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'Subterranean Worksick Blues': Humour as Subversion in Two Call Centres

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Abstract

This article engages in debates stimulated by previous work published in *Organization Studies*, and more widely, on the purpose and effects of workers' humour and joking practices. The authors emphasize the subversive character of humour in the workplace, rejecting perspectives which see humour as inevitably contributing to organizational harmony. Drawing on methodologies, including ethnography, which permitted the authors to penetrate the organizational surface of two call centres, rich evidence of satire and joking practices were uncovered. While long-acknowledged motives were revealed, particularly relief from boredom and routine, workers' use of humour took novel, call centre specific forms. Overwhelmingly, though, humour contributed to the development of vigorous countercultures in both locations, which conflicted with corporate aims and priorities. However, the particular combinations of managerial culture, attitudes to trade unionism and dissent, and the nature of oppositional groupings helped impart a different character to humour between the two call centres. At Excell, the presence of a group of activists seeking to build workplace trade unionism in circumstances of employer hostility was a crucial contrast. These activists were instrumental in their use of humour, aware that it helped make the union popular and served to weaken managerial authority. This evidence, that subversive satire can be allied to a wider collective union organizing campaign at workplace level, makes a distinctive contribution to the recent literature on organizational humour.

Keywords: call centres, labour process, humour, trade unions, resistance

Introduction

In the late 1990s, UK strike activity fell to record low levels, according to the government's three measurement criteria (Davies 2001: 302). Further, despite slight increases in recent years, the long-term decline in trade union membership is statistically established (Hicks 2000). Consequently, much managerial and academic writing has concluded that the weakening of organized labour, combined with the effects of new systems of 'panoptic' surveillance or 'involving' human resource management practices, have taken together created cowed or contented workforces. From either perspective, conflict and misbehaviour have all but disappeared from the contemporary workplace.

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However, given the difficulty of imputing *behaviour* from strike statistics (Blyton and Turnbull 1998: 288), it is presumptuous to infer that workplaces are harmonious or conflict-free, particularly if the definition of conflict includes a range of activities short of strike action. Nor can union decline be taken to be 'synonymous with the disappearance of workplace resistance and conflict' (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999: 146). Proclamations of the death of resistance may emanate from those with little contact or affinity with the lives of real workers, or understanding of the workplace experience. Reeves (2001: 188) exemplifies this reality avoidance, asserting that work is 'the happy pill' and that employees, 'holding the means of production in their heads, are working with enthusiasm, ambition and with themselves nominated as chief beneficiaries'.

We agree with a diverse range of authors who have emphasized the persistence of oppositional practices, continuing union relevance, and 'the resilience of adversarialism' (for example, Thompson and Ackroyd 1995; Bradley et al. 2000). Further, even when conflict or overt resistance are not manifest, the presence of oppositional attitudes, culturally and socially, have been confirmed (Stephenson and Stewart 2001). Kelly (1998) has described the typical workplace as one in which employee discontent has grown along with distrust of management, while Bryson and McKay (1997: 28) have demonstrated that there has been a significant underlying deterioration over time in employees' perceptions of workplace relations.

In common with much of our earlier call centre research, we adopt here a conceptual framework derived from core labour process theory (LPT). Thompson and Smith's (2000: 56–57) identification of core elements of LPT includes the necessity for a control imperative in the labour process, in order for capital to secure profitable production and to translate labour power into actual labour and a surplus. Further, we accept the view that the social relations between capital and labour in the workplace are of 'structured antagonism', although capital's requirement to generate some degree of creativity and cooperation from labour means that in response, worker resistance overlaps and coexists with accommodation, compliance and consent. In essence, though, the workplace is a contested terrain. These theoretical underpinnings have informed our specific analysis of work organization and management control in call centres. We conclude that call centres embody novel and extensive forms of control, albeit reflective of the enduring influence of scientific management (Bain and Taylor 2000; Taylor and Bain 1999; Taylor et al. 2002). It is also argued that much call centre work is experienced as repetitive, intensive and frequently stressful.

We continue to reject the simplistic and mistaken application of the 'electronic panopticon' metaphor to the call centre, in which supervisory power has been 'rendered perfect' and worker resistance is nullified (Bain and Taylor 2000; Fernie and Metcalf 1998). Equally unconvincing to us is the post-Foucauldian version of LPT theory (for example, Knights and McCabe 1998), which reduces the possibilities for resistance to highly individualistic and self-contained acts, where workers can seek only 'spaces for escape'. In contrast, our research has uncovered manifold and vigorous

forms of individual, quasi-collective and collective resistance (Bain and Taylor 1999, 2000; Taylor and Bain 1999, 2001, 2003) rooted in part in the experience of work in this 'unique working environment' (HSE 2001). Discontent with the experience of task performance, employment conditions and the 'managerial regime' certainly underlay the manifestations of workers' humour from the two call centres on which this article is based. The rich evidence of creative and subversive humour presented here contributes further to the case against those who believe that all workers can do is consent to totalizing systems of surveillance and control which preclude divergences from managerially defined norms of behaviour (for example, Sewell and Wilkinson 1992).

A brief review of the workplace humour literature will be followed by an explanation of the methodologies employed, based upon a recognition that unearthing workers' humour requires researchers to dig beneath the organizational surface. We then focus on the case study contexts in order to embed the patterns of workplace humour in the specific contexts of work organization and the employment relationship. It is suggested that the particular form that humour takes depends on the interaction between 'managerial regimes' and the degree and nature of worker self-organization. Although there are similarities, in that both case studies are 'low trust', 'high regulation' regimes, differences also exist. At Excell, the regulation of the labour process was more extensive than at 'T', and management was more strongly opposed to trade unionism and employee dissent. A key contrast was the presence, at Excell, of a group of activists engaged in the wider project of building a union. These differences tended to influence the style, character and purpose of humour in the two locations.

The observation that much contemporary workplace humour has a 'corrosive content', 'being targeted more consistently on managerial activities' (Ackroyd and Thompson 1998: 1) is confirmed by our findings. However, evidence from Excell suggests an additional dimension to satire and joking that has yet to be fully acknowledged. A group of workers consciously used humour simultaneously to undermine management and to advance trade union organization. This article, therefore, builds on Rodrigues and Collinson's study (1995) in this journal of the utilization of humour in a Brazilian trade union newspaper, *The Goat*. While they examine the relatively formalized way in which a union used humour 'to highlight inconsistencies in managerial practices and to resist [a] corporate culture campaign' (Rodrigues and Collinson 1995: 758), we delve deeper by exploring the relationship between union organizing and humour at the informal, workplace level.

Considerations of Humour

As Collinson (1988) and Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) observe, workplace humour has long been acknowledged as an important form of behaviour. Ethnographic research has uncovered its persistence, although frequently as an unintended by-product of broader studies (Roy 1958; Lupton 1963).

However, little agreement exists on the overall purposes and effects of workplace humour, although many commentators do not regard humour as subversive or even potentially so. Collinson (2002) refers to Radcliffe-Brown (1965), who believed humour contributed to consensus and harmony by defusing conflict and acting as a safety-valve, and highlights the influence of the functionalist tradition, which rejects the possibility that workplace humour can be radical in its intentions or effects (for example, Bradney 1957; Coser 1959). Hay (2000) provides a recent example of the continuing search for the 'functions' of humour. Others have argued prescriptively that humour can be a useful management tool (Barsoux 1993) and that in the contemporary workplace, managers might usefully utilize humour to motivate employees (Deal and Kennedy 2000).

Even writers from a more radical and critical tradition have argued that humour acts to defuse tension and sustain hierarchical social relations:

'Joking at work plays an important regulatory function by providing a means of expression that assists group cohesion, deflects attention from the dehumanising aspects of work and acts to preserve the existing power hierarchy. In this sense, humour is a vital factor in obscuring the social relations of production, and suppressing the alienating tendencies of work.' (Noon and Blyton 1997: 159–160)

In contrast, several authors dissent from these views. Linstead (1985) concluded that humour is often closely related to manifestations of resistance and sabotage, creating an informal world outside the strictures of managerial control. Collinson's seminal study (1988) suggested that joking was one way in which work groups defined their identity, distinct from management and other employees. There were three dimensions to workplace humour: resistance, conformity and control. Collinson insisted there were limits to humour as resistance, as it expressed male identities, and a preoccupation with masculinity meant that, ultimately, the bonds established between the workers he studied were superficial. Consequently, Collinson valuably cautions against attempts to romanticize workers' use of humour, and not to neglect sexist, racist and other divisive forms which might serve to undermine humour's radical potential. In short, he argues, workplace humour is contradictory, combining elements of both resistance and control, so that while often subversive, it can also be oppressive.

Ackroyd and Thompson (1998: 7) argue that 'applied humour' (aimed, targeted and making fun of someone) is most likely to be found in the workplace. Although the process by which jokes are applied is complicated, many have both butts (whoever the joke is about) and audiences (whom the joke aims to amuse or influence). They identify three types of applied humour (clowning, teasing and satire) differentiated in terms of distinctive butts, audiences, targets, contents and character, which they present as a typology of joking (Ackroyd and Thompson 1998: 17). They make a distinctive contribution to the debate by, first, developing four analytical categories of misbehaviour: disagreement over 'the appropriation of work', 'the appropriation of the materials used in work', 'the appropriation of time spent on work' and 'the extent to which employees identify with their work activity

and the employer' (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999: 25). This last category encompasses workplace humour and joking. Second, they argue that 'ironic, sardonic and satirical commentary on managerial initiatives ... endemic in Britain, have become in the current context, significant forms of misbehaviour' (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999: 10). The gap between managerial rhetoric claiming to prioritize employee opinion and unchanged work situations encourages cynical comment. For Ackroyd and Thompson (1998: 103) joking of this kind constitutes an increasingly prevalent 'undercurrent of satirical debunking of management pretensions'.

The case study evidence is analysed by reference to this critical theoretical context, and is informed by a rejection of the functionalist perspective and an acknowledgement of the subversive potential of workplace humour. Throughout a consistent attempt is made to integrate empirical data with the conceptual concerns of these critical authors.

Methodologies

In order to acquire data on, and develop insights into, workplace humour, it is necessary to access the rich fabric of social interaction between workers, and between workers and managers. Researchers must acquire an intimate knowledge of an organization's 'underlife' and gain a high degree of trust from workers. As Ackroyd and Thompson observe, 'Finding reliable evidence for misbehaviour has never been an easy task, if only because the tendency to misbehave is usually hidden' (1999: 100). An understandable suspicion that reports of misbehaviour might be relayed to management inhibits such acts being revealed to researchers. At both call centres, we were able to tune into the vital dynamics of workplace humour. Access to this 'hidden' world was achieved through contrasting methodologies.

'T' is one of four call centres studied in a project conducted under the Economic and Social Research Council's 'Future of Work' programme. The data utilized here comes from the period October 1999–May 2000, when researchers engaged in intensive observation of work processes; listening to calls while sitting alongside agents, and discussing the task performance, formed the main component of this fieldwork. Field notes recorded observations and included accounts of informal interviews with agents, supervisors and managers. Researchers had full access to 'shop floor' activities and, through sustained contact, gained the confidence of key informants. Consequently, the study of humour here draws mainly on ethnographic methods.

Research at Excell commenced in 1998. To date, studies have focused on surveillance, control and employee resistance (Bain and Taylor 2000) and the growth of collective organization (Taylor and Bain 2003). Research could not involve direct observation, but relied upon the contemporaneous testimony and recollection of workers interviewed off-site. This generated three qualitative data sets. The first consists of transcriptions of frequent meetings of a group of between four and twelve employees. In effect, these

are the proceedings of an informal, loosely structured committee, striving to build a union in circumstances of employer hostility, and whose debates and decisions were recorded against a background of conflict. The authors documented 27 such meetings between October 1998 and May 1999. Second, 15 concurrent interviews were conducted with agents, ex-employees and supervisors, exploring in detail perceptions of the labour process and employee relations. Third, from late 1999 into 2000, 10 interviews, each lasting two hours, were conducted with workers who were encouraged to reflect on the earlier period when they first organized themselves in the Communication Workers Union (CWU). These lengthy accounts by key informants generated thoughtful reflection on the purpose and effects of workplace humour. Although based on data from separate studies, the common organizational setting of the call centre enables pertinent comparisons to be made and contrasts drawn.

Case Study Contexts: Call Centres, 'Managerial Regimes' and Self-Organization

An important component of Ackroyd and Thompson's conceptualization is that 'distinct forms of misbehaviour are the characteristic artefacts of distinct managerial regimes' (1999: 75). This does not reduce workers' attitudes to a mechanical response to managerial initiative, for it is acknowledged that it is the dialectical relationship between managerial regimes and workers' self-organization which gives misbehaviour and humour their particular character. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the effects of different types of managerial regime.

Can a distinctive call centre regime be identified, and if so, what are the characteristics? Some early accounts of work organization in call centres treated them as if they were homogeneous. As we have seen, Fernie and Metcalf (1998) characterized call centres as regimes of all-encompassing electronic surveillance, in which employee resistance was impossible. However, it is increasingly recognized that, despite the common, defining integration of computer and telephonic technologies, important differences exist between and within call centres (Batt 2000; Hutchinson et al. 2000; Taylor and Bain 2001; Taylor et al. 2002). At the risk of oversimplification, contrasts exist in the complexity of agent–customer interaction, the degree of routinization or customization, the 'hardness' of quantitative targets, the length of call-handling times and the extent of employee discretion. In short, differences in volume and value reflect managerial prioritization of quantity or quality. Contingent factors include industrial sector, market conditions and the value of the customer base (Batt 2000). One model locates individual call centres along a spectrum defined by quantitative and qualitative characteristics (Taylor and Bain 2001: 45), but recognizing diversity should not lead to the conclusion that call centres are equally distributed between 'quality' and 'quantity' operations. They tend to be concentrated at the highly controlled, quantitative end of the spectrum (Callaghan and Thompson 2001; Taylor and Bain 2001).

Operations at 'T' and Excell fell into the 'quantitative' category, with agents expected to handle the greatest number of routine calls in the shortest possible time. Further, agents exerted little control over task performance and faced a battery of numerical and quality targets. The daily reality for all agents at Excell and most at 'T', was of repetitive and regimented work. While it is not suggested that the labour process constitutes the *sole* defining feature of these managerial regimes, experience of task performance provides an important contextual determinant of the character of humour. Both call centres fell within the 'low trust', 'high regulation' quadrant of Ackroyd and Thompson's 'managerial regime' typology (1999: 88). Consequently, forms of misbehaviour and humour were likely to be characterized by 'recalcitrance/militancy', the predicted outcomes in regimes of direct control.

Despite common characteristics, contrasts exist. First, although both were outsourcers, they differed in relation to their respective client bases and labour utilization strategies. 'T', a multi-business centre, operating services on behalf of 15 clients, combined a minority of high-value accounts with low-cost, routine operations and pursued cost reduction through exploiting flexible internal labour markets. Excell, a telecommunications outsourcer, operated customer enquiry services for cable and mobile phone companies. Cost control was pursued primarily through a labour intensification strategy, so that targets were more rigorously enforced and monitoring more pervasive than at 'T'. For example, directory enquiry agents took calls every 30 seconds, with call-handling times measured to 100th of a second and agents obliged to spend 97 percent of working time on 'switch'. 'T' and Excell are comparable managerial regimes, but the latter exercised direct control *in extremis*.

The second contrast concerns employer attitudes toward trade unions and employee representation. Neither company recognized unions, but while the senior management of 'T' adopted a pragmatic approach, Excell (an Arizona-based multinational) was implacably hostile. Antipathy to unions, rooted in the ideological convictions of the company's founders, was sustained by the business logic driving telecommunications outsourcing. Excell has sought to attract clients through undermining or circumventing existing union agreements. No account of the Excell regime is complete without understanding their antipathy to trade unionism and, indeed, to all forms of dissent. The denial of any employee 'voice', other than through ineffectual internal communication forums, contributed to particular expressions of worker humour.

Third, differences existed in the nature of worker self-organization. At Excell, a plethora of grievances concerning low pay, bonuses, health and safety, bullying managers, arbitrary disciplinaries and unrealistic targets hardened into a sense of collective injustice, as a group of workers coalesced round a determination to improve conditions (Taylor and Bain 2003). However, the catalyst for CWU recruitment was managerial malpractice in relation to the emergency lines which Excell provided for non-British Telecom companies. To simplify a complex narrative, because management had neglected to update customer records, emergency calls frequently meant that 'fire engines, the police and ambulances were sent to wrong addresses' (Meeting, 29 November 1998). The company's obdurate refusal to rectify

this problem compelled this group of workers to campaign for remedial action, while simultaneously fighting to improve pay and conditions. As management lost legitimacy in many workers' eyes, union membership increased (to 30 percent of the 350-strong workforce by May 1999). The examples below come from this period of conflict, in which union activists realized that humour could be an effective weapon. In contrast, at 'T', no nascent collective organization existed to give expression and direction to employee discontent over aspects of work and employment conditions. This absence of collective purpose, allied to a less pressurized experience of work and softer managerial styles, influenced differences in the manifestations of workplace humour at 'T' and Excell.

Humour at 'T': Undirected Subversion

Humour as Relief from Boredom and Routine

As some workers did make themselves the butt of their own jokes, clowning did take place. For example, following the company's Christmas party, Andy, who had 'got off' with the daughter of a senior manager, acted out a ritual of self-ridicule. Andy, nicknamed 'Mr Cheese', because of his unctuous telephone manner, clearly could remember his actions on the night in question, but feigned amnesia through excessive alcohol consumption (Observation, 13 December 1999). Fellow workers peppered him with questions on both mundane and intimate details, to which Andy responded by acting the dumb fool. This charade was played out in front of fresh audiences as, throughout the day, other workers dropped by to interrogate the 'victim'.

Ackroyd and Thompson's categorization of humour into clowning, teasing and satirical forms provides a valuable framework with which to observe and analyse manifestations of humour. However, it should be recognized that protagonists may combine different roles and utilize more than one form of humour, as this example of clowning and teasing also included satirical comment which was overtly critical of management. One agent remarked, 'That's the first time a Martin [the surname of manager/daughter] has been fucked over by anyone in here', a perception which highlights the distance between employees and senior management, and displays an appreciation of the realities of power and authority. However, teasing and satirical banter, between agents, and between agents and team leaders, were the dominant forms of humour, rather than pure clowning, and took several identifiable forms.

Several agents commented that having a laugh was the only thing that 'kept them going'. In a sales section with particularly rigorous targets, Pat described the effects of incessant call handling, and how the regime was forcing her to 'exit' after 11 months:

'People are unhappy — lots of things but mainly the calls. It seems to go in cycles. A new lot come in bright and fresh, get disillusioned and some leave, then it's new lambs to the slaughter. I probably won't be here next week, because my job interview

yesterday went very well.... This place does your head in, if it wasn't for the jokers here it wouldn't be tolerable.' (Interview, 27 February 2000)

A 'community of comedians', to use Collinson's term, made work 'tolerable'. In this community, a hierarchy, based on an ability to make workmates laugh, was discernible, with Mark, Shona and 'Norrie the Hun' best at banter and 'the wind-up'. The community engaged in common practices motivated by the desire to relieve boredom and the frustration of task performance. Agents dealing with irritating, long-winded or slow customers would typically hit their 'mute' button and, when inaudible to customers, make sarcastic comments to close colleagues. Whenever Hughie hit the mute, he would say 'What's that all about?' and burst out laughing, expressing amazement at customers' foibles (Observation, 10 December 1999). Typical comments included 'Wait till you hear this one,' 'That's a new one,' 'See these customers, outrageous man!' and 'Thick as fuck!' Frequently, while conversing, agents' eye contact, facial movements and body language would convey similar expressions of frustration and astonishment. Such comments and mannerisms were part of a ritual, creating a sense of expectation among fellow workers, eager to hear a full account of these interactions. If the volume of incoming calls was sufficiently low as to create longish breaks between calls (and no supervisor was close), an audience would gather and proceed collectively to 'rip the piss' out of customers, competing to recount examples of their folly. Since 'T' received calls from across the UK, opportunities arose to mimic regional accents, a source of considerable amusement. Catch-phrases from a popular Scottish television comedy 'Chewing the Fat' were liberally borrowed, providing a shared medium of comic expression.

Undoubtedly, these are examples of humour as coping or survival strategies (Noon and Blyton 1997). The primary purpose is to make the day more interesting, providing relief from the routine of call handling. But this behaviour also 'reflected and reinforced a shared sense of self and a group identity and differentiation' (Collinson 1988: 185), indicating the presence of a distinct organizational subculture in sharp conflict with managerial values and priorities. Verbal abuse of customers, even at a safe distance, certainly ran counter to the principles of company culture. A delightful irony was that while agents 'slagged off' customers, suspended from the ceiling above their heads were notices bearing mission statements such as 'Committed to putting the customer's needs first.' In challenging management values, and undermining the customer service ethos, these rituals should be seen as subversive in their effects.

Humour and the Erosion of Team Leader Authority

Ackroyd and Thompson argue that workplace struggle is also 'concerned with the matter of identity' (1999: 101). Management, at least rhetorically, has an interest in obtaining greater levels of commitment from its workforce, an objective which may allow employees to express opinions. Of course, such encouragement to openness has sharply defined boundaries, and is permitted

in so far as it benefits the organization. Since the promise, suggested by cultures of openness, may clash with the unchanged reality of routine task performance, workers exploit these limited spaces, inserting expressions of their interests which conflict with management aims. Under these conditions, joking, which is excused from the normal conventions of serious discourse, becomes a means of conducting a satirical attack on management:

'Joking is... perfectly appropriate when a group with power is espousing a willingness to be intimate, but is still incapable of admitting equality. It is in this sort of situation that joking becomes a useful tool.' (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999: 102)

The joking practices of agents at 'T' confirm these insights, most pointedly in the way that humour was directed at undermining team leaders' authority. Formally, team leaders were responsible for ensuring that the quantity and quality of an agent's call handling were satisfactory. Unacceptable performance levels ostensibly were to be improved through coaching, although exhortation or chastisement were equally common responses. Most team leaders, recently promoted from the ranks, were encouraged by senior management to maintain informal social contact with erstwhile colleagues. It is the contradiction between team leaders' conventional and directive roles, and the compulsion to act as if they were still 'one of the gang', which gives a distinct edge to the banter directed toward them. Three examples follow.

'Taking the Piss'

When call volumes were low, gossip quickly filled the gaps. On this occasion, the stimulus was the previous Friday's company 'do'. The main topic, inevitably, was employees' ill-behaviour: how drunk so-and-so had been, who had felt which part of whose anatomy, and who had got off with whom. Although risqué, the language was never sexist or offensive, with both sexes participating as protagonists and 'victims'. Sanction was given by Monica, the team leader, who having excelled in the consumption of alcohol, was herself the butt of much verbal sparring. For example, 'That dress must have been cheap, you'd only have to pay for half of it, it had no back.' Although two agents, Linda and Mark, came in for 'a proper slagging', the sharpest barbs were directed at Monica. The greatest hilarity occurred when an on-call team member re-entered the conversation and, in trying to catch up, would ask deliberately naive questions, pretending not to know who was being discussed. This kept the joke going and enabled agents to replay their attacks on Monica.

The Limits to Tolerance

A humorous 'questionnaire' was designed and distributed by Hughie, following management permission on the grounds that it was a pre-Christmas 'bit of fun'. Everyone was polled on questions like 'Who is the sexiest? The grumpiest? The scariest?' As questionnaires circulated, jokes proliferated as workers considered nominations for various categories. Once again, the principal targets were team leaders, with the unpopular nominated for unwelcome categories; 'Nurse Ratched' won the 'grumpiest' award. Evidently, the questionnaire

almost crossed the line of unacceptability as defined by management, as this snatch of conversation reveals.

Hughie: 'We had a question in the first version "Who is going to get the sack before Christmas?" but we had to take it out because they were cracking up.'

Al: 'Who was cracking up?'

Hughie: 'They [management] were cracking up because of what's happening to them (nodding over to campaigns team).'

Clare: 'That's because they're getting fucked. All temps in campaigns are to be laid off by December 19th.'

Team leaders were ambivalent. Although approving the questionnaire, to the extent that some joined in discussing nominations, a line was drawn when it strayed from what was defined as harmless fun and touched on sensitive issues. Team leaders even attempted to stifle spontaneity by insisting that completed questionnaires were returned to Monica so that she could compile the results. Such an approach tacitly acknowledges that creative joking in a workplace regime of this kind can never be purely harmless. Completed questionnaires revealed how workers enthusiastically seized the opportunity to deride both team leaders and those agents regarded as 'yes men'.

Je ne parle pas français

Astonishingly, the manager of a French language section was unable to speak the native tongue of the majority of team members. Inevitably, this generated operating problems and undermined supervisory authority. On one celebrated occasion, the manager sat beside an agent in order to monitor calls, asking him to translate customer queries and his responses. Months later, the memory of this farcical incident induced wholesale derision of both the hapless manager and the company (Observation, 19 March 2000). Two agents, Diane and Saul, described how, after the failure of this monitoring exercise, the manager continued to hover near the French team, clearly within earshot of agents' conversations. Saul recollected that after a call had ended and the customer had hung up, he continued talking, pretending it was still live. He finished by saying, in French, 'Thank you very much for calling. We will send someone round to kill your wife and family.' Agents at adjacent workstations were scarcely able to contain their laughter. The manager's humiliation was complete when Saul reported, in English, how successful the call had been. It matters little that this story was embellished in the retelling. What is significant is that it continued, months afterwards, to be a source of great amusement and had come to symbolize managerial incompetence. The French speakers constituted a work group with a high degree of self-organization, and their scathing humour served to widen the gap between themselves and the company.

These examples reveal a deep undercurrent of distrust of management motives, and the medium of humour conveyed a subtle, but frequently overt, criticism of supervisory authority. Such evidence challenges Noon and Blyton's (1997) claim that joking always obscures the social relations of

production. Management's attempts to close the gap between team leaders and agents, through encouraging familiarity, proved largely unsuccessful. Agents used humour in order to clarify exactly where the boundaries of authority lay, subverting the attempt to humanize supervisors through an 'all pals together' culture. Supervisors' efforts to sponsor fun, or control banter, tended to be counterproductive. Out of earshot, agents would share their minor triumphs in what was certainly a battle for identity, but was much more besides. Their actions invoked an older tradition of not letting the foreman get away with anything.

Cynicism about Management in General

There is nothing novel in the circulation of cartoons, slogans, poems, stories and gobbets of home-spun philosophizing, delivering pithy, humorous or ironic messages, frequently of the 'you don't have to be mad to work here, but it helps' kind. The proportion containing satirical attacks on management may have increased at the expense of the more anodyne, although it is difficult to be certain about this. Some are authored within the workplace and contain references unique to the organization, while others are generic, passed by hand or, now, frequently forwarded as e-mail attachments or downloaded from the internet. While such cyber-humour can be experienced by employees as oppressive (Collinson 2002: 277), the two examples given here of e-mail satire (Figures 1 and 2), which caused great amusement as they circulated through networks of trusted colleagues at 'T', should be seen as subversive. The first mocks the image of the high-powered managerial meeting, implicitly contrasting its pretensions with the (unstated) efforts of ordinary workers. The second can be seen in the context of tight time controls prevalent in call centres, which often include measurement of toilet breaks. Both contributed to the sense of distance between employees and employers.

The significance of humour at 'T' as a means of overcoming tedium, and providing some relief from work pressures, should not be underestimated. Nor should its satirical force, directed at managerial targets, be underplayed. Yet, for all the caustic wit and sarcasm, this was directionless subversion, unconnected to any conscious strategy of challenging managerial 'frontiers of control' or improving working conditions. This is not to say that the humour lacked purpose. The experience of the labour process, the relatively poor pay and rewards package, and the contractual insecurity of temps, guaranteed that barbs would fly at the employer and managers, who promised much and delivered little. The point is that undermining management through humour, though undeniably corrosive of authority, was not accompanied by a conscious and broader union challenge to the employer, unlike that which developed at Excell. Two years on, despite sporadic leafleting forays by two unions, the workforce at 'T' remains unorganized.

Figure 1.
'Meetings':
The Practical
Alternative to Work

Are you lonely?

Hate having to make decisions?

Rather talk about it than do it?

Then why not

HOLD A MEETING

You can: Get to see other people
Sleep in peace
Offload decisions
Learn to write volumes of meaningless notes
Feel important
Impress (or bore) your colleagues

And all in work time!



'MEETINGS'

The Practical Alternative to Work

Humour at Excell: Conscious and Directed Subversion

The 'Bad Boys'

At Excell, managers and supervisors themselves were largely responsible for becoming the objects of relentless and unforgiving joking. The incessant pressure to meet targets and their intimidation of certain workers made some managers extremely unpopular. Further, management unwittingly contributed to the formation of an oppositional group by dubbing individuals seen as

Figure 2.
New Office Space

Due to an increase in staffing, along with a lack of available space and funding, all cubicles will be converted to the new efficiency model pictured below. This new model should alleviate stress and increase productive work time.



troublesome as the 'bad boys'. The more managers took petty disciplinary action against these malcontents, the more they cohered as a group and developed common forms of expression and identity through a set of shared beliefs. Humour facilitated the formation of this 'out group', uniting disparate individuals into a collective organization.

'I think it [humour] was the glue that initially made collective action possible. Without that, people had no obvious reason to feel warmth, or commitment, or comradeship for anyone else. We had to develop a sort of kinship and emotional feelings and support for each other because we were up against it... it didn't happen organically, it happened quite deliberately.' (Interview, Gary, 12 December 2000)

The fact that this group of dissidents was funny made them, and the union with which they were identified, more attractive.

'Once people saw they could sit and have a laugh with everybody who was involved, that was really important. And the common ground that people shared was their ability to laugh at these fools who were nominally controlling them.' (Interview, Gary, 12 December 2000)

Humour as Part of a Conscious Strategy of Undermining Management

'Oh aye, it was always about a means to an end. It was never a case of misbehaving for the sake of it — well I liked misbehaving and having a laugh anyway — but it was done for a reason.' (Interview, Jimbo, 22 June 2000)

Management was ridiculed as part of a deliberate strategy of undermining authority. The activists' main objective was to demonstrate to fellow workers that nobody need be frightened of management. Belittling superiors, particularly those most deserving of retribution, without incurring subsequent reprisals, could successfully erode deference to authority. The jokes, mocking and lampoonery enabled serious messages to be communicated. The following examples demonstrate both the inventive ways in which authority was undermined and a sophisticated understanding of the role of the audience.

'We would turn the whole scenario of control on its head, so that fools could be kings for the day. If you say in front of a manager, "I can't believe this man earns £20,000 a year, have you seen his shoes?" the allure can be shattered just by saying something as foolish as this.' (Interview, Gary, 12 December 2000)

'People like Sammy were really effective. He would develop a routine, which he would use at every opportunity to berate managers, but in a way that they couldn't discipline him because the questions he was asking were part of normal conversation. He would ask managers questions that made absolutely no sense, like "What's your favourite colour Roy?" and the conversation would go like this "I don't know, I don't have a favourite colour." "You must have a favourite colour, everybody's got one." And when you ask managers questions like that they immediately become wary, because they don't know where it's leading. So Roy would walk away. Ten minutes later Sammy would be standing right next to him saying, "Have you got that answer for me? What's the colour, Roy?" "I don't know." "Come on, I'm asking you what your favourite colour is." On and on like that. We would create a situation where people working beside us could see what it was like to make managers, who would normally humiliate them, seem inadequate. And it was really important because this was happening in a public space with an audience. It didn't have any meaning unless people could see it happening.' (Interview, Colin, 15 June 2000)

Such was the contempt for particular managers, that mocking rituals were interspersed with vicious humour, such as this humiliation of a recently promoted and deeply unpopular individual:

'It was just before Christmas Eve, one of those nights when we were all in high spirits... The others were saying to me, "Do something to Fred." So I ripped a Christmas card off one of the boards, scored out the name and used my left hand to write "Merry Christmas, from your friends at Excell, you prick, enjoy your new career as a manager." Jack had a condom, so we got chicken soup out of the machine, waited till it was cold, poured it into the condom, made a wee prick at the end so that the soup dripped out, stapled it to his Christmas card, folded it up and put it in his locker. When he came in next morning we were still on shift. He got the chicken soup over him and went mental. He didn't know who had done it, but I told everybody that it was me, so it must have got back to him but he never did anything.' (Interview, Jimbo, 22 June 2000)

No action could be taken against the suspected perpetrator, for this would have drawn attention to the manager's own humiliation, inviting further ridicule. Managers had 'tittle-tattle' about their private lives thrown back at them. One received the following broadside after delivering a 'motivating' team briefing, 'Well, I know when you are not here you sit in the house all afternoon smoking dope. I can't believe you are not more laid back at work' (Interview, Dave, 20 February 2000). Again, a manager has been targeted as the butt and is powerless to respond. The banter has a serious subtext, which goes something like this: 'If you do not stop cracking the whip, we will let it be known to senior managers what you do in your spare time.' The most disliked managers, 'total company men', were given nicknames such as the 'Crafty Christian' or 'Tricky Dicky', which served to reinforce group solidarity and sharpen the sense of distance between 'them' and 'us'. These examples hardly convey the full repertoire of parody and invective directed at individual managers in what the activists saw as a never-ending war of attrition.

Challenging the Rules and Subverting Company Culture

Ackroyd and Thompson's (1999: 105) suggestion that the sets of values underpinning workplace humour are evidence of 'a distinct organizational subculture' is confirmed by workers' *misbehaviour* at Excell. So, too, is their observation that a distinctive subculture often becomes 'a more pointedly critical and overtly satirical counter-culture' whose existence is evident in workers' challenges to formal rules. Collectively, agents decided to conform to the company's dress code, which they regarded as both unnecessary and expensive, in a particular manner:

'When you were nominally following the rules, you would do so in such a way as to be subversive. The dress code changed and we were told, "You have to wear a shirt and tie." So we got word round, "Tomorrow, wear shirts and ties that make us look as unprofessional as possible." I wore a tie about four or five inches wide, illustrating the history and future of the motor car in glorious technicolour, along with a purple-checked shirt. Everybody dressed like this and there was nothing managers could do.' (Interview, Gary, 12 December 2000)

This incident reveals a remarkable degree of collectivity in both thought and deed, justifying the assessment that satire of this kind proves the existence of a vigorous counterculture. One further incident, debunking Excell's

corporate culture, demonstrates how even spontaneous acts were informed by powerful collective identities:

‘One night a manager... was showing new starts round, and he passed the mission statement, which was prominently displayed on a wall. Suddenly, he remembered he had ten people in tow and he hadn’t pointed it out to them. So he led them back and started reading it when, spontaneously, about ten of us stood up and saluted him, singing “The Star Spangled Banner”. And, of course, these new starts got the message that there was no respect for either management or company.’ (Interview, Dave, 9 March 1999)

The Ace Joker

A group of workers were defined by management, and defined themselves, as ‘bad boys’. They shared a common identity, and the comic code which informed their activity was allied to the wider purpose of combating an employer they regarded as unjust. Notwithstanding the collective nature of this undertaking, the leading role of one individual in the unionization campaign has been recognized (Taylor and Bain 2003). So must the unique contribution of Jimbo, as the initiator of many practical jokes, be acknowledged. He adopted the roles of clown, tease and satirist, sometimes combining all three to great subversive effect, and sporadically used humour of the blackest kind, as with the episode of Frank and the Christmas card.

‘Sometimes it was quite frightening and disturbing stuff. For example, Jimbo would leave cards lying around on managers’ desks with one word, “liar”, written on them, and then wait for a reaction. Or he would go through memos with a fine toothcomb correcting the grammar and send them back to management, asking them to correct them before he would consider reading them.’ (Interview, Gary, 12 December 2000)

Openly gay, ‘he would always use his campness as a way of undermining management and winning people over’ (Interview, Dave, 8 March 2000) and was simultaneously ‘very funny, camp, bitchy and very hard, taking people on all the time’. A frequent ploy was to ‘slaughter’ a manager’s dress sense or appearance, pushing what was permissible as banter to the very limits. Jimbo would also connect managers to the Samaritans or live sex lines and relish their embarrassment. He could get away with all this because he would exploit both his own popularity and managers’ stereotypical expectations of a gay man. He could say and do things that managers would not have tolerated in others. No manager contemplated disciplining him, for it would have been counterproductive. The range of misbehaviour that Jimbo, and those inspired by him, engaged in is impressive. Clowning and a yearning to escape routine call handling certainly motivated much joking, but this was ultimately connected to the more serious purpose of undermining management.

Humour and Trade Union Organization

At Excell, the boundary between subversive humour and conscious trade union activity was frequently blurred as, for example, when internal communication forums were subverted.

'We would write our demands on flip charts, but not on the first page. They would [later] be giving a briefing, using the flip chart, and when they turned a page they would find "Parity for Glasgow and Birmingham." They knew my writing and accused me but I denied it. They would insist, "It was your writing." I would say, "Did you see me writing it?" The manager would go "No" and I would say, "Shut up then." And that would be that, because I would be backed up, and they couldn't prove it. We would always back each other.' (Interview, Jimbo, 22 June 2000)

Hundreds of union leaflets were photocopied during night shifts, slipped under keyboards or placed in mail bins, and in the morning managers would 'go ballistic'. The leaflets had a serious purpose, calling on management to solve '999' service problems, or raising demands over pay and conditions. They might contain confidential data on company profitability or turnover, information appropriated from managers' desks (an example of pilfering for collective purposes). However, the distribution of serious leaflets was interspersed with scathing satire in the form of poems or, in this case, 'a recipe' (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
'A Recipe for
Disaster'

– A RECIPE FOR DISASTER –

TAKE

ONE BUCKET OF TAX DODGING GRANTS
 TWENTY HORSES ARSES TO RUN THE PLACE
 ONE PRIZE COCKSUCKER (AMERICAN IS BEST)

CHOP TWO GRAND OFF THE AVERAGE CALL CENTRE WAGE
 DICE WITH DEATH AND A FAULTY DATABASE
 TENDERIZE THE SAPS THAT BELIEVE YOU

SPRINKLE LIBERALLY WITH LIES AND DECEIT

PLACE THE LOT IN A FUCKED UP ECONOMY AND HEAT FOR FOUR YEARS
 UNTIL IT REACHES BOILING POINT. THEN SIT ON YOUR FAT FUCKING
 ARSES AND DO SWEET FANNY ADAMS DRIVING AROUND IN YOUR
 FUCKING FREE MERCEDES WHILE WE ALL GET REPETITIVE STRAIN
 SYNDROME IN OUR EARS FROM LISTENING TO THE SAME SHITE YEAR
 AFTER BASTARD YEAR, THAT YOU DON'T EVEN RECOGNIZE.

THEN GO AND FUCK YOURSELVES.

By general agreement, managers' furious reaction to the 'recipe' made this Jimbo's most effective satirical act. The content is not only funny, but succinctly gets to the heart of corporate priorities and the realities of work. Two days later, union membership cards were placed under the same keyboards and in the same mail bins, as the activists consciously linked their satirical attack on Excell with an open appeal to join the union.

The evidence from Excell suggests a paradox, in that while the company was profoundly anti-union and hostile to dissent, managers appeared impotent in the face of this satirical onslaught. This can be explained by reference to

several factors, which emerge from a fuller analysis of developments at Excell (see Bain and Taylor 2000; Taylor and Bain 2003). First, during the period in which these examples of humour occurred, a delicate balance of power existed between union activists and management. Fearful of further public exposure by the activists of malpractice in relation to service provision and unsure of the strength of an increasingly confident workplace union, management acted cautiously. So extensive was the support for these counter-cultural activities and their instigators that attempts to sack individuals could prove counter-productive. A recent attempt to discipline, with the intention of dismissing, a leading unionist had collapsed in the face of widespread opposition from fellow workers and an impeccably constructed defence. Following what was seen as union victory, a chastened management was forced onto the defensive, allowing union activists the space to continue their organizing (and humorous) activities.

This amounted to no more than a temporary postponement of Excell's desire to rid themselves of troublesome elements. In March 2000, Excell embarked on a course of repression, dismissing two leading unionists for gross misconduct, following a television report exposing poor working conditions. However, the victimizations proved to be a Pyrrhic victory as the attendant publicity further damaged the company's reputation, precipitating a decision by the main client to replace Excell with a new outsourcing company (Vertex). Significantly, in the longer term, the campaign to unionize the workforce and gain recognition has proved successful. In March 2002, 99.4 percent voted for union recognition across the three former Excell call centres, demonstrating both the widespread degree of identification with the union and the enduring legacy left by activists from the period we have examined.

Conclusion

The evidence from both case studies suggests that 'pure' clowning was relatively rare, and shaded into teasing and satire. Overwhelmingly, satire, sometimes vicious in character and directed at individual supervisors or management in general, was the most common form of humour. Long-acknowledged motives behind joking were also apparent, particularly relief from boredom and routine. On occasions, the attempt to escape alienation took call centre specific forms, as with the denigration of customers at 'T'. Similarly, Collinson's (1988) observation that humour reflected and reinforced a shared sense of group identity is confirmed. Humour and joking contributed to the development of attitudes standing in sharp contrast to managerial values and priorities. Workers created countercultures, in which alternative values were clearly articulated, although the process went further at Excell. Gary displayed a sophisticated understanding of how the deliberate use of humour bolstered an oppositional culture:

'The beauty of it was this. Managers didn't understand the humour, the workers understood it, which is a complete reversion of what normally happens in the

workplace, where managers are briefed in advance in terms of how they are going to behave and disseminate information. We reversed the process, we knew what *we* were doing.' (Interview, Gary, 12 December 2000)

Both call centres witnessed the erosion of team leaders' authority. However, satire at 'T' tended to be opportunistic, more a reflex. Although ridiculing managers was often spontaneous at Excell, targets were frequently selected in advance and tactics planned.

There is no evidence from these cases that the subversive effects of humour were undermined by divisions created by sexism or narrow preoccupations with masculine identity, as Collinson found. From the perspective of gender analysis, the locations raise interesting comparisons and contrasts. In both, the gender composition was about 50/50, with little sexual division of labour among agents, but, common to many call centres, women were strongly represented in frontline supervision. At 'T', women participated in joking rituals equally with men, and some were leading comedians. To the extent that sexist humour was present, the banter tended to be even-handed, with women equally dishing it out, but, for the most part, humour was risqué rather than sexist. At Excell, there was a 'laddish' element to the humour, which the union activists came to acknowledge and sought to combat, particularly when more women joined the CWU and some became leading members. However, as several participants recalled, more significant was the camp quality of much of the humour, stimulated by Jimbo's presence, which makes it difficult to squeeze the joking into a neat category of masculinity.

Overall, Thompson and Ackroyd's central propositions (that sardonic and satirical humour is common in the contemporary workplace and there is deep distrust of management motives, which pretensions to openness encourages) are confirmed. So, too, is the importance of the interaction between 'managerial regime' and workers' self-organization. The contrasting combinations of managerial culture, labour process, attitudes to trade unionism and dissent, and the nature of the oppositional group helped impart a different character to humour at 'T' and Excell. Although subversive at both locations, humour was more biting, even nasty, at Excell, with activists seeking an audience of fellow workers to inflict the maximum humiliation on managers. Undoubtedly, there was more to rail against at Excell, but the most important factor was collective organization, the presence of incipient workplace trade unionism. The activists were instrumental in their use of humour, clear in the knowledge that it helped make them and the union popular and served to weaken managerial authority and legitimacy. Subversive satire was allied to a wider collective purpose, while at 'T', despite the 'sending up' and creative satire, the widespread use of humour against management and its values did not lead to trade union organization. At Excell, union recognition and negotiated improvements in pay and conditions were long-term objectives. With the qualified exception of Rodrigues and Collinson (1995), the literature fails to consider the role that workplace humour can play in trade union organizing campaigns.

It is impossible to disentangle the precise contribution that humour played in the ultimately successful unionization campaign from that which

derived from formal organizing activities. The evidence strongly supports the conclusion that the informal category of resistance and misbehaviour and the formal category of organization should not be analytically polarized where workgroups are prepared to use an array of both creative and serious means to challenge managerial legitimacy. It was the creative relationship between the two which gave a distinctively effective edge to organizing activities at Excell.

Lastly, the efflorescence of humorous activities at a subterranean level, that is, beneath the organizational surface, delivers a further blow to those who liken the call centre to an electronic prison. Resistance, disobedience and collective organization have emerged in familiar and novel ways in these most contemporary of workplaces.

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