



Controlling the Shop

Author: Luca Szücs

January 3, 2017

Who controls the shop? This question is crucial for work discipline. Granting employees a sphere of autonomy and encouraging them to identify with their boss's interests fosters job satisfaction and ultimately enhances labour discipline.

In my ethnographic research on tobacco shops in Hungary I operationalise the concept of work ethic. I do so by explaining the factors that motivate people to work hard in a job that is low-paid. Various aspects of control are relevant. While managerial control is essential, employees too may acquire a sense of control over their workplaces and work processes, and this too is crucial to overall work discipline. While some authors approach workers' control in terms of resistance or sabotage (Ong 1987; Beynon 2009), I argue that giving employees scope for autonomy and allowing them to identify with their boss's interests increases both job satisfaction and labour discipline.

My point of departure is Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between intrinsic and external profit: "It is on this principle that modern management theory, while taking care to keep control of the instruments of profit, leaves workers the freedom to organize their own work, this helping to increase their well-being but also displace their interest from the external profit of labour (the wage) to the intrinsic profit." (Bourdieu 2000 [1997]: 204–205) By allowing workers a degree of control over their work and thus to pursue symbolic "intrinsic" profit, managers deflect wage demands ("external profit"). Approaching the problem in a different way, Michael Burawoy made a very similar point when he wrote about work as a game in his early ethnographic research in an industrial plant in South Chicago (1979). He argued that it was the piece rate game of "making out" and the resulting job satisfaction and symbolic rewards that made him and his colleagues work so hard. Evoking Gramsci, he concluded that the shop floor was ruled by a hegemonic regime of production based on consent between workers and the management (Burawoy 1979, 2012).

I explained the shift system and division of labour in the tobacco shops in my post of 21.07.2016. Only one employee works at any one time, even though tasks are rather complex (including sales, maintaining inventories, preparing new orders and cleaning the shop). This

person therefore enjoys a great deal of autonomy. Each shop has one shop manager who works shifts like other employees but enjoys even more autonomy. Shop managers are responsible for drawing up the monthly shift assignments of her colleagues, checking purchase orders and stocks, and ultimately guaranteeing that everything is in order, particularly when new products (e.g.: electronic cigarettes) and lottery games are introduced. There are negligible differences between shop assistants and shop managers in terms of duties and tasks, though shop managers bear full responsibility for their shops; therefore they get a little more money. Kati is an experienced retail shop assistant in her late forties who has been working for this company from the very beginning and has a capacity for hard work. Although Kati is not a regular churchgoer, she has a strong sense of moral duty (I often wondered where it came from).



Customers queue up in a National Tobacco Shop.

Photo: Luca Szücs, July 2016

She imagines that that she has influence over the clientele of the shop and thereby over her own working conditions. By not ordering the cheapest cigarettes or having only limited quantities available, she feels that she is sending a message to potentially awkward customers (such as the homeless and poor people who are heavy drinkers). In terms of morality, Kati's boss is devoid of ethical sensitivity: he really does not care what sort of people frequent his shops as long as they increase his profits. For Kati, in contrast, this does matter, even though she has very little agency in changing the items sold by the shop, let alone influencing the composition of the clientele.

Kati developed a sense of control and internalized her boss's economic interests. One Sunday, when Kati had a day off, she could not stop fretting about the purchase order that needed to be placed to the central supplier on Monday morning. Her colleague was sick, the owner was substituting for her, but Kati did not trust him to submit a correct order due to his lack of knowledge of the consumption patterns of the clientele and the computer system. Thus, instead of enjoying her day off, she cut a planned family occasion short and went to the shop in the evening to make sure that the purchase order for the following week was properly prepared. When I asked her why she had to do this herself, she replied that the business depended on her performance to make a profit and remain sustainable. Her job was at stake.

One could say that Kati had obvious material reasons to work hard – she wanted to keep her job in the long run and to avoid economic uncertainty. Moreover, further material incentives and annual bonuses from the owner (remuneration practices will be elaborated in later writing) also encourage employees, such as Kati, to work harder. However, what motivated her on a daily basis was the symbolic rewards or job satisfaction in other words, “intrinsic” profit in the sense of Bourdieu. Kati had a favorite story about her boss visiting her one afternoon in the tiny shop where she worked at the time. He was sitting on a plastic crate behind the counter, right next to the full shelves, like a regular employee, while Kati was standing behind the counter, interacting with the customers and occasionally giving instructions to her boss when she needed something from the shelf. It was as if the owner was working for the employee and not vice versa. The narration of moments like this helps to reproduce the employees’ identification with their boss’s profit-maximising goals. Kati’s subjective feeling of being needed and important can be seen as a psychological phenomenon that ultimately made her work harder and increased her exploitation.

References

- Beynon, Huw. 2009. “Controlling the Line.” Pp. 111–129 in *Industrial Work and Life. An Anthropological Reader*, edited by M. Mollona, G.D. Neve and J. Parry. Oxford: Berg.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. [1997] 2000. *Pascalian Meditations*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Burawoy, Michael. 1979. *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labour Process under Monopoly Capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Burawoy, Michael. 2012. “Durable Domination: Beyond Bourdieu and Gramsci.” *Sociology* 46(2): 187–206.
- Ong, Aihwa. 1987. *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline*. Albany: State University of New York Press.