Introduction

30 years after *The Managed Heart*: exploring the commodity frontier

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Arlie Hochschild in perspective

If the length of a Wikipedia entry is any sort of 21st century measure of the contribution made by someone to contemporary thinking then the substantial entry on Arlie Hochschild marks her as a sociological ‘bigwig’ and a public commentator of note. Indeed, such is her influence that a textbook on Key Sociological Thinkers (Stones 1998/2008) includes a chapter on Hochschild where she joins such illustrious, post-1968 thinkers as Foucault, Bourdieu and Habermas. This recognition of Hochschild’s work also includes an edited collection assessing the importance of her contribution, At the Heart of Work and Family: Exploring the Ideas of Arlie Hochschild (Garey and Hansen 2011).

This special issue of Culture and Organization marks the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Hochschild’s most famous and influential book, the pioneering and enduringly relevant, The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling. Here we are introduced for the first time to the now very common concept of emotional labor - “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value” (1983/2003, 7). Quite simply, The Managed Heart’s impact was – and still is – profound. It has probably done more than any other single publication to ignite and shape the exponential growth of the sociology of emotions – especially emotion in organisations (see Fineman 2005).

In the Preface to the 2012 edition, Hochschild recounts that she was observing a training session at Delta Airlines where a pilot was telling newly recruited stewardess’ to “smile like you really mean it”. She noticed the woman sat next to her jotting down the advice verbatim. Aware from her interviews with flight attendants that such exhortations are met by a mix of anxiety, ennui and fear, combined with an enthusiasm to serve, Hochschild’s response was to jot down for the first time the words, ‘emotional labor’. Such was the term’s enduring resonance, as a label and concept, that thirty-years on it is in such wide-usage inside and outside of the academy that a Google search of ‘emotional labor’ (and ‘emotional labour’) generates over 250,000 results. The best illustration of its impact is provided by Hochschild in her Afterword to the 2003 edition:

After The Managed Heart first appeared, I began to receive visits from flight attendants, nurses, and others and receive long letters from scholars who wanted to study it…. Some flight attendants flew in from London, Sydney, Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, New York…. Several times I spoke at union meetings (1983/2003, 199)

There were also television appearances, other media coverage and public debate in the United States. Hochschild’s accessible and engaging writing style had ensured that The Managed Heart was an effective, campaigning act of public sociology in the tradition of Wright Mills (1959/1970), who trenchantly argued that the sociologist’s role should be the creation of an informed and radical public
that challenges the powerful. His public sociology and incisive commentary on the shape and direction of post-1945 American society has been an enduring influence on Hochschild’s work. Indeed, *The Managed Heart* opens with a quote from Wright Mills on the emergence in the 1950s of a new market for ‘alert’ and ‘obsequious’ personalities.

*The Managed Heart* is a study of the emotional labour of flight attendants and debt collectors where their daily customer service work is heavily directed by - and measured against - management’s prescribed *feeling rules*. Hochschild’s analysis is eclectic. She uses some Marxism, much of Goffman’s interactionism and even a touch of Freud on emotion psychology. Indeed, her adoption of Marx’s alienation theory to explain the harm wrought by emotional labour - where a smile, feeling and relationship “comes to belong more to the organization and less to the self” (1983/2003, 198) - underpins much of *The Managed Heart’s* sharp, radical tenor. This is especially so as it offers a rich account of flight attendants resisting work-intensification - *speed-up* – through informal and trade union organised action. It is an analysis that “clearly politicises our understanding of emotion at work” (Fineman 2005, 6). Because of this, scholarly reactions have tended to take sides - or simply pass over - the political ramifications of Hochschild’s analysis (see Brook 2009). For example, prominent critics object to her use of alienation by labelling it as ‘absolutist’ and claiming instead that emotional labour can be enormously satisfying, as well as distressing for the worker (e.g. Wouters, 1989; Tolich, 1993).

Nevertheless, while the content of her original concept has been subject to much critique – *transmutation of feelings, surface acting and deep acting* – for its limited ability to capture the contradictory, complex and potentially resistive nature of front-line service work (see Korczynski and Macdonald 2009), the singular notion of *emotional labour* has been adopted - and adapted - by the vast majority of those studying emotion at work. As Hochschild notes, there are now emotional labour studies of “social workers, retail sales clerks, Disneyland ride operators, waitresses, receptionists, youth shelter workers, telemarketers, personal trainers, nursing caregivers, professors, policemen, midwives, door-to-door salesmen, police detectives, hair stylists and sheriff’s interrogators” (1983/2003, 200). Moreover, emotional labour has always been an inter-disciplinary concept. Within this ever expanding array, there is a noticeable tendency for studies to have either a psychological focus (e.g. Janz and Timmers [2002] on emotional dissonance) or to be primarily sociological (Grandy et al 2012).

Since *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild has widened her focus to encompass the creeping commodification of everyday life, not least at the blurring boundary between home and work. Principally through a series of critically acclaimed popular sociologies - read far and wide beyond the academy - her down-to-earth writing has dug deep to reveal the de-personalising, distorting effects of consumerism on the self, relationships and wider society. Her enduring commitment to challenging the inequalities of gender and class resulted in a powerful teaming-up with the renowned campaigning writer Barbara Ehrenreich to edit *Global Women: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers* (2003). Here they shine their critical spotlight on the global market for emotional labour by exploring the exploited and...
harsh lives of women from across the world; ‘imported’ to provide the commodified ‘love’, ‘care’ and ‘intimacy’ that sustain the so-called ‘new economy’s’ affluent, yet time-poor lifestyles.

Hochschild’s *The Second Shift* (1989/2003) – a US bestseller - also shines the spotlight on the unseen work of women, but this time the continuing, unequal burden of childcare and housework in the modern dual-income family; a manifestation of what she refers to as the ‘stalled gender revolution’. In doing so, she questions the dominant assumption that childcare should still be a wholly ‘private’ responsibility of families, and women in particular. She shows how these ideas and assumptions are reproduced on a daily basis by the rules and practices in parents’ ‘public’ workplaces. Here the expectation is that women do the bulk of childcare. This then, severely constrains the possibilities for more equal-parenting, causing frustration, strain and exhaustion for working mothers - and fathers. Hochschild describes how couples are locked together in a division of labour, underpinned by an unequal ‘economy of gratitude’. She paints a vivid picture of treadmill existences for exhausted mothers and harried fathers struggling to meet the emotional demands of an idealised family life and employers’ exhortations for evermore effort in the workplace.

Hochschild revisits and expands on similar themes in *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (1997) – another bestseller. After interviewing every employee in a *Fortune 500* company, she discovered a startling and disturbing trend that even when ‘family friendly’ policies, such as flexi-time, are available few working parents, particularly mothers, are willing to adjust their long unsocial working hours. Hochschild’s conclusion is that such are the stresses and demands of today’s home-life – particularly idealised ‘intensive mothering’ - that its function as a sanctuary from the pressures of work is rapidly diminishing. Instead workplaces, especially offices, are now a more attractive social environment for many working parents, because work offers a sense of belonging, support and, by comparison with home-life, manageable demands.

In *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work* (2003), Hochschild goes beyond the themes of the *The Second Shift* and *Time Bind* to interrogate how neo-liberal capitalism is shaping and changing every imaginable aspect of daily life, and in the process our very selves through faux, commodified experiences of love and intimacy. She provides devastating evidence of how the commodity frontier is overrunning our everyday lives and assumptions about the boundary between our public and private lives. In *Intimate Life* she interrogates the rapid growth and insidious effects of the women’s’ advice industry, personal services and the new ‘paid help’ market. She builds on the same themes in her latest book, *The Outsourced Self: Intimate Life in Market Times* (2012). Here Hochschild compares a self-sufficient farming village where she spent summers as a child with the expanding global marketplace that now offers outsourced burials at sea, ‘love coaches’, ‘wedding planners’, surrogate mothers and much, much more. For Hochschild, the commodification of intimacy is eroding the emotional and cultural fabric that binds together families, communities and societies. She points the finger of blame at the ruthless march of the free market through neo-liberal privatisation and austerity, where hitherto regulated social spheres, organic cultural domains and
private lives are made fit for market colonisation. The irony for Hochschild is that many of those who feverishly demand the radical chopping away of market regulation, state welfare and public services are often the same social conservatives who incessantly bemoan the demise of traditional family values.

In the thirty-years since the publication of *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild has played a peerless role, as scholar and popular public commentator, to reveal in stark detail the damage wrought by capitalism’s deepening colonisation of our everyday lives, work and relationships. She has kept a relentless spotlight on the creeping commodity frontier, even if she has tended to leave unanswered questions of how, who, where and when we can resist, even turn-back the forward march of marketisation and commodification.

The special issue contributions

The articles in this special issue explore different aspects of Hochschild's work - from the blurring intersection of work and private life; to her explorations of emotional labour; and perhaps most importantly, to her research on the processes and social effects of commercialisation and commodification. The articles employ a variety of perspectives to explore transformations at the commodity frontier. The range encompasses historical, contemporary, theoretical, empirical and ethnographic studies. Some study discourse, or look at practices, while others have a macro-sociological outlook or offer micro-sociological case studies.

As a starting point, Orvar Löfgren draws on Hochschild's studies of the blurring boundaries between work and home. He then applies a cultural history perspective to study the interplay of two processes: emotionalisation and commodification. By comparing two periods of rapid economic and cultural change in Swedish history – the informal society of the early 1970s and the ‘new economy’ in the late 1990s – he highlights and unravels some of the contradictions in the commodification process. For him, both periods are characterised by a process of emotionalisation. However emotions were put to work in radically different ways. The emotionalisation during the informal society in the early 1970s was accompanied by a process of de-commodification and a rejection of consumerism and commodity fetishism. This was most of all a political project from ‘below’. The emotionalisation during the new economy in the late 1990s was much more driven by an economic imperative and an intensification of commodification. Löfgren is particularly interested in what connects these two periods. In which ways, he asks, has the informal society become a stepping stone for the narcissistic catwalk culture in the new economy?

Allison Pugh's takes Hochschild's work about relationships and intimacy as her starting point. Her article is based on empirical work. She uses interviews to explore how a consumerist ideology pervades talk about relationships, about both, friends and work relationships. Here commodification does not refer to material things but to the realm of the immaterial, to relationships and to language. How is the vocabulary that people use to talk about relationships shaped and dictated by the market?
For Pugh, the consumerist ideology is expressed with respect to three components: the primacy of choice; the loyalty to authenticity; and the replaceability of people. Often this consumerist language serves as a liquefying agent by creating distance and devaluing social bonds. It is perhaps not so surprising that there is a class aspect to this argument, as those interviewees at the lower end of the social ladder were particularly aware of themselves as replaceable commodities.

Andreas Wittel uses a passage in the Preface to the 2012 Edition of the Managed Heart to make an argument about the last three decades of commodification. For him, the commodity frontier might have arrived at its final stage as there is not much left that can be turned into a private good any more. He looks at the commodification process from the opposite direction. He conceptualises the digital commons as a process of counter-commodification and a moment that has the potential to fundamentally transform production in capitalist economies. As digital production is at the very heart of cognitive capitalism, the digital commons is not just any other disruption of the process of commodification. It is the site of a fierce struggle over the future of the internet and the future of capitalism itself.

While Wittel theorises the digital commons as a concrete utopia, he is also sceptical. Due to its rather specific political economy, which is an economy of contribution, the digital commons can only achieve its full potential if we develop and support an understanding of labour that goes beyond the narrow confines of the wage-based system.

Paul Brook theorises a rather specific aspect of commodification – the commodification of labour power from a labour process perspective. His project is a detailed and in-depth examination of the productivity of Hochschild's concept of emotional labour for developing a Marxist, materialist theory of worker subjectivity. For Brook, Hochschild's concept of emotional labour – primarily defined as an aspect of labour power that is sold for a wage – is a particularly fruitful foundation. This is because it supports an understanding that the emotional aspect of labour power is inseparable from its physical and intellectual dimensions. He here builds on Marx’s idea that labour power constitutes the living personality at work. However, Brook is also critical of how Hochschild's concept tends to overly focus on the individual employee – via surface acting and deep acting. He argues instead that the experience of work is not atomised, but rather subjective-collective. This is because employees experience of their pay, working conditions and management control is more often than not a shared one amongst co-workers. Therefore, their common experience of exploitation and subordination opens up possibilities for collective resistance to employers’ attempts to squeeze out ever more value from their yet-to-be realised labour power commodity. Brook theorises this by blending the ideas of Vygotsky and the classical dialogicians (Bakhtin and Vološinov) to produce a materialist understanding of the social and collective mediation of worker's emotional effort, which he argues is the volitional tone of all labour activity. Consequently, workers’ subjective-collective experience of their unitary labour power manifests itself through their routine engagement in dialogical contests with management over the meaning and purpose of speech, affect and behaviour at work.
Gertraud Koch is interested in the border work against commodification by individual actors who go beyond what is formally required in their jobs to offer altruistic empathy and kindness, thereby engaging in acts of de-commodification. She also inspects the social structures that support empathic help against de-humanisation alienation in the workplace. Building on more recent perspectives of Hochschild on the borderlands of commodification, she criticises social and cultural studies for putting too much emphasis on an understanding of commodification that overly emphasises its harmful effects. Instead, she argues that there needs to be a much greater emphasis on the possibilities of ameliorating its de-humanising effects through acts of empathic kindness in the workplace. She draws on the example of an engineering training officer who helps one of his apprentices, a teenage migrant, to start an apprenticeship in another trade and theorises this as an act of empathy. It is an act of care that does not rely on modern forms of corporate governance and its mediating techniques of coaching, mentoring, psychological talk, and other impositions of a therapeutic habitus. Instead he takes responsibility and takes matters into his own hands. For Koch, the social spaces for unconditional giving are more plentiful than we acknowledge amidst the regulatory, competitive demands of commodified work and living. She finishes by making a plea for a greater appreciation of the hidden reserves of altruism, as a deep, humane response to the calculative corrosiveness of market logic.

This special issue ends, fittingly, with an afterword by Arlie Hochschild. Here she offers a short, eloquent commentary on the articles common themes. She highlights that the contributors are united by their opposition to the de-humanising, ultimately anti-social encroachment of the commodity frontier. In doing so, she acknowledges that the articles offer a diverse range of possibilities for countering the forward march of commodification and market relations. For Hochschild, it is not one-way commodification traffic, but rather the border of market culture is in a constant state of being pushed forwards then pushed back some way through resistance or the emergence of non-market alternatives; followed by another push forward that is met by yet more countering push-backs; and on it goes. In short, the commodity frontier is porous, messy and contested, but always on the move.

Common themes, diverse analyses

While all articles in this special issue are characterised by difference and a variety of heterogeneous perspectives, approaches, and methodologies, they also have commonalities with respect to a number of themes relating to the commodification frontier. The corrosive intrusion of capitalism into people's lives is widespread. Not surprisingly, spaces of commodification are spreading and can now be found everywhere. Löfgren's space of commodification is a cultural history of everyday life, at work and at home. The 'new' colonised spaces – made fit for the 'new economy' - were previously non-consumerist and even avowedly anti-capitalist emotional landscapes. Pugh's space of commodification is language. It is language, however, that informs as well as represents practice. The way we talk about friends is how we are with friends. Wittel's contested space of commodification is the digital space, the rapidly growing cyberspace and the rather specific political economy of the digi-
nal commons. Brook’s and Koch’s spaces of commodification refer to the realm of social realms from which commodification may exist as well and the inventiveness of capitalism is likely to raise-up new ones. This variety in the nature of commodification is countered by the banality of its effects: collective alienation through the distortion of individual senses of self-worth and our social relationships, as the inevitable result of exposure to an unchained marketization. It is a thingified world where individuals, natural resources and the fruits of humanity’s collective labour are priced-up to be bought, sold and competed over in a global bazaar. Commodification and selling generates an inescapable alienation that enfolds its destructive effects on humanity and sociality, even if the intensity of individual estrangement ebbs and flows through space, time and circumstance.

Another theme running through all the contributions is the tension between commodification and de-commodification. Where are the autonomous spaces and places for resistance, born of inherently antagonistic workplace relations, ‘counter-commons’, ‘moral economies’ and contested ‘emotionologies’? How do we resist at work and in wider society? Why do we consent to socio-economic diktats of capitalism and its attempts to commodify everything? The commodity frontier is always on the move, being pushed further ahead at the behest of capital – what the Occupy Movement call the super-rich 1% - but also being pushed backwards ‘from below’ in crucial ways by many from within the 99%. This is the core, takeaway argument from each of the articles in this special issue; total commodification and pure market relations are impossible. Often unnoticed or unprofitable social realms provide a residuum for both resistance and nascent alternative futures; while in the workplace the frontier of control is daily tested and probed, often pushed back and sometimes even breached. In total, the contributions map and examine the dynamic interplay between commodifying forces and de-commodifying activities. It is a complex, contested and ambiguous field.

While all contributors acknowledge the possibility for resistance, they arrive at different evaluations on the robustness of autonomous/alternative spaces, and the resilience/potential of resisting practices. Pugh does find interviewees who reject a consumerist thinking about their friends, but she does not find many. The informal and anti-consumerist lifestyle that emerged in Sweden in the 1970s...
only lasted for a decade or so. Indeed, Löfgren’s analysis of the colonisation of this anti-consumerist lifestyle a few decades on by the market driven ideology of the new economy does not leave much room for hope. Both Pugh and Löfgren share a good portion of scepticism with respect to acts of resistance. Similarly, Hochschild suggests that there is little room for durable resistance, but she does express the hope that pushing back against the market logic of a *tumbleweed* world of just-for-now, demi-attached relationships must involve striving for “communities based on love and commitment that last”. More hopeful approaches are developed in the articles by Wittel, Brook and Koch. Wittel discusses the commons-based peer production as a potentially powerful alternative to a commodified internet; Brook sees the antagonistic nature of the employment relationship and the subjective-collective experience at work as a basis for mutual support and worker’s resistance; and Koch’s hope lies in the overriding social morality of individuals who doggedly insist on acting out of altruism, not self-interest, even when it cuts against management rules at work.

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According to Google Scholar, citations for *The Managed Heart* number nearly 9,000

**References**


