The great labor process debate that enervated studies of work throughout the 1970s, 80s and early 90s has largely subsided, settling into what one recent analyst, referencing Adler (2007), calls a state of “paleo-paralysis” (Vallas 2007). While some of this decline can be attributed to sheer exhaustion among many of the protagonists, a good portion is likely due to the waning significance of manufacturing as a sector of employment in advanced capitalist nations, with this field of work having provided the primary empirical battleground for debates about deskilling, upgrading or other trajectories of workplace change.

In the interim, a burgeoning sociology of service work has grown up in the wake of labor process theory, much of it starting in its footsteps, but developing in a more subjective direction. The fruits of these recent labors have been anything but meager, supplying researchers with analytic concepts such as emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), aesthetic labor (Pettinger 2004), the service triangle (Leidner 1993) and “organized emotional care” (Lopez 2006) that greatly aid the study of services and their effects on service workers. But attention to change in service occupations has been decidedly less central to recent accounts than their psycho-social dynamics. In particular, the grandiose hypotheses of labor process theorists have been largely absent from the study of service work. Such a-historicism inhibits our ability to fully understand the contemporary dynamics within service industries, while dissuading researchers from testing the classic hypotheses of labor process theory on a more current (and growing) field of employment.
This study aims to address this gap in recent research by analyzing change in department store sales work since the mid-twentieth century. Based on in-depth case studies of two contemporary department stores in New York City—Macy’s and Target, representative of ‘traditional’ and discount sales models—as well as historical analysis of early twentieth-century department stores, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: to what extent have frontline services, such as retail sales, been degraded and deskilled, or conversely upgraded and en-skilled? Is there an identifiable pattern? And how have such trajectories, if found to exist, proceeded in the context of more emotion-based, intrinsically interactive occupations?

In what follows, I first review studies of service work and the labor process debate to derive four key hypotheses as they pertain to two service categories: emotional labor and the service triangle. Next, I describe a qualitative and historically-informed method for interrogating these claims before moving to an empirical analysis of sales work in early twentieth-century and contemporary American department stores. While pre-war selling is found to display many aspects of craft organization, sales work in today’s ‘traditional’ stores, such as New York Macy’s, are found to have undergone restructuring closely analogous to Taylorism but in an altered fashion I call as inverse Taylorism. The case of Target, shows further work rationalization in the discount arena described as service Toyotism, or what might alternately be called ‘lean’ or ‘Japanese-style’ service organization. Finally, these transitions are found to provide evidence for the deskilling of emotional labor within the department store sector of the retail industry.

Service Work and Labor Process Theory

Since the publication of Hochschild’s The Management Heart in 1983 the study of service work has steadily grown and begun to approach the weight in work-related research that
services have long since held as a proportion of the U.S. workforce. The defining aspects of frontline, “interactive services” (Leidner 1993, 1996) in contrast to manufacturing, clerical and all other non-interactive jobs have been identified as 1) the emotional labor involved in working on people rather than things and 2) their triadic, rather than dyadic structure of interests and control.

Hochschild’s concept of emotional labor has been arguably the most enduring contribution to this field. Originally defined as “labor [that] requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (1983, 7), “emotional labor” and its effects have since been applied and analyzed in myriad service workplaces (Tolich 1993; Wharton 1999, 2009; Brotheridge and Grandey 2002) and further elaborated to develop the related concepts of “aesthetic labor” (Pettinger 2004) and “organized emotional care” (Lopez 2006).

Parallel to this has been the identification, application and elaboration of the “worker-manager-customer triangle” (Bolton and Houlihan 2010; Lopez 2010). Benson’s (1986) historical study of department store sales work was perhaps the first to note this multi-angled force field of interests, while later historians (Cobble 1991; Opler 2007) and ethnographers (Paules 1991; Leidner 1993) came to similar conclusions and, in the cases of Leidner and Korczynski (2002), formalized these findings into a theory of shifting alliances (on the part of workers) between customers (or clients, patients, etc.) on the one hand, and managers on the other, with the potential for these latter two to team up in controlling worker behavior.

Thus while “emotional labor” theorists focus primarily on the content and complexity of service tasks, “triangle” theorists focus more on autonomy, opposition and consent among key actors in the service workplace. Below we will see that task complexity and autonomy have been
generally recognized and used as the primary dimensions of skill, but before we can discuss this it must be noted that the central deficiency of recent service work studies is their lack of attention to historical change. Specifically, how have emotional labor and triadic workplace structures changed over time within service industries? By what mechanisms? To whose benefit? And can we identify clear trajectories in these developments? The intriguing but all-too abstract efforts of Ritzer (1993; see Smart 1999 for a critique) and Bryman (2009) to account for such changes notwithstanding, as well as the highly suggestive but superficial attempt of Braverman in his chapter on services (1974, 248-60), it is to the seminal debate on labor process change in manufacturing industries that we must turn for theoretical guidance in answering these questions.

Braverman’s (1974) account has long been taken as the primary formulation of the deskilling theory of workplace change. Centrally dealing with transformations occurring in manufacturing (though with a significant application to clerical trades), he argued that “the worker, systematically robbed of a craft heritage, is given little or nothing to take its place” (ibid, 5). The proposed causal mechanism behind such degradation was not technological change or ‘rationalization’ per se (as per Kerr et al. 1960; Blauner 1964), but capitalist relations of production: “the manner in which labor processes are organized and carried out, is the ‘product’ of the social relations we know as capitalist” (ibid, 15). Braverman saw Taylorism as the definitive theoretical expression of the capitalist imperative to increase control over workers through methodical observation, knowledge transfer (from workers to management), subdivision and routinization of workers’ tasks, culminating in a significant erosion of workers’ skill, or deskilling.

Later theorists who were sympathetic to Braverman’s approach emphasized the roles of worker consciousness and organization (e.g. Montgomery 1979; Edwards 1979) in resisting this
downward trajectory, with Edwards (1979) and Burawoy (1979) identifying alternate managerial control strategies such as bureaucratization and “good sportsmanship” (Stinchcombe 1990, 297, in reference to Burawoy 1979). Taylorism on such formulations, was not the epitome of capitalist work-rationality, but merely one particular and not entirely successful mode, with Fordism, welfarism and human resource management providing at times superior means for enforcing control and gaining worker consent. This theory of workplace change, in accordance with the title of Edwards’ influential book, might be called the contestation model, whereby the impulse to deskill exists on the part of managers and capitalists, but as a tendency that can be counteracted rather than an inexorable process as Braverman’s account appears to suggest.

A third group of theorists in the mid- to late-1980s, however, began to raise doubts about the underlying validity of the deskilling hypothesis. Wood (1987) and Attewell (1987) debated whether degradation as a general trajectory could ever be empirically verified and Attewell (1990) later took issue with the very concept of skill, arguing that it was so shot through with subjective criteria as to be of little value to the objective investigation of work. Seeing no clear trajectory in historical patterns of workplace change, these researchers’ proposals have been largely (and appropriately) named a “contingency theory of labor process change” (Tomaskovic-Devey and Risman 1993).

Finally, and perhaps most persistently, a fourth group of theorists both pre- and post-Braverman have asserted the opposite of deskilling—namely, skill upgrading (e.g. Adler 2007). Proposed causal mechanisms for this upward trajectory are more heterogeneous than those of deskilling or contestation theorists, who typically implicated capitalist work relations: while Blauner (1964), Gorz (1964) and Bell (1973) saw technological change as the key driver of increased skill, Sabel (1982), Piore and Sabel (1984) and other post-Fordists favored macro-level
shifts in the normative structure of industrial relations, while enthusiasts of Japanese-style lean manufacturing emphasized the role of enlightened, ‘participatory’ management that sought “high performance workplaces” (Whitfield 2000; see also Ohno 1988; Krafick 1988; Womack and Jones 2003). Though this latter variant has had its share of critics (e.g. Milkman 1991; Graham 1995; Moody 1997), with Dohse et al. (1985) referring to lean methods as ‘Toyotism’, both it and upgrading theory generally continue to exercise strong influence on social-scientific and popular perceptions of work transformations.

With all this talk about the trajectory of skill a more determinate concept of skill is also called for. Comparatively little controversy (with the noted exception of Attewell 1990) surrounds the division of work into intrinsic and extrinsic aspects (e.g. Kalleberg 1977; Littler 1982; Spender 1983; Mottaz 1985; Vallas 1987), with the intrinsic (i.e. skill) seen to consist of both task complexity and worker autonomy (or its converse, managerial control). These two generic intrinsic dimensions can be applied to an understanding of work in its myriad concrete forms (e.g. manufacturing, service or otherwise) and provide our present investigation with a more focused theoretical lens for interpreting data from contemporary service industries.

In this review we have identified two concepts about service work—emotional labor and triadic control structures—that have been extensively elaborated but not sufficiently investigated with regard to historical change. Labor process theory provides us with four possible trajectories for workplace change that can be applied to these aspects of service work: deskilling, contestation, upgrading or contingency. Finally, the emotional labor and triadic structures posited of frontline services fit well within the categories of task complexity and worker autonomy long used to interpret skill in other areas of employment.
Research Design

To investigate the transformation of service work over time a longitudinal and industry-focused study is called for. Here I lay out a methodological justification for—and the limitations of—an in-depth qualitative comparison of two contemporary service workplaces: traditional and discount department stores.

Of the nine service-providing industries defined by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,¹ education and health, wholesale and retail, and professional and business services are the largest.² Education and health operate to a significant extent in the public sector, while professional and business services contain a large proportion (54.7 percent) of managerial workers, with weekly earnings even for non-supervisory staff at 124 percent of the private-sector mean. In retail, however, only 9.8 percent of workers hold managerial positions and frontline wages are 63 percent of the private-sector mean (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011),³ making retail the largest for-profit service industry with a predominantly low-wage workforce. Recent accounts point to the centrality of retail in the global articulation of America’s ‘postindustrial’ economy as well as its influence on employment practices in other sectors (Lichtenstein 2006, 2009; Moreton 2009; Lambert 2008). Thus to investigate workplace change within frontline services organized specifically under capitalist relations of ownership, retail presents a conspicuous target of study.

Retail is a complex sector with many subsectors. General merchandise firms make up the largest portion of employment (21 percent in 2011), the second-largest of sales (14.4 percent in

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¹ Wholesale and retail trade, transportation and utilities, information, financial activities, professional and business services, education and health services, other services, and public administration (although transportation and utilities, with high proportions of production-type jobs) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).
² Respectively employing 22.8 percent, 14.1 percent, and 11.3 percent, of the American workforce in 2011; retail alone accounted for 11.4 percent, placing it second behind education and health (or health alone) and above professional and business services.
³ Second only to non-supervisory leisure and hospitality workers, who earned 43 percent of the private-sector average.
2007) and third-largest of profit (14 percent in 2007). This subsector also has the fastest rate of employment growth, expanding 23 percent between 1990 and 2011. Its department store sub-sector (NAICS 4521) accounts for half of its employment (10.5 percent of the retail total) and includes traditional full-line stores along with big-box discounters. Firms in this sector, from Macy’s and Sears to Wal-Mart and Target, have long played leading roles in industry change (Benson 1986; Leach 1993; Jacoby 1997; Lichtenstein 2006, 2009) and a long-term shift from the “traditional” to the discount models (Bluestone et al. 1981; Zukin 2004; Lichtenstein 2006). Home to some of the most emblematic traditional stores, New York has only recently been colonized by formerly suburban big-box and discount chains (Angotti 2008). Thus a focus on paradigmatic cases of each model of department store sales in the same city should allow for insight into work transformations over time while controlling for demographic and local-institutional variance.

In choosing cases for study, Macy’s and Target stand out. Due to recent closures and mergers Macy’s, Inc. is now the dominant national chain of traditional department stores. Four of Macy’s New York stores have been unionized since the 1960s; these were chosen as the “traditional” case due to prior evidence that union presence often restricts labor process restructuring, preserving a greater number of past practices for posterity (Montgomery 1979, 15-18). Of the big-three discount chains (Wal-Mart, Kmart and Target), Target is second in size only to Wal-Mart and is continually expanding. While Wal-Mart has been extensively analyzed, Target remains under-investigated, stemming partly from the conscious promotion of a ‘socially responsible’ image. Significantly, Wal-Mart has so far been unable to open any stores within

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4 Employment figures come from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and calculated monthly, thus available for 2011; sales and profit figures come from the Economic Census, conducted every five years, most recently in 2007.

5 The “other general merchandise stores” sub-sub-sector (NAICS 4529) includes dollar and used-good stores, but also warehouse clubs and super-centers (NAICS 45291)—discount department stores with full-line grocery offerings.
New York City due to strong resistance from unions and community groups; Target has encountered no resistance, evidenced by the eight stores it has within the city. Though Kmart is also present in New York and was once the nation’s largest discounter, it has long been eclipsed by Wal-Mart and entered a period of noted decline. To study the vanguard of discount store work and worker consciousness, Target is therefore a prime candidate. Table 1 displays key characteristics for each firm, highlighting the comparative utility of these cases with regard to their respective store models, unionization levels and sales methods.

**Table 1:** Selected Characteristics for Macy’s, Inc. and Target Corporation, 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Macy’s, Inc.</th>
<th>Target Corporation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model</strong></td>
<td>Traditional, full-line</td>
<td>Discount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. outlets</strong></td>
<td>842 (including 44 Bloomingdale’s)</td>
<td>1,763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employees</strong></td>
<td>171,000</td>
<td>365,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. sales</strong></td>
<td>$26.4 billion</td>
<td>$68.5 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. profit (post-tax)</strong></td>
<td>$1.3 billion</td>
<td>$2.9 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Profit rate</strong></td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sales/employee</strong></td>
<td>$154,415</td>
<td>$187,578</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cost of merchandise</strong></td>
<td>$15.7 billion</td>
<td>$47.8 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CoM as % of sales</strong></td>
<td>59.6%</td>
<td>69.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unionization</strong></td>
<td>10 percent of national workforce</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sales method</strong></td>
<td>Individual: some commission; personal sales goals; no cashiers</td>
<td>Collective: no commission; store-wide sales goals; cashiers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources:* Macy’s, Inc. Annual Report (Form 10-K) 2012; Target Corporation Annual Report (Form 10-K) 2012.

Data on work organization at Macy’s and Target stores were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with employees of each company. A total of 60 interviews lasting an average of 45 minutes each were conducted with 62 sales workers and first-level supervisors (30 interviews and 31 subjects per company) from two Macy’s and three Target stores, all located within the five boroughs of New York City; an additional interview was conducted with the president of the Macy’s union local. Company approval was not sought due to the bias it might have engendered in worker responses (Tannock 2001, 228). Because of this, respondents were selected in non-probabilistic fashion through casual in-store discussions, with formal interviews...
set up on this basis. Participants were offered a monetary incentive and chosen to maximize diversity with regard to age, gender, job tenure and department of employment. Interview data is supplemented through documentary analysis of company reports and publications, such as Target’s employee handbook provided me by a respondent.

The following analysis unfolds in four parts. First, I describe the craft-like origins of department store sales work in the first half of the twentieth century, basing my depiction on the extensive historical studies of this period. Second and third, I describe the organization of work in contemporary Macy’s and Target stores in New York, defining Macy’s labor process as inverse Taylorism and Target’s as service Toyotism. Fourth, I compare these two cases to assess the four hypotheses about workplace change as applied to the two central service work concepts of emotional labor and triadic workplace structures.

Craft Selling in Early 20th Century Department Stores

“The unique element in department-store labor policy,” writes Susan Benson in her seminal study of America’s pre-war department stores, “was the encouragement of skilled selling: the use of trained salesclerks to increase the size and number of sales transactions through merchandise information and sales psychology” (1986, 125). C. Wright Mills, analyzing late-1940s department stores, confirms this picture by describing a varied set of tasks that allowed “salesgirls” to develop “a range of sales personalities” from the “interplay of individual with the store and the flow of customers” (1951, 174). He identifies no fewer than eight types of clerk: the Wolf, the Elbower, the Charmer, the Ingénue Salesgirl, the Collegiate, the Drifter, the Social Pretender and the Old-Timer (ibid, 174-77). And William Leach’s extensive history of American consumer culture in the early twentieth century notes that the first “School of
Retailing” (founded in 1919 at the behest of retailers such as Macy’s, Abraham & Straus and Lord & Taylor) attempted “to teach retailing…with the overall intention of upgrading saleswork into ‘skilled labor’” (1993, 159). “The NYU School of retailing,” he states, “attempted to improve retail selling by raising to a higher level the development of the human factors upon which rest the task of distributing the world’s goods (ibid).

In its expansionary innovation phase, the department store industry was engaged in creating a new occupation—the retail salesclerk—that had previously existed only in drastically different or petite-bourgeois forms (Kirstein 1950, 6-14). Given the industry’s then-dominant orientation towards the upscale market (in contrast to the concurrent down-market focus of five-and-dime and early supermarket chains), personalized service provided by clerks was a key component of firms’ differentiation and competition strategies. The absence of ubiquitous branding and advertising—“absentee selling” which Mills saw as ultimately “centralizing and rationalizing” frontline sales work (1951, 179)—combined with pre-war store designs that “separate[ed] goods from customers” by keeping them behind counters, required clerks to be “skilled workers, whose expertise and training were highly valued” (Opler 2007, 81). “[W]ithout the salespeople’s knowledge of the stock on hand,” writes Opler, “and their ability to provide customers with acceptable merchandise, the stores would immediately cease to operate, since customers could not gain access to goods without the intervention of a salesperson” (ibid). This dovetails with what Bluestone et al. noted in their time as the continued “dependence upon skilled labor” of full-line department stores in contrast to their emerging discount counterparts (1981, 66; see also 15-34).

The role of the sales clerk in a typical pre-war (or immediate post-war) department store was not without circumscription: as Mills notes, prices were set by the employer and not open to
“haggling and bargaining,” as had once been the case (1951, 179); each clerk’s sales output was monitored by buyers and “floorwalkers,” providing cause for reprimand or dismissal if too low (ibid, 170); and employer-stipulated “dress codes enforced ‘a defined and appropriate ‘class distinction’ between the customer and the assistant [clerk]’” (Benson 1986, 140). Employers also sought to elicit sales workers’ consent to such control through myriad welfare schemes that included fringe benefits, company unions and leisure facilities (ibid, 142-46; for the case of Sears, see Jacoby 1997, 95-142).

But despite this, significant training was often required of sales personnel—and provided by many employers—for them to competently fulfill their roles in solving capitalism’s emerging macro-level “realization problem” (Braverman 1974, 286). The two technical aspects of skill (task complexity and autonomy) were clearly in evidence even if their socially-determined counterparts (status and pay) were often lacking for frontline salespersons in America’s early 20th-century department stores. Though the salesperson’s job was a new one not accompanied by the storied lore (and pay) of such time-honored occupations as machinist, butcher or weaver, its intrinsic features nonetheless most accurately pinpoint it as a form of craft work, not yet exposed to the simplifying tendencies of Taylorism, Fordism, or other management-driven rationalization strategy.

**Inverse Taylorism at Macy’s**

Moving forward in time to contemporary Macy’s stores, we can see the incipient “rationalization” Mills identified now in full force. Product branding and the attendant “absentee selling” of advertising have become ubiquitous, while save for very few categories of goods,
such as jewelry and fragrances, almost all merchandise is now located directly on the sales floor where customers can handle and select it themselves, instead of behind counters.

The division of labor on the sales floor has also been simplified: whereas previously each floor “had exit registers where the cashiers were—the salespeople sold and the cashiers cashed,” today there are no dedicated cashiers: “they actually made them salespeople,” says an 18-year saleswoman and shop steward. “As the years went by,” relates a 31-year salesman, “the salesperson does everything. We used to have stock people, now I think there's one stock person for the whole floor. It's just—you do everything, you are a glorified stock person.” Salespersons have become the predominant group on the sales floor, with their tasks expanded to replace those of now-absent cashiers and a waning number of stock workers. A four-year saleswoman in a women’s apparel department describes her daily routine as follows:

We answer the phone, we register the person out, we go back to the floor, look for the item, we retake the item, pack the item, we also have to check the fitting rooms and put the clothes back, we also have to maintain the floors, right? You also have to open up credit [cards], right? And then sometimes you have to go check the stock room as well. That's basically it. It’s a lot of multitasking and we also have to order.

But despite this broad-banding of salespersons’ tasks within each department, a high level of separation is maintained between departments. A first-year cosmetics saleswoman states, “we don’t really associate with people in other departments, we just stay in cosmetics,” and almost all multi-year salespersons stated that they had remained in the same department throughout their tenure. Specialization of salespersons to particular types of products (e.g. women’s shoes, men’s suits, women’s junior’s) or even brands (French Connection, Ralph Lauren, Sunglass Hut) is a prominent feature of work organization in Macy’s New York stores.

And this specialization relates to Macy’s sales method, officially embodied in the management-promulgated acronym “MAGIC”: “meet and make a connection…asking
questions...give advice...inspire to buy...celebrate the purchase” (2-year shoe salesman, emphasis added). This open-ended method requires salespersons to employ considerable product knowledge in their interactions with customers, and is thus aided by their continued focus on a narrow range of products. “You have to demonstrate your product knowledge because it's best to learn those things in terms of sales,” says the two-year salesman just quoted. A third-year salesman in men’s suits finds that, “it took me about a month to understand the floor, but I would say almost a year to be able to confidently express my opinions to customers.” Even those in smaller-ticket, non-commissioned departments “have to know [the] merchandise, about the brand, about different times and different styles, why this style during this season is in” (4-year saleswoman, men’s casual wear); “it's good to know the jeans so you can inform the customer on how the fit is,” states an eleven-year part-time saleswoman from the women’s plus size department.

Interpersonal ability or more precisely, emotional labor, is an additional aspect required of effective salespeople and again, embodied in the company’s MAGIC approach. “I just learned to be real patient and observant with customers,” says a one-year saleswoman in women’s juniors, “because you can't come up to every customer the same way—some want to be really attended to, some just want to be left alone.” A first-year cosmetics saleswoman, when asked whether her concurrent training as an actress is ever useful on the sales floor, simply states:

Oh definitely, are you kidding? If I have a ridiculously rude customer that doesn't want to listen to anything I say and I have to put on a face and be professional, that's what I do. When the customer doesn't want to believe what I'm saying—improvising, it's really part of the job.

Although the MAGIC method encourages such open-ended interaction, and ways of conducting it are taught in the company’s two-part MAGIC classes required of salespersons, many rely on their own intuition and charisma to make sales: “I sort of use MAGIC,” says the two-year shoe
salesman previously quoted, “but really I'm more of a comedy person, so I try to stand out by my attitude and my luck.” And the eleven-year saleswoman from women’s plus sizes finds that “it’s pretty about much being yourself, if you enjoy talking and selling. Each of us, we all do our own thing, no one does the same thing.” Charisma, intuition and product knowledge are thus key components of the salesperson’s role at contemporary Macy’s. MAGIC, a managerial attempt at standardizing the sales process, is in practice more a general guideline and embodiment of company policy than a rote procedure rigidly followed by each and every salesperson.

Salespersons’ inputs at Macy’s today are thus multiple and varied, though tied to specific departments, and relatively loosely controlled. At few times are they required by supervisors to immediately perform specific tasks, either maintenance or sales-related. Instead, the balance between these two functions is negotiated throughout the shift: “We do our own thing,” says a five-year saleswoman, “they [managers] tell us what to do but if we don't feel like doing it we don't really do it.” A four-year saleswoman affirms that “even when Macy's doesn't have a supervisor on our floor we still join together and do what we have to do; we get things done the same way.” While salespersons’ physical control of the merchandise and monopoly on knowledge of it have been greatly reduced since the counter-top days of the pre-war (and largely pre-branding, pre-advertising) era, contemporary Macy’s workers retain a non-negligible degree of autonomy over their immediate task inputs.

Sales output, however, is another matter entirely. Here is where the Taylorist imperatives of task subdivision, time-calculation and systematic increase of output through the use of individualized incentives are most evident. All salespersons receive daily sales goals electronically determined by store-level management based on each department’s year-to-date sales plus an incremental increase, then divided by the number of salesperson-hours on that day.
Progress toward these goals is calculated for each individual on the registers every time she completes a purchase throughout her shift. In addition to these aggregate daily (weekly, monthly, quarterly) goals, output is also measured and graded across three other dimensions: average sales per hour, day, week, etc., the items customers buy per transaction (“IPT”) and the number of Macy’s credit cards that salespersons sign customers up for (the goal being three per week for full-time employees during the period of study). “The time you are outside the register,” says a four-year salesman, “they [managers] call ‘unproductive hours’ which means you are not selling, you are doing something that helps the sale but is called unproductive. Only the time you are ringing, that's a ‘productive hour.’”

Attaining or surpassing goals, for all but the minority of commissioned salespersons, yields no incentive other than an improved scorecard that could potentially lead to a raise at one’s next annual review. Failure to attain goals, at least in unionized New York Macy’s stores, cannot be an official cause for dismissal; when subsumed into the employee’s overall review (which also includes attendance and any behavioral write-ups), however, it can have a detrimental impact on raises and chances for promotion or transfer to higher-paying departments.

“If you want to go to another department,” states a first-year saleswoman, “the manager is not interested in how well you look or how nice you are, she wants to look at your scorecard because she doesn't want to lose in her department, she wants someone who can perform well.” Another first-year saleswoman finds the goals system produces “tension? Every single day, it's very competitive,” while a four-year salesman states this “in my department I have two registers but six persons working at the same time, each with a $1000 goal. How could, in the same working hours, six people make the same target?” A two-year saleswoman simply finds the system “individualistic, you feel like it’s a dog-eat-dog kind of world.”
What we observe at contemporary Macy’s store is as follows. The former craft model of selling has been greatly altered by the removal of counters and the introduction of ubiquitous branding and mass advertising, though important elements of it still remain—namely, the product- and brand-based specialization of salespersons, combined with the extensive product knowledge and in-depth emotional labor required of them. The framework for autonomously performing these functions, however, has been further reduced by the recent implementation of the four-dimensional goals scheme that subdivides, time-measures and seeks to raise individual output through (dis-)incentives. At the same time, non-selling tasks within departments are increasingly broad-banded—required of salespersons—with dedicated cashiers removed and the number of stock workers reduced. For these reasons, the organization of sales work in contemporary Macy’s stores is described as inverse Taylorism: a minute subdivision, measurement and raising of salespersons’ individual output combined with a broad-banding and persistent relative autonomy of their immediate inputs.

Service Toyotism at Target

Stepping into a Target store we see many of the tendencies in evidence at Macy’s carried to their conclusion. The central difference in work organization between the two stores is the collectivization and mechanization of selling at Target in contrast to its individualization at Macy’s. Target exhibits a functional-rational store design that places less emphasis on brand and style than Macy’s. There are no branded departments or sections at Target and each store is divided into four large divisions: hardlines (non-food, non-clothing goods), softlines (clothing and shoes), pharmacy and food—subdivided into roughly twenty specific areas (e.g. sporting goods, stationary, women’s wear, frozen food).
Frontline labor is divided not only among these departments, but along the in-store supply chain: from logistics (receiving and stock) to sales floor to “front lanes” (i.e. cashiers, concentrated at one end of the store, unlike at Macy’s) and finally, “special services” (customer returns, product questions and shopping carts). All of these workers are referred to as “team members” and may rotate between departments and divisions throughout their tenure and even on a given shift. “They always train you on the sales floor and on the cash register,” says a first-year sales-floor worker, “because it gets really busy in the store and they sometimes call for back-up, so everyone knows how to work the register.” A one-year stock worker comments that “if it’s very busy then the manager may ask a team member from the sales floor to help us out and they give us a hand.” Cross-departmental cooperation, nearly absent at Macy’s, is thus a regular feature of work at Target.

The sales effort, moreover, is beyond the reach of any individual employee. Stock workers replenish merchandise, sales-floor workers maintain displays and answer customer questions, with cashiers closing final purchases. All of this is coordinated by an integrated database that allows for just-in-time product replenishment: “You scan the shelf label,” says a four-year stock worker, “and what that does is—it’s a system-generated thing—if it’s upstairs [in the stock room] they will send it down; if it’s not, the scanner will order it from the headquarters and they will send it in.” The same function is also performed by front lane registers, which similarly track in-store product depletion and signal when new shipments are needed. Accordingly, store-wide rather than individual sales goals are used; cashiers’ and stocker workers’ output is electronically measured by the registers or handheld Personal Data Assistants (PDAs) in terms of speed rather than sales; and sales-floor workers’ outputs with regard to speed and accuracy of display maintenance as well as style and enthusiasm of customer service are
measured qualitatively by first-tier supervisors, the former in line with strict design “planograms” determined by the corporation at large.

Sales-floor workers, counterparts to Macy’s sales associates, perform three basic tasks: re-shop—replacing misplaced items or customer returns; zoning—organizing displays in line with planograms; and customer service. A first-year sales-floor worker describes his routine as follows:

You come in and if there is re-shop, you put it where it is supposed to be, you take it to the back. Then you get back to your zone and you zone it, that means you push everything forward and make it look neat and clean, that’s basically what we do. And help customers.

‘Helping customers’ also differs in style and content from its corollary activity at Macy’s. The company’s service motto is “Fast, Fun and Friendly” and its signature sales question is “Can I help you find something?” Sales-floor and in-stock workers are “coached” to ask this of all customers (referred to as “guests”) that come within ten feet and to interrupt whatever tasks they are doing to prioritize customer needs. A one-year sales-floor worker and middle school teacher describes her experience as follows:

Being readily available to guests at any time they need something—that is going to make sales. A couple of days ago I was working in pets and seasonal but on my way to somewhere else I got stopped by three different guests and had to call backroom for three different items. That helps with sales, helps drive sales, and if I say just hey, go ask somebody that works in that section, that is not going to help sales because they are probably not going to do that so you have got to be on top of your game all the time. Our motto is fast, fun and friendly. And just be there.

A one-year sales-floor worker in a softlines department states that

They [managers] literally have us, every five minutes asking every single customer, ‘Can I help you find something?’ Mind you, that customer has probably been asked ‘can I help you find something?’ twenty times that day, so it’s annoying to the customer and also annoying to us because we can't get done what we have to get done.
Target’s orientation towards general inventory rather than product-specific service requires less in-depth knowledge from salespersons with the sole exception of those in electronics. An exchange with a three-year sales-floor worker:

Q: Do they give you any training in terms of product knowledge?
A: Only electronics does that openly, if something new is coming out and there’s going to be a big sale they will teach you what you need to know about selling it and asset protection regarding it.

A four-year worker from the stationary department states that “mostly in electronics they have to be knowledgeable, but not for me—no knowledge is necessary.” Reports from most sales-floor workers depict a foreshortened learning curve in comparison to that at Macy’s. “Training took me two weeks,” says a first-year sales-floor worker in her early twenties, “but after the first week I was already pretty much familiar with everything.” The need for product knowledge is thus significantly less for Target than for Macy’s salespersons, while emotional labor is more routinized—“Can I help you find something?” vs. the open-ended MAGIC method—and less intensive: interactions do not have to end in a sale to be successful, only in the prompt location of an item or price.

A further contrast to Macy’s is the extensive use of teamwork at Target. Within departments, maintenance or stocking tasks are typically assigned as group, rather than individual objectives and in the process of serving customers, team members are encouraged to cooperate both within and across departments in order to meet customer needs. “We call it one team, one dream,” says a first-year sales-floor worker, repeated a managerial motto, each department is one team, like softlines, electronics, health and beauty, but if health and beauty is not done and we are, then we go to help them, so everybody is just one team, altogether. We help each other out all the time; everybody has to help each other out.
“Working together?” replies a one-year sales-floor worker to a question about cooperation, “a good 90 percent of the time. The only time I would be by myself is if I’m the only one in the store, say from eight until nine, but mostly working together.” A one-year stock worker finds that “there is no single day that we move apart, we are always together.” And a first-year sales-floor worker in the market section describes the necessity of cooperation for completing re-shop and zoning tasks:

If there is any re-shop it is for the whole section so we will put our carts together and get all the re-shop out together. At night there is something we call wave zoning where we zone together, like you take this side, I take that side, and we just zone each aisle together. So yeah, we do work together a lot.

The “team” mentality extends to first-, second- and third-level managers, who are referred to as team leaders (TLs), executive team leaders (ETLs) and store team leaders (STLs), respectively, and reinforced at twice daily “huddles” that closely approximate the famous quality circles of Japanese auto manufacturers. A store-wide huddle is held each morning and “each section has their own little huddle throughout the day,” says a first-year stock worker, “the morning huddle is just to get everything kicked off and let everyone know what’s going on in the store.” Store-wide sales goals and their recent attainment (or not) are discussed at these meetings, which typically last five to fifteen minutes, as well as any new display-building, stocking or customer service projects. But in addition to such practical matters, team leaders “talk about if it’s somebody’s birthday or if somebody has an anniversary, and they will give us samples from Starbucks if there is a new drink” (1st-year sales-floor worker). Team members are publicly “recognized” by team leaders or fellow team members for doing good work or publicly reprimanded, by team leaders only, for “hitting compliance”:

If you hit compliance your name is also called—it’s like public embarrassment, sort of. Nobody really looks at it that way but that’s exactly what it is, they point you out in front of everybody and say ‘you messed up so you need to fix that.’ (1st-year stock worker)
Managerial control is greater at Target than at Macy’s. Not only are tasks more routinized and pre-designed, with speed (for stock workers and cashiers), accuracy (for stock, sales and cashier workers) and collective output (sales) continuously measured by management, but shop-floor oversight—that is, control of workers’ inputs—also closely monitored. “I pretty much did anything I wanted in Macy’s,” says a first-year Target sales-floor worker who previously worked at Macy’s,

they didn’t have strict guidelines. Target is a little more strict, I guess since they are used to dealing with kids [younger workers], so they are on you making sure you’re on time, on you for doing your work and stuff, so it’s different.

“They have supervisors that watch you,” says a four-year sales floor worker, “you don’t know they watch you but they watch you.” A first-year sales-floor worker states that “the team leads and the LODs [leaders on duty—ETLs] constantly walk the floor to see if we are on task and that we are not loafing,” and another first-year sales-floor worker echoes the opinion of many others in “believ[ing] that they do use the [in-store] cameras to watch how everybody is working. I mean they would always come out and say, ‘hey, I see you on the camera doing this or doing that.’”

The organization of work at Target can be defined as service Toyotism: tasks and positions are intensively standardized and monitored, with store-level functions operating on a unified, mechanized and just-in-time basis. At the same time, however, workers are not “fix[ed]…to jobs whose positions [are] rigorously determined by the configuration of the machine system,” as in the classic Fordist paradigm (Aglietta 1979, 118); they rotate between positions and perform many tasks as teams rather than as isolated individuals fixed to one point in the production—or distribution—process. Furthermore, worker input, or the semblance thereof, is regularly sought during “huddles,” a near equivalent to Toyotist quality circles.
Deskilling Emotional Labor

The most lasting contribution to the study of service work has been Hochschild’s concept of emotional labor: “labor [that] requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild 1983, 7; see also Wharton 2009). This intrinsic dimension of interactive service has long been used to set it apart from manufacturing, clerical, and other types of non-interactive work. Retail selling is one of the oldest forms of interactive work (involving emotional labor) to be carried on under capitalist relations. Therefore, according to Braverman’s deskilling hypothesis, it should have undergone a process of degradation whereby the complexity of emotional tasks and the autonomy of salespersons to perform them show a secular decline. Do we observe this when we compare the roles of salespersons (sales associates and sales-floor team members, respectively) at Macy’s and Target?

The role of salespersons at Macy’s is not uniform across the store. It varies with the type and price of products and with the ownership structure (vendor-leased or Macy’s owned) of departments. A dividing line based on commission vs. straight-hourly pay types runs between ‘high-end’ and ‘low-end’ departments and salespeople, respectively. The tasks of all salespersons are multiple, however, including an increasing number of cleaning, maintenance and register duties previously performed by a larger number of support staff and dedicated cashiers (now absent). Multi-tasking, and the complexity inherent in that, is thus ever-present for Macy’s salespeople.

But selling itself is where most task-based complexity is registered. All salespersons have a vested interest in achieving this whether they receive commission or not (due to the goals
system for all associates) and to sell effectively, especially in high-priced, commission-based
departments such as men’s suits or women’s shoes, often requires extensive product knowledge
that changes with the seasons, new fashions or product lines. A three-year salesman from men’s
suits reported that it took him “almost a year” to become familiar enough to sell effectively, and
associates from other commissioned departments reported similar, elongated learning curves.
Respondents from non-commissioned departments also emphasized the necessity of maintaining
product knowledge to aid their sales efforts and meet goals, such as the eleven-year saleswoman
who found “it's good to know the jeans so you can inform the customer on how the fit is.”

Product knowledge, however, is only half the equation when it comes to selling, the other
being interpersonal ability. Macy’s has attempted to standardize this through its MAGIC method,
but this ‘method’ is less about reciting a rote script and memorizing set information (as at Target)
than about getting salespersons to engage customers on a personal level, keep them talking and
via this open-ended process to induce them to buy—possibly more than they planned to. Selling
in this way contains an inherent unpredictability based on the personalities, wants and means of
customers: as a one-year saleswoman put it, “you can't come up to every customer the same
way”; “improvising, it's really part of the job,” stated a first-year cosmetics saleswoman. Ken
Bordieri, president of Macy’s Local 1-S and a former long-timeshoe salesman reported that “you
have to keep your approach fresh—if you used the same spiel every time you would go out of
your mind,” or simply fail to sell effectively. This kind of emotional labor that requires
practitioners “to be patient and observant with customers” (1-year saleswoman), anticipate their
needs and respond to them flexibly while applying considerable product knowledge is more
equivalent to the deep acting performed by door-to-door insurance salespeople (Leidner 1993) or
luxury hotel attendants (Sherman 2007) than the routinized surface acting of McDonald’s or
supermarket cashiers (Leidner 1993; Ritzer 1993; Tannock 2001; Tolich 1993). In and of itself, unpredictability requiring varied interaction requires freedom from rigid, externally-determined procedures, at least with regard to sales input; sales output, as we saw, is tightly monitored.

At Target the situation is different. Sales-floor workers are constantly beset with re-shop and zoning tasks while customer service is relegated to the status of an interruption—albeit a prioritized one—of this primary function. With the sole exception of the electronics department, where workers are expected to advise customers and sell “attachments,” Target’s salespeople do not “sell” in the strict sense of proposing products for purchase and then closing that purchase. As a three-year sales-floor worker reports, “it is not a sales-based thing because we don’t get commission”; the first-year sales-floor worker and teacher describes interactive tasks as “[b]eing readily available to guests at any time they need something—that is going to make sales.” Required in-depth product knowledge is thus lower for Target than for Macy’s salespersons. It is replaced with a broader inventory and store-system knowledge: knowing where items are, when they will be in (or out) of stock and how to find them using the PDA, walkie-talkie system or by asking the right co-workers. All tasks related to closing the purchase (ringing, processing payment, promoting the Target credit card and customer surveys) have been re-allocated to cashiers, a separate and even more rigidly standardized job category.

If customer interaction requires less product knowledge on the part of salespeople and its average length and significance (per customer) is reduced by the removal of both final purchase and related direct incentives then it can already be seen as more predictable and hence, less complex. But the complexity of emotional labor at Target is even further reduced by management’s imposition and regular enforcement of scripted interactions. “Can I help you find something?” is to be asked of all customers who come within ten feet and use of this phrase is
daily reinforced at huddles and one-on-one coaching sessions, as well as on the back of workers’
company-supplied T-shirts. “Five minute drills” are also called “every half-hour or hour [in
which] everybody—team members, team leads—stops whatever they are doing and stands in the
race-track [large central aisle], greeting the guests with ‘Can I help you find something?’” (2-
year sales-floor worker). In a parallel yet opposite direction to the open-ended complexity of
interactive work at Macy’s, with its attendant autonomy of input, the simplification and
routinization of interpersonal style at Target is combined with a reduction in salespersons’
immediate task autonomy: they are told not only what to say, but when and in which situations to
say it. This type of emotional labor can more accurately be described as surface rather than deep
acting, and closely parallels the standardized interaction required of fast-food and supermarket
cashiers, as well as many call-center attendants (Leidner 1993; Tannock 2001; Tolich 1993;
Renneberg 2004).

As we move from Macy’s to Target, keeping the salesperson at the center of our vision,
we can thus clearly observe a decline in both the complexity of her tasks and the autonomy she
has to perform them. This is the deskilling of emotional labor. Skeptics such as Attewell (1990)
might counter that a concept of ‘task complexity’ that consists of both knowledge and
unpredictability is based on criteria that derive from the subjective worldview of the academic;
he and others might also object that our overall concept of skill erroneously includes autonomy.
But if knowledge and unpredictability are invalid indicators of task complexity, what other, more
objective indices should replace them? None seem readily apparent. And as the analysis of sales
work at Macy’s and Target shows, autonomy of task performance is intertwined with the
complexity of tasks: simplification at Target is achieved through standardization, which itself
implies heteronomy—the setting of a standard by others for what is to be done and how. Autonomy, therefore, is not extrinsic to skill, but is reaffirmed as a central pillar of that concept.

Mechanized sales work, as at Target, does appear require new types of skill—what Hampson and Junor refer to as “work process skills” (2010, 526) or what Harvey foresaw as skills of “adaptability” that “entail literacy, numeracy, the ability to follow instructions and to routinize tasks quickly” (2006 [1982], 109). These, however, are not the skills of a salesperson: they are skills of operating and navigating the Target system or similar systems in other workplaces, much as the skills of a technician who programs smelting cycles in a modern steel plant are not those of a blacksmith but of an entirely different occupation. Can skills of adaptability and system knowledge provide contemporary retail workers means of achieving labor-market closure and advances in pay, security or social status? Or are they destined to become the new baseline expected of most workers but not a source of leverage or empowerment? At present, the answers must be ‘No’ to the first question and a preliminary ‘Yes’ to the second.

With regard to triadic workplace structures, the impact of deskilling is both evident and strangely convergent. At Macy’s and Target, workplace dynamics are fundamentally triadic given the equal presence of all three groups (workers, managers, customers). At Target, however, customer interaction is more routinized, less in-depth and less significant (with regard to sales). Macy’s workers are often more socially distant from their customers than Target workers, given the firm’s more up-market orientation and a high density of tourists at the flagship Manhattan store. But despite this social distance, Macy’s salespersons depend on customer cooperation to complete sales, often pursue extended, personal conversations to achieve this and have an incentive to forego managerial proscriptions (maintenance tasks, strict use of MAGIC) other than
the selling imperative. Management-determined sales goals and particularly the credit-card quota were frequently cited sources of annoyance that many salespersons felt inhibit their ability to address customer needs. Taken together, these dynamics point towards a latent worker-customer rather than worker-manager alliance pattern at Macy’s.

At Target, the tight proscription of “Can I help you find something?” combined with the requirement that sales-floor workers interrupt tasks at any time to serve customers produces a weaker alliance between the two, as well as some resentment of management by workers. Many prioritize maintenance duties and find customer requests and their disheveling of displays to be a nuisance. This is not to say that worker-customer antagonism is a prominent feature at Target: the social proximity of the two groups and the lower-stakes nature of their interactions—not having to end in sales to be successful—help to ameliorate tensions. For cashiers, however, stakes are higher due to per-checkout speed scores while interaction is even more circumscribed. This appears to engender greater friction between cashiers and customers, the latter of whom are often seen as obstacles to achieving a speedy checkout. Altogether, the triadic structuring of service tasks and control at Macy’s and Target, though different, do not produce radically different alignments of workplace interest: Macy’s workers show slightly stronger affinity with customers vis-à-vis managers than their Target counterparts, but not markedly so.

Conclusion

In this paper we have investigated four competing hypotheses about workplace change—deskilling, upgrading, contestation and contingency—as they pertain to service work and retail sales in particular. Using qualitative cases studies of contemporary “traditional” (Macy’s) and discount (Target) department stores, combined with a foregoing historical analysis of early
twentieth-century sales work, we found evidence of a downward skill trajectory which, in the case of interactive sales work, entails a simplification and routinization of salespersons’ emotional labor tasks as well as a re-alignment, though not a radical departure, of worker-manager-customer alliances.

The evolution of department store sales work was described in terms of three distinct phases: craft selling in the heyday of department-store growth (the pre-war period), inverse Taylorism in contemporary full-line department stores such as Macy’s, and service Toyotism in discount stores like Target. This trajectory supports a larger-order hypothesis that some service industries have undergone, or are now undergoing, similar long-term transformations to those previously observed in manufacturing industries, albeit on a different terrain of work content.

Some limitations of this study include the fact that it does not allow us to assess causal mechanisms behind such long-term transformations due to the worker- rather than management- or corporate-based nature of the primary data. A second limitation is the use of contemporary cases as proxy representatives for historical phases of sales work: the question may be raised as to whether Macy’s provides an accurate stand-in for historical forms. We have attempted to address this by choosing both unionized and older stores within the Macy’s chain that are more likely to retain historical practices in their operations. Furthermore, the strategy of comparing two or more contemporary workplaces or industries as models of different historical forms has a considerable and still-viable pedigree within the work and industrial relations literature (e.g. Blauner 1964; Edwards 1979; Smith 2001).

In sum, the findings of this study point toward the service sector as a fruitful terrain for reviving, re-examining and further testing the claims of labor process theorists—a task which has been several times initiated (e.g. Braverman 1974) and called for (e.g. Warhurst, Thompson ad
Nichson 2009) but all too rarely carried through to completion. Future studies in this vein might involve parallel qualitative analyses of skill in other service industries, or more systematic, quantitative assessments of the four hypotheses here explored.

References


