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”. On the other hand, there are the proponents of the *knowledge-intensive* society, where so-called knowledge workers utilise their ‘thinking skills’ by manipulating symbols, ideas and solving problems. Many of these workers are involved in ‘front line’ interactions with customers, it is claimed, for example in call centres (Frenkel *et al.*, 1999).

For both positions, the focus is on *work*. For the first position, there is some appreciation of the *workers* doing this work. Service workers are clearly stratified, often on the basis of gender, race and class (for example, Leidner, 1993; Paules, 1991). Job-holders are regarded as working class, generally with no academic qualifications and receiving on-the-job training to do the work (SOC, 1992). The second position, only examines work, and the workers themselves are absent, except in discussion of intra-organisations social relations in production. This paper examines both work and workers in the interactive services industries, principally retail and hospitality.

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 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 dualistic notion that such work is likely to be either inherently servile or empowered. This ‘traditional’ view of much front line service work 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 which 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) and the workers who perform such labour offers one example of a niche ‘style’ labour market in which the relationship between customer and employee is potentially more nuanced than a simple characterisation of servility and/or empowerment would suggest. On the basis of our existing research we have identified three themes in interactive service work that are so far under-appreciated and that both overlap and, importantly, extend the dualism. These themes are employee/customer direction, equality and intimidation. With the service encounter reconfigured, 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 workers can: firstly, direct customers in the service encounter or, secondly, ‘hold their own’ with customers within it or, thirdly, even intimidate customers.

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 with our current and new research on aesthetic labour. As Steadman Jones (1983) notes much of the work on the labour aristocracy has been within a Marxist analysis of capitalism, industrial relations and class struggle and segmentation, particularly within Victorian Britain. Equally 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’ (p. 62). That said, much of the argument about the idea of the labour aristocracy rests on the distinctiveness of a group of workers who were distinct and separate from other segments of the working and middle class (Crossick, 1978; Foster, 1974). Such distinctiveness was in part based on higher, more stable earnings, though within debates about the labour aristocracy others also point to ideological, cultural and social values. In this respect, we accept a definition of labour aristocracy as being a group within the ‘working class’ that hold a privileged position, either economically or socially, or both. As before, the type of jobs in the aesthetic labour market – waitering and shopwork 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.

We would accept that a large number of front line, interactive service jobs may well be stratified based by gender, race and class. However we argue that with respect to class, the stratification more complicated. A number of jobs in the ‘style' labour market or ‘high end’ services allow for the mobilisation of a range of social, economic, 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. Thus aesthetic
labour can, to some extent, be trained 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. Our research reveals their remuneration and status to be distinct. This point is also developed in Pettigrew’s (2002) work on retail and the ‘snobbery’ of those who work in organisations such as French Connection. Her workers also benefited from the potential for in-kind benefits, such as free clothing or make-overs.

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 servility and empowerment approaches are too simplistic. In respect of the second, 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 service occupations.

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