complicit in the process of ensuring service is synonymous with servitude. Most importantly, she notes the importance of the physical setting of the restaurant, the costumes which waitresses wear and the linguistic conventions of service. Importantly, as well, Paules also locates these aspects within a historical context, to argue for continuity from domestic service in the past to the more commercialised, though still no less status-driven, contemporary restaurant industry. These aspects are now briefly discussed.

In terms of the physical setting Paules (1996: 266) notes how 'the architecture of nineteenth century houses reinforced class distinctions by ensuring physical segregation of master and servant...Similarly, in restaurants employees may be required to enter through the back door or don street clothes, and so assume the status of customer, if entering through the front door'. Moreover Paules notes how the demarcation between the server and served is markedly different, much as it was in the houses of the past. For example, the décor is markedly less salubrious in the back of house area of the restaurant.

Moving on to dress, Paules suggests that this is another area rich in symbolism. Most obviously this can be seen in the plain, often black and white, uniform which the waitress is forced to wear, a uniform which often brings to mind the maid of the past. Paules also argues that dress codes for waitresses which circumscribe, or forbid altogether, the wearing of jewellery have the 'same purpose as medieval decrees forbidding low-ranking persons to wear gold' (1996: 267). The last aspect of Paules work discussed here are the linguistic conventions of service, which sees the idiom of master and servant still being alive and well. Particularly important here is the etymological closeness of terms such as service worker and server/servant to servile, which Paules suggests '...contributes to the imagery of servitude by providing linguistic continuity between historically stigmatised and modern forms of service' (1996: 269).

Of course, as we noted earlier this characterisation of much front line interactive service work as being inherently servile and of low status is, to an extent, rather archetypal. For example, Bradley (2000: 145-6) recognises that:

The changing nature of the service-based economy increases the difficulty of locating particular occupations in class terms. There has been considerable disagreement among sociologists, for example, about the class situation of retail and clerical workers. This mixed experience, which may be referred to as 'class hybridity', leads to further confusion about identify and belonging.

It is interesting that Bradley specifically mentions retail here, as the class position of retail workers has arguably been rather more ambiguous, than that say of hospitality workers. Thus, although certain types of shop work have been seen as being working class, and of low status, other types are potentially more middle class (and see Smith, 1982 and Wright Mills, 1956 for a discussion of this issue). Clearly, then, there is room for greater ambiguity than a simple characterisation of all front line interactive service work as being inherently servile, a point we will address again shortly. Nevertheless, there is clearly much support for the more pessimistic view of service work as being of low status and characterised by servitude and for many this has a number of implications for society as a whole. MacDonald and Sirianni (1996: 16) ask, for example two key questions, 'How can we serve and still be recognised as equal citizens? Can we develop a civic culture that it up to the challenges of a post-industrial world without transforming the culture of the service workplace?' In response, they answer their questions by offering a rather pessimistic vision of a future society, which is dominated by service work. Thus, this bleak view considers that the 'asymmetry in the exchange of respect is often built into structural features of service work...And since much of our public life occurs in service settings in which we are actors and witnesses in this asymmetrical exchange of respect, the fabric of our civic culture – indeed, ordinary civility – is vulnerable' (ibid.: 17). Thus, the pessimistic view suggests that workers are subordinate to customers and have little or no capacity to shape the interaction subsuming their own identities and attitudes. It is jobs of this type which most readily seem to fit the typical 'working class' low-level, interactive service job as outlined by SOC (1992).

We do not necessarily share MacDonald and Sirianni's rather pessimistic outlook and would argue instead in support of Bradley et al. (2000) who see a rather more complex service economy than a simple dichotomy between the pessimists of inherently servile and low status interactive front line service work and the so-called knowledge workers of the new economy would suggest. In this sense we would argue for a recognition of something of a changing terrain more generally for service work, and specifically that 'aesthetic labourers' do not fit easily into the characterisation of service work as being inherently low status and servile. Indeed, more generally it may well be time for a reappraisal of what work means in the early twenty-first century, dominated as it is by jobs in the service sector, and particularly front line service jobs. To appreciate this point attention now turns to address the extent to which there may well be changes anyway in the nature of work and employment in the contemporary service industry, which in turn impact on issues such as class identity.

The changing terrain of the service economy and its impact on status and class

[A fictional character, Matt, is approaching his thirtieth birthday and reviewing his life. One thing that must change, he thinks, is his boring, samey clothes.]

On a rather reckless impulse – no doubt spurred on by an impending fit of melancholy – I walked into a clothes shop ... that from the outside seemed suitable hip and happening ...

In a fit of self-chastisement I threw caution and my blue/dark-only philosophy to the wind and grabbed a couple of brightly coloured shirts that caught my eye. I approached one of the shop's cooler-than-thou assistants who was sneering by the clothes racks. He was about twenty-one, with the body of a stick insect and wearing a shirt like the one I had in my hands. Now, because the intimidation by the trendy clothes-shop assistants was a new experience for me (although, from what Elaine had told me, it was a regular occurrence in women's clothes shops), I threw back my shoulders, sucked in my stomach, and asked him where the changing rooms were. He looked at me, his features only a notch or two down from a grimace, then shrugged and pointed me in the right direction. (Gayle, 2000: 78-9)

In this section of the paper we want to suggest that there is increasingly a need to reappraise work and employment in the contemporary service economy, as the above illustration indicates. Not only can interactive service jobs be potentially 'good' jobs, these jobs can involve a reconfiguring of the relationship between customer and worker, so that the status of the latter is ameliorated.

A recent polemical pamphlet – *Is New Work Good Work?* – from Andy Westwood of the *Work Foundation* (previously *The Industrial Society*) is particularly useful in setting the scene for any discussion about the potentially changing terrain of service work. In attempting to describe what might be thought of as the 'good' job, Westwood initially recognises the potential for a changing and dynamic situation in terms of the nature of the

economy generally and the jobs which are provided within that economy, including the now predominant service sector. He notes:

Assumptions and expectations about work have changed too. Labelling jobs as 'old' or 'new' or 'good' or 'bad' may ultimately be a rather fatuous exercise. In reality, all labour markets will always contain a mixture of all four elements and many more besides. After all, it may be stating the obvious that new jobs will include hi-tech, high-earning career jobs as well as low-paid manual jobs; the service sector will include jobs at Harvey Nicks as well as Homebase, and opportunities in Michelin-starred restaurants as well as McDonalds (Westwood, 2002: 1).

Clearly, Westwood is arguing for a more nuanced position than that of those who see the service-dominated economy as being likely to lead to inherently low status and servile jobs. Indeed, he is at pains to address the pejorative notion of the service economy being dominated by the 'McJob', a description of service jobs so famously coined by Douglas Coupland (1992) in *Generation X*³. This idea of the McJob could be thought of as being the most obvious expression of the 'pessimistic' view of front line service work, for as Westwood (2002: 3) notes, 'It has stuck fast in popular terminology, even assuming collective status for all such service sector occupations, not just those beneath the golden arches'. However, Westwood is concerned to avoid such a clichéd view of service work and instead notes how Asda, the supermarket chain, was voted as the best place to work in the 2002 annual survey of workplaces by *The Times* and the Department of Industry⁴. Whilst Westwood notes how Asda is now seen increasingly as a 'good practice' employer, he does also concede that old habits die hard and notes how the public perception of jobs in supermarkets, in particular, and by extension the service sector as a whole, do still struggle to attain cultural legitimacy in the eyes of the British public. This, he suggests, is especially the case when compared to the likes of the America, 'where consumerism and the jobs associated with it seem much more acceptable' (Westwood, 2002: 4, and see also Wood, 1997: 183-193 for a discussion of notions of cultural acceptability of hospitality work in areas such as South East Asia, mainland Europe, the US and the UK). In summary, Westwood's work is timely in arguing for at least a more nuanced view of service work.

The second aspect to understand the potentially changing nature of the service economy is the extent to which notions of servility may be breaking down. Although we have previously noted the work of MacDonald and Sirianni which questions the extent to which contemporary civic society is scarred by the 'asymmetry' of the interaction between service worker and those consuming the product, there may also be counter arguments about declining 'social distance'. Bell (1974) in his seminal work on the changing nature of society and economy utilises the metaphor of a game to denote the shift from a pre- to a post-industrial society. Thus, in the pre-industrial age the game was between man and nature; in the industrial epoch it was a game between man and fabricated nature; and, finally, in the post-industrial era it has become a game between persons.

In this 'game between persons' it is instructive to note the extent to which those playing the game have seen it from both sides, that is, as producer and consumer. This conflation of identity between producer and consumer has the potential effect to create correspondence between the two players in the game. In the industrial era, where there was a smaller service sector, there was less likelihood that those consuming the product would have ever been in the position of providing that product. However, with the predominance of service employment, and particularly interactive front line service employment, it is much more likely now that those consuming service products have also had experience of providing such service, thus workers are also consumers in the service 'game'. Baum (1997) discussing this idea within the tourism sector sees this as a process of 'democratisation', and talks of the declining 'social distance' between those providing and those consuming the service. He notes how this situation has changed considerably from the emergence of tourism, through the so-called 'Grand Tour' which was primarily for the aristocratic class, where the traveller and employee were totally detached in social, economic and cultural terms; to more of a situation where 'in theory at least, employee and guest are equal' (p. 96). Of course, and as suggested by Baum's caveat, this notion of equality is by no means a universal phenomenon and he recognises that certain sub-sectors of the tourism sector may still be characterised by a more servile relationship, noting how:

The master-servant relationship, at the root of the wide 'social distance' in tourism, has much less potency today than in the past in most parts of the developed world. Vestiges do remain in some sectors of the industry, particularly in the environmental trappings of some businesses such as cruise lines, hotels and restaurants where the service ritual may give the appearance of encouraging notions of servility (Baum, 1997: 96).

Baum generally though sees this process as leading to greater equality between employee and guest, as those consuming increasingly see the interaction with those providing the service in a relatively empathetic manner.

In the service game we would also argue though that employees can even intimidate the customer. The most obvious articulation of this manipulation has been in the emotional labour literature. A key feature of this literature is not only the necessity for workers to control their own attitudes and emotions but also those of customers. Bolton (2004), for example, argues that emotion work should be regarded as a skill. Recasting the debate, she concludes that emotion work should be regarded as a distinctive form of skilled work and that the employees in interactive services, for example, should be acknowledged as multi-skilled emotion managers. Similarly, Leidner notes that her insurance workers also have to take on the role of interactive inferior, in stark contrast to workers in McDonald's these insurance workers were expected to assert themselves in their relationships with customers. They were, Leidner (1991: 117) states:

...taught that their job was to establish and maintain control in interactions with prospects. They were told that they controlled their own destinies and were urged to cultivate the qualities of aggressiveness, persistence, and a belief in themselves.

While success might require that they take on a deferential manner, it was seen as a matter of skill in manipulating situations, not as servility....

In terms of the customer-employee interaction, the employee may increasingly be expected, or choose, to now be superordinate in the interactive process. At its most extreme this control goes beyond benign management to the intimidation of customers. For example, call centre workers can intimidate customers, as revealed in Taylor's (1998: 96) account of telephone sales agents in the Newcastle area of the UK: 'It really annoys me when it's obvious people are just ringing up for information ... I love to fuck about with them. If it is someone from outside the area, I lay the accent on really thick. You can hear them getting embarrassed when they have to say pardon all the time.'

In a similar vein, in the hotel industry a growing number of 'chic' hotels are intentionally more hostile than hospitable, according to Keats (1997). As one customer stated 'they [the staff] are daring to be rude because they know this place is hot and trendy'. Staff dressed in designer suits are encouraged to be themselves, jettisoning servility. The manager of one such hotel, the Mombrian outlined the difference expected in the interaction between his employees' and even those of luxury hotels, 'when you go to a Ritz Carlton or a Four Seasons it's "yes sir, yes mam". We don't do that here' (quotes from Keates, 1997: 12). Customers are treated with disdain and employees, due to their looks, also intimidate customer. According to Keats these hotels outperform the market with much higher occupancy rates as well as higher prices.

A contextual feature of this shift to employees' correspondence with customers and even control or intimidation of customers is the changing labour market for the service sector, and particularly in the areas of hospitality and retail. At one level, there may be an argument to be made that those who would have accessed traditional working class labour markets in the past, in areas such as manufacturing, are now having to find employment in low level service jobs, which are characteristic of the pessimistic McJob/'service proletariat' view of the service economy. A further issue, though, worthy of note here is the increasing number of students entering the labour market. Curtis and Lucas (2001) in a recent review of this issue note how over 1 million students were active in the labour market in 2000, and that projections suggest that by 2011 there will be a further 156,000 more students than in 2000 (and see also Taylor et al., 2000). Importantly, both Curtis and Lucas and Taylor et al. also note that when students do work it tends to be in areas like retail and hospitality, such that 'student employment in these industries is now considered to be structural rather than casual' (Curtis and Lucas, 2001: 39). Curtis and Lucas note that students have become increasingly popular with employers in hospitality and retail because they are considered to be good quality labour – they are perceived by employers as being articulate and having good customer care skills – highly flexible and, importantly, not too costly. A further aspect to students popularity with employers' is that 'a young workforce appears to be popular with those retail and catering establishments attempting to attract young customers and wanting to portray a youthful corporate image' (p. 41). Clearly, this latter point has a good deal of resonance with our notion of aesthetic labour and we will develop this point more fully later in the paper. At this point though, we would argue here that students, who are often

middle class, are attractive to employers because of the reasons outlined above, but additionally we would also suggest their inherent cultural capital makes them highly desirable as a source of labour.

The above discussion suggests that there is increasingly a need to reconsider the largely dominant view of interactive front line service work, which sees it characterised as inherently servile and low status. Much of the above discussion is largely concerned with a rather general discussion of a potentially shifting service economy, which is rather more complex than simple descriptions reliant on a ‘pessimistic’ view would allow. At this juncture, then, we would like to consider this question in a rather more specific manner by arguing that increasingly what we have previously identified as the ‘style’ labour market, provides a very explicit example of the need to develop a more nuanced view of contemporary service work, and the class connotations which surround it. To begin to do this, we firstly consider the broader implications of what many consider as the increasing ‘designification’ of everyday life.

Designed for Life: Aesthetic and Aestheticising Labour

[A fictitious UK Prime Minister is travelling the country incognito, accompanied only by his bodyguard, Jack, and a taxi driver, Ali. They arrive late at night at a boutique hotel in a northern English city that has regenerated itself as a regional service hub.]

The Prime Minister pursed his lips in disapproval – they were in fact pulling up outside The Falls, a converted grain warehouse that sprawled alongside a canal. Jack booked Ali and asked him to pick them up at 0-ten-hundred hours. The weir that gave the hotel its name could be heard as Jack and the Prime Minister walked along the wet cobbles to the front door. A night porter called Norman let them in and switched on the futuristic-style gas fire in the minimalist fireplace in the reception area.

While Jack registered the Prime Minister took one of two dozen red apples that had been arranged in a pyramid shape in a glass bowl. Norman frowned at this; it was understood by the clientele of The Falls that the tower of apples was an *object d’art* and that only a fool would take one and eat it. (Townsend, 2002: 126)

This shift to services is altering urban economies in the UK, particularly in areas previously dominated by the manufacturing sector. A number of cities are re-inventing themselves as regional service sector hubs, for example Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle. Glasgow is another such city. With the demise of shipbuilding, and its locomotive and engineering industries, the city has reinvented itself as ‘post-industrial’.⁵ The city’s new economy is based on business and financial services, retailing and wholesaling, and hotels and catering. Although examples are drawn here from Glasgow to discuss the emergence of what we have termed the ‘style’ labour market, we would argue that the issues are equally important in other restructuring urban economies. In this respect, Bennett (1998: 12) argues that a ‘designification of the UK’ is underway in which it is ‘now more common to sit on puce Arne Jacobsen Ant chair when you go out

than a beer-stained, ripped leatherette bar stool.’ This emphasis on presentation and image envelopes employees too, as one sushi bar employee stated; ‘We have all had a talk on Issey Mikaye grooming standards’ (Sweet, 1997: 3).

We focus here on the retail and hospitality industries, involving face-to-face and voice-to-voice interaction. We acknowledge that other industries, such as the call centre industry, also rely on employee aesthetics, with management concerned, for example, with the voice and accents of employees (see Bain 2001; Nickson et al., 2001). We draw on retail and hospitality here because these industries are at the forefront of this designification. As Wylie (1998: 7) notes; ‘Individualism in the hotel business is coming up for air again after two decades of domination by soulless, faceless mega-chains such as the Hiltons, Mariotts and Holiday Inns.’ Instead style-driven ‘lifestyle’ hotels are opening, often established by new, independent entrepreneurs; Sir Terence Conran’s Great Eastern Hotel in London for example. Similarly, in retailing, creating ‘brand environments that deliver powerful brand experiences’ has become the ‘must have’ marketing tool. Plus, with e-tailing, if shopping is to retain a physical presence at all, it must provide an experience that cannot be attained through a PC. The response is to incorporate terrazzo lobbies into retail space, for example. Nike Town in London’s Regent Street is even offered as a town-within-a-town, a ‘brand cathedral’ concerned to showcase a lifestyle through its interiors design (*Marketing*, 2000: 23). In essence, what is being sold is an experience and a set of emotions. And as emotions and experiences become commodified – a coffee experience, a hotel experience, a retail experience – then employees, particularly those on the front line, need to become part of the product and the experience.

This commodification of employees’ style and the fit of that style with the image of the employing organisation is, what we have termed aesthetic labour. Essentially, such labour is seen as a supply of embodied capacities and attributes possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment. Employers then mobilise, develop and commodify these capacities and attributes through processes of recruitment, selection and training, transforming them into ‘competencies’ and ‘skills’ which are then aesthetically geared towards producing a ‘style’ of service encounter deliberately intended to appeal to the senses of customers, most obviously in a visual or aural way. Although analytically more complex, ‘looking good’ or ‘sounding right’ are the most overt manifestations of aesthetic labour. (For further and more detailed empirical and conceptual accounts of aesthetic labour see Nickson et al., 2001 and Witz et al., 2003 respectively). In essence, then, with aesthetic labour employers are seeking employees who can portray the firm’s image through their work, and at the same time appeal to the senses of the customer for those firms’ commercial benefit.⁶

Our research of Glasgow has identified a ‘style’ labour market which appears to be a distinct niche. This ‘style’ labour market is much more redolent of ‘high-end’ services, such as designer retailers, boutique hotels and style bars, cafes and restaurants. The study had three research foci. Firstly, it examined the personal physical capacities and attributes demanded by employers at the point of entry to employment. Secondly, it examined how these capacities and attributes were developed by employers through training and

regulation. Finally it explored how the capacities and attributes featured in the actual work of employees as they interacted with customers. The findings of this study are fully reported in Nickson et al.(2001). In short, the study found that the need to look good and sound right did exist and was very important to employers, especially in the 'style' labour market niche. These employers believed that having staff that look good and/or sound right not only helped companies create a distinct image on the high street but also provided competitive advantage for these companies in the crowded retail and hospitality industries. The study revealed that companies in the service sector desired and developed employees who could become the physical embodiment of the image and 'personality' of those companies. As one respondent stated about her company's recruitment and selection, they wanted: '...people that look the part...fit in with the whole concept of the hotel'. In the 'style' labour market workers are employed because they fitted in with the image of the company. In the recruitment literature of one boutique hotel within the study, it was a person not a job description, asking prospective employees to assess themselves by the thirteen words that were claimed to characterise that companies image, stylish and tasty, for example. Job advertisements featured key phrases such as 'well spoken' and 'of smart appearance' and 'very well presented'. Recruitment sometimes involved the submission of photographs by applicants. Aesthetic labour is not only concerned with getting into a job, but doing the job as well. A common theme that emerged was the extent to which organisations through training sought to mould people into the desired personas. Management also policed the appearance of employees, one company had a 'grooming standards committee' or in the words of one of its employees, 'the uniform police'. Whilst being aesthetic could be mobilised and developed it was at the point of entry that being aesthetic mattered most. To this end the retail and hospitality organisations in the study, particularly those in the 'style' labour market, tended to recruit young middle class persons already possessing the requisite cultural and corporeal capitals, as suggested by Bourdieu (1984). This development in relation to the importance of cultural capital in industries such as retail is also noted by Crang and Martin (1991: 106):

...customer contact staff are part of the product itself...the cultural and social background of employees is [] used by employers as a criterion of selection and discrimination: as one manager of a fashion retail store said to us, the residential origin of his employees is an important consideration: none came from the large council estates in...the city as they were not the "right kind of people" he was looking for. They lacked the "cultural capital"...to display and sell the middle class clothes in the store.

This display as work and the employment of particular employees appears to be particularly apparent in 'high-end' services: 'Take a look at the jet set's favourite hotels...Staff wear all-black Versace with specially designed gold-printed ties or scarves...It might not be your style, but the staff sure do look good – so good that they are dangerously close to inverting the rules of status. These days, the people you are paying to serve might just show you up' (Forte, 2002: x) and see Box 1 overleaf.

Box 1: Examples of style in well-known hotels and restaurants

Mercer Kitchen – New York, waiters in Isaac Mizrahi slate-grey leather t-shirts.
The Metropolitan – London, everyone from the maids to the concierge are dressed in Giorgio Armani, ‘the unquestionable king of the classic, navy look’.
Met Bar – London, ‘staff parade in trendier pieces – most recently, tops and leather trousers with leather strap details; previously aubergine backless blouses. And the uniform changes each week during fashion week in February’.
Cafeteria – New York, waiters’ uniforms change with fashion season and recently moved from Dolce and Gabbana to sport Club Monaco.
Steam – London, Havery Nichols’ Nicolas Oakwell designed the staff uniforms.

Other examples of designer clad staff include: Armani at Nobu, Rebecca Moses and Calvin Klein at Spoon+ in the Sanderson Hotel, Asia de Cuba in St Martins Lane Hotel and Hussein Chalalyan at Hakkasan. As Forte (2002: x) notes ‘such uniforms don’t just pass the test with the most aesthetically conscious crowd; those wearing them also up the fashion ante, oh so casually, while setting down that second bottle of brouilly’.

From: Forte (2002).

This point is also developed in Pettinger’s (2002) work on retail and the ‘snobbery’ of those who work in organisations such as French Connection, compared to the other organisations in which she conducted her research, such as Dorothy Perkins and Top Shop. The difference between these various brands would seem to be largely explicable, according to Pettinger, by the branding strategies adopted by the organisations she studied:

I would contend that the organisational aesthetics of the firms I looked at are class based, contingent upon the marketing/lifestyle strategy of the firm which is underpinned implicitly by distinctions based on class [and other social categories such as gender, age and ethnicity]...Within the organisational and institutional framework of market-driven bureaucratic capitalism, workers are used not just for the use value of their labour, their actions, but also for their implicit cultural value/capital (Pettinger, 2002: 4).

Thus, French Connection, and especially their fcuK brand, is suggested as being very successful in their promotion of a young, sexy, fashionable and well-styled image. As a consequence she suggests it ‘has some status as an aspirational brand, signalled by it being able to sell logo products’ (p 11). Importantly, as well, this also has an impact on who can work in French Connection, and the class and status connotations which may be derived from working in such a setting. Thus, although Pettinger notes how shop work is a low status occupation, the image of French Connection has the effect of enhancing the status of the employees. Moreover, this is also an important point in terms of their relationship with consumers of French Connection products. As Pettinger (2002: 12) notes, ‘workers without French Connection style would look out of place. Showing how the clothes are to be worn and how the customer could look is a way of advertising the

products, but it may also intimidate potential customers and only works if the workers suit the style'. Key to this as well is the extent to which workers are utilising aesthetic labour. Pettinger offers an interesting development on our work in suggesting a difference between aestheticised workers and those genuinely engaging in aesthetic labour. For the former, the extent to which they are 'made up' (du Gay, 1996) is rather less imposing than for those who would be considered much more redolent of the 'style' labour market. Thus, Pettinger believes that those workers working in the mass market, mid-price brands were rather more aestheticised labour, rather than aesthetic labour. For example, they would often have a literal uniform, which identified the store and were less likely to be wearing current stock, which was much more likely in French Connection, where employees would 'model' the current stock to create a style identity which consumers could potentially aspire to. The differences between aestheticised and aesthetic labour were also seen in terms of appearance standards, wherein the standards at the likes of Dorothy Perkins were less likely to be adhered to compared to French Connection.

In summary, what we have suggested in this section is an increasing designification of parts of the service sector, which in turn means that aesthetic requirements are increasingly a major part of what organisations are seeking in their front line staff. These requirements can differ between those employees who are aestheticised, and those who are expected to explicitly engage in aesthetic labour. In crude terms this can be seen as the difference between more prosaic service providers and those providing so-called 'high-end' services, such as up market fashion retailers, designer bars and restaurants and boutique or 'lifestyle' hotels. It is the latter group of workers, those engaging in aesthetic labour, with which we are most concerned. We argued that this group of workers make up a niche within the broader service sector labour market, what we have termed the 'style' labour market. We also suggested that this group of workers can be thought of as quite distinct, especially in terms of their status and relationship to customers. In particular, this group of employees is much more likely to 'hold their own' or even intimidate customers, a process which is explicable to a large extent by the cultural and corporeal capital that they can bring to their work.

Conclusion and discussion

In this paper we have attempted to outline and reappraise work and employment in the contemporary service economy, and the status and class position of workers within that. We have argued that the pessimistic view of jobs within this economy is too narrow and simplistic. Undoubtedly McJobs exist and management's attempts to control employees extends beyond these McJobs. However, with regard to the relationship between customer and worker, rather than worker and management, it is evident that there is a wider range of possibilities. We acknowledge that some jobs in interactive services can provide 'good' work. We have also noted that the relationship between employees and customers is not entirely about servitude, but that employees can control and even intimidate customers in this relationship. Part of the explanation for this difference lies in the reconfiguration of work as part of a wider strategy by interactive service organisations to brand and differentiate themselves in competitive markets. Not unrelated

there is a shift in the nature of the labour market from which employees to this work are drawn. Our illustration of these two changes – to work and those who are doing it – has focussed on what we have termed aesthetic labour.

As for being labour aristocracy those workers in the ‘style’ labour market clearly do not have the craft skills. However, they do have skills requiring the utilisation of corporeal and cultural capital in the same way that Bolton argues that emotion work is skilled work, mobilising these capitals is also a skill. As we have argued elsewhere (Nickson et al. 2001) it is this skill which is most demanded by employers, particularly at the point of entry to employment. Moreover, in recognising the distinction between aestheticised labour and aesthetic labour, it those employees working in the ‘style’ labour market who clearly have to mobilise these capitals, both to secure and maintain their employment and to do their work. Of course, this recognition of this work as a skill rests upon an appreciation of the changing nature of skill in the contemporary economy (Warhurst et al., 2004). With regard to the income there is little evidence that indicates that these employees basic wage rates are significantly higher than mainstream interactive service jobs. However, it does appear that these workers do receive other forms of remuneration and so receive greater in-kind benefits, such as expensive, but free, clothing or make overs. On the issue of employment security, workers in ‘style’ labour markets – as across interactive service labour markets more generally – tend to have relatively transient employment. However, for the time being the ‘style’ labour market is tight, with demand outstripping supply. As with other workers in interactive services, trade union organisation is poor, or non-existent. That said, one of the points that we think ought to be salient about our use of the term labour aristocracy, in relation to aesthetic labour, is the need to disentangle work and employment. With the exception of marginally higher remuneration the terms and conditions of employment of aesthetic labourers are not hugely different, if at all, from workers in other areas of more prosaic interactive service work. Their work, however, is significantly different. And it is this work that involves and forefronts their segmentation within the labour market and, moreover, we would suggest the effect of this is not identification with the service proletariat, but rather an identity which is much more redolent of the labour aristocracy within services. We use labour aristocracy as a possible explanatory device because their seems to be stratification amongst interactive service workers, with those employed as aesthetic labour forming a distinct upper strata within jobs that have been traditionally regarded as working class. With this paper we have attempted to raise and conceptually explore this hypothesis. As above, and as before with debates about the nineteenth century labour aristocracy, empirical analysis is now required to explore these issues in much greater detail. Such empirical research can only add to our understanding of some of the potential changes in the class position and identity of the modern day service worker.

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Endnotes

¹ As a slight variant on this theme, Gorz (1982) in his work on the ‘death of the working class’ talks about the ‘post-industrial, neo-proletariat’. Indeed, Gorz’s views are even more pessimistic as to the fate of this neo-proletariat, noting how they have no job security, no class identity and are condemned to probationary, contracted, casual, temporary and part-time employment, with their jobs ultimately disappearing with automation

² It was Lenin who developed the term, but to explain the failure of internationalism amongst the working class (Lummis, 1994).

³ Coupland (1992: 5) talks about McJob as being ‘A low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who never held one.’

⁴ This is a newly established survey that began in 2001 (and see <http://www.bestcompanies.co.uk/>). The results are derived from a survey undertaken with employees to assess a range of things, including elements such as leadership, opportunities for personal growth and what employees think about pay and benefits. Interestingly in the years in which the survey has been running, Asda has performed consistently well and is one of the few companies which appears in the top ten for all the three years the survey has run. In 2001 it was 5th, in 2002 the company was 1st and this year it was 7th..

⁵ We note the problems and dangers in overly delineating between services and manufacturing in Warhurst and Nickson (2001). We also note that the use of the term ‘post-industrial’ to describe a service-based economy is problematic, for many labour processes within services can be ‘industrialised’, see for example Baldry et al.’s (1998) discussion of call centre work.

⁶ It is important to note that the form of aesthetic being offered may vary from one type of service organisation to another. The aesthetic of a stylish, boutique hotel will be very different from that of Harry Ramsden’s fish and chip restaurant.