Several theorists have attempted to describe society as it is today, from Post-Fordist and Post-Industrial perspectives to theories of the knowledge economy, which for the most part overlap or can be contrasted in a coherent way. Daniel Bell (The coming of post-industrial society, 1973) predicted a shift in the occupational structure from manual labour to immaterial labour; this is evident in the UK’s current economy, with the service sector contributing three-quarters of national output (The Telegraph, 2013).

This critical reflection considers contemporary workplaces, with particular emphasis on the service sector industry and what it means for our society. Castells suggests that “the process of work is at the core of social structure” (2010: 216). For an occupational structure to be dominated by a particular type of work makes it a defining feature of that society; therefore to view the rise in service sector work with a critical eye is vital. Bell (1973) describes the concept of a Post-Industrial society: a rise of a new class of intellectuals conflated with the growth of the service sector. This Post-Industrial society has undergone rapid changes in social structure so that we are now considered to live in a “knowledge society” run by professionals such as teachers, to cater for the expansive education system, as opposed to industrialists (Burke, 2000). Bell believed that the shift from the manufacturing industry to the service industry would create less alienated, white collar workers; however, the growth of the service sector resulted in a requirement for low-paid clerical workers, just as insecure and isolated as any industrial worker (Burke, 2000).

The idea of immaterial labour has a large presence in contemporary workplaces today, such as the notion of delivering “good customer service”. Hochschild (1983) coined the term “emotional labour” as a form of emotional regulation, an often unrecognised form of additional labour used in the workplace. According to Hochschild (1983) jobs involving emotional labour can leave workers feeling estranged, especially when workers are expected to adhere to a script. Goffman (1961), however, suggests that the use of a script can help protect the workers by keeping a distance between them and their performance at work. The use of scripts can be seen in both call centres and fast food chains as a way of monitoring and standardising a person’s...
performance to fit in with the employer’s needs, reducing a person down to a machine who utters pre-decided sentences when appropriate.

Standardisation and rationalisation of products and the worker itself can be seen to characterise Fordism. This is especially reflected in the fast food industry where tailoring for the customer’s need is not at the forefront of the agenda; instead, productivity is. Ritzer (1996) in the McDonaldisation of Society proposes a theory drawing on Weber’s concept of rationalisation, suggesting that society is becoming increasingly dominated by principles utilised in the fast food industry. Ritzer (1996) outlines several main principles of McDonaldisation including efficiency, calculability, rationality, predictability and replacement of the work force with technology. It is these fundamental elements that are applied outside of the fast food industry into mainstream society. For example, predictability is seen in the widespread standardisation of chain restaurants so that services delivered are practically the same anywhere. This is also seen in employees who undergo repetitive, predictable tasks when at work. Replacing the work force with technology is seen across the service sector, such as a checkout cashier mindlessly scanning a barcode, or a McDonald’s worker mindlessly pressing a button to cook pre-packaged, pre-measured goods. Recently, there has been a rise in consumers performing the labour involved in service work themselves, reflected in self-service checkouts, self-serve buffets, cash machines and drive-throughs.

Of course the McDonaldisation of society would not be possible without ICTs and global media; there are now more advertisements on the internet than people in the world. The interconnectedness of society via the internet provides a platform for global predictability when it comes to chain retailers. Castells (2010) recognises the importance of ICTs and its particular relationship to how the working world has been transformed. In contrast to Post-Industrial theories, Castells (The Rise of the Network Society, 2010) recognises that whilst informational societies require qualified professionals, there is also a growth in low-skilled jobs, creating an ever increasing polarised social structure. He suggests that the growth of ICTs has transformed the working world by creating “new forms of social and technical division of labour” (Castells, 2010: 255). Those who work in Subway can be seen to highlight the epitome of division of labour in the fast food industry.

Castells is useful in recognising the inequalities that this occupational structure may create. With the rise in ICTs comes the rise in surveillance, especially within the workplace. In many retailers it is protocol for members of staff to clock in and out using their fingerprints. Is this technological advancement to be seen as a marvel or as an invasion of privacy? Even more astonishing than this is timed toilet breaks, monitored phone calls and CCTV monitoring of staff used widely across the service sector. Prominent in the history of surveillance studies are figures such as Marx and Weber; Marx believed surveillance was a part of the struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat (Foucault, 1995), and Weber believed surveillance could be used as a tool by modern organisations for storing information (Wood, 2006). Weber’s ideas on surveillance can be applied to contemporary society in the way that internet retailers predict and suggest items based on previous purchases. More recently, David Lyon (1994) views the contemporary world as a surveillance society, suggesting that mass
surveillance is used as a way of organising social hierarchies.

Drawing on Jeremy Bentham’s “Panopticon” design, Foucault (Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, 1995) created the concept of self-surveillance. He suggests that “the Panopticon, on the other hand, must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men” (Foucault, 1995: 205). Far from Bentham’s imagination, although comparable, is the constant threat of CCTV in contemporary society to discourage offending; just like the panopticon’s design, CCTV acts to constantly put humanity under the threat of surveillance and therefore acts as a deterrent to those considering misdeeds. The concept of self-surveillance can be applied to call centre jobs: employees are told that their phone calls may be monitored but are not told exactly when, creating the illusion of constant monitoring. Surveillance can be seen as a means for employers to keep their employees working to the correct standard. A new form of work-place surveillance can be seen in the need for customer feedback; “tell us about your experience today and have the chance to win £1000”. The latter is often plastered on the bottom of receipts and acts to ensure employees are working correctly - the threat of bad customer feedback may deter employees from engaging in improper practice.

Contemporary society displays clear elements of Fordism, despite being now considered Post-Fordist by many scholars. Perhaps Neo-Fordism would be a better way of describing society as it today; some of the fundamental characteristics of Fordism still exist in certain industries, such as standardisation of products, division of labour and alienating work - however, society can be seen as consumer driven as opposed to production driven. The use of ICTs has meant that modern workplaces can successfully target populations based on their past purchases, postcodes or internet history which denotes a special emphasis on the design of products. Flexibility has also become a key aspect of the working world, with zero hour contracts, temporary contracts and more part time work than ever before. Increasingly, job security has become a cause of anxiety for many, relating to Beck’s (1992) theory that modernity is creating increasing amounts of risk for society. Risk especially impacts on workers in precarious forms of work, which is significant considering flexibility is usually a quality employers look for. Should contemporary society be seen as a technological wonder, creating a mass of qualified workers, or as a risk-laden, invasive regime creating increasing amounts of inequality? The answer lies somewhere in the middle: “what Post-Fordism has produced [...] is an increase in income and freedom for some and a decrease for others” (Burke, 2000).
Bibliography:


