

CHAPTER 5

Silent Rebellions in the Capitalist Paradise: A Brazil-Quebec Comparison

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Where there is power, there is a resistance,

MICHEL FOUCAULT, *L'histoire de la Sexualité*

Introduction

Supermarkets may be considered major exponents of consumer society, a capitalist version of the Garden of Eden, where everything exists for the happiness of men and women. Indeed,

when a purchase is made in the supermarket, the displays hide all the work involved there: the work of production, distribution, the placement of displays, price labelling, etc. Goods are there like fruits in an orchard, vegetables in a garden, fish in the seas and rivers, . . . until one arrives at the checkout to pay; the cash-register is the end of the Garden of Eden and the return to the brutality of the marketplace. (Chauí 1989, 70)

Considered "light and simple," the work of supermarket cashiers is the object of little attention in Brazilian and Québécois supermarkets, and one often hears discrediting and scornful remarks about it. In Quebec, employment as a cashier is often considered a "small summer job." Workers are hired part-time, and their training is often done on the job. However, a closer analysis of this type of work reveals its strategic importance, for besides being responsible for the entry of money into the organization, the cashier is the access point between the customer and the supermarket. Moreover, cashiers' work is situated precisely at the difficult transition between the Garden of Eden and the "brutality of the marketplace." These factors give this kind of work a particular complexity.

My main objective will be to highlight how supermarket cashiers face this complexity, with a particular focus on their encounters with customers in Brazil (São Paulo) and Canada (Montreal and Quebec). The strategies they use in their daily struggles serve as a starting point, a "chemical catalyst," in Foucaultian language, that permits us to put into evidence the power relations present in work, and to highlight the laborious character of a traditional female job and all the (in)visible skills necessary to accomplish it, skills that often remain hidden under the discourse of "light" work and of women's "passivity."

In the first part of this chapter, certain aspects of work organization at the supermarket checkout in Brazil and Quebec will be presented. Then, the role of cashiers will be analyzed, for they are not passive victims of such a reality—they resist! Sometimes their resistance is collective and organized (i.e., strikes), but most of the time resistance is individual and silent. In the second part of this chapter, these silent rebellions will be analyzed to make evident the active role of supermarket cashiers in the production of this service.

Strategies of Resistance

Strategies of resistance are presented by Nino Shapiro-Perl (1984, 194) as "creative acts made with purpose by workers who aim to limit, more than change, what management can do to them, while keeping their job." An important dimension of this definition is that the strategies of resistance aim, at one and the same time, to contest power relations while enabling the worker to keep his or her job. However, one must widen this conception of work, since these creative acts can be used by working women to limit the oppression not only of management, but also that of customers (i.e., in the service sector) and of the work organization. Moreover, these creative strategies enable cashiers to mediate between the demands of the job and the home.

Transposing J. C. Scott's (1985) ideas to the worlds of work, one may say that these daily strategies of resistance form a constant struggle that uses such simple and ordinary weapons as dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, foot dragging, sabotage, work-to-rule, solidarity, absenteeism, and, more radically, quitting. Thus, "just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do the multiple acts of [worker]¹ insubordination and evasion create political and economic barrier reefs of their own" (Scott 1985, xvii) and these "barrier reefs," in a certain way, have a shielding effect against oppression, violence, and exploitation at work.

On the other hand, strategies of resistance must not be seen as the panacea against all constraints present in the organization and conditions of work. They are used by workers to help them cope with workplace reality and minimize their perverse effects. This does not mean that these strategies prevent workers from suffering the physical and mental consequences of oppressive work organization or bad working conditions.

Strategies of resistance signal precisely the existence of oppressive working conditions and the active role of workers in their daily struggles to work with dignity and in a healthy environment. However, despite the fact that these resistance strategies radically contest the worlds of work, they have been studied very little. Part of the literature on this topic appeared as a critique of Harry Braverman (1974), who was criticized for not having considered the role of workers' resistance in the deskilling process (Friedman 1977; Elger 1979; Edwards 1979; and Burawoy 1985). Other literature is dedicated to sabotage practices at work, a more visible strategy of resistance (Sprouse 1992; Taylor and Walton 1971). The small number of studies devoted to workers' resistance are even more limited when one takes gender into consideration (Milkman 1987; Paules 1991; Shapiro-Perl 1984; Rosa 1991; Kergoat 1982; Gottfried 1994; Jermier, Knights, and Nord 1994; Souza-Lobo 1995; Soares 1997). One possible reason for the lack of research on women's strategies of resistance at the workplace may be the fact that these strategies do not necessarily conform to those used by white male workers nor to the ideas that the researchers have about what constitutes resistance (Paules 1991; Kergoat 1982).

Recently, Randy Hodson (1995) proposed a model to conceptualize workers' resistance using four categories: (1) the diversion of mistreatment; (2) the regulation of the quantity and intensity of work; (3) the defense of autonomy; and (4) the expansion of the workers' control in participation programs. The author highlighted the interrelationships between forms of resistance and systems of control used by management (direct and personal control, control techniques, bureaucratic control, and diagrams of working involvement, respectively).

Certainly, this model is an important theoretical advancement, as it is a first attempt to categorize workers' resistance, but it must be improved, as it does not consider the influence of different payment systems and forms of control in the shaping of specific forms of resistance. For example, if salary is paid on a piece-rate basis, workers will not use the strategy of slowing down the pace of work (Scott 1985).

Another drawback is that this model does not incorporate the specific strategies of resistance of working women, such as those used in juggling paid and unpaid work (De Koninck 1995; Corbeil and Descarriers 1997; Séguin 1997, Prévost and Messing 1997) and in facing sexual and racial harassment (Yount 1991; Snow, Robinson, and McCall 1991). One must incorporate in the same model not only the convergent forms of strategies of resistance used by men and women at work but also the divergent ones. Thus, the analysis of these strategies permits us to understand, in broader scope, relations not only of social class, but also of sex, race, and ethnicity.

In the next sections I will discuss the work organization of supermarket cashiers in Brazilian and Québécois supermarkets as well as the means with which the cashiers face this soulless work organization — their solidarity, their strategies for coping with violent customers and sexual harassment, and their struggle to keep the limited control that they possess within their work. But first we must discuss some points on the methodology used.²

Methodology

To explore these aspects of cashiers' working lives in São Paulo (Brazil) and Montreal and Quebec (Canada), a qualitative approach was used. One of the reasons for choosing a qualitative perspective was that "qualitative methodologies bring into central focus the points of view of those studied and their active participation in constructing worlds that are sometimes quite different from the worlds they are thought to live in by those in power" (Statham, Miller, and Mauksch 1988, 311). In fact, to understand what happens in the worlds of workers, "it is necessary that one knows that the essential knowledge is not in his/her mind but in the workers' mind and that there is a rationality within their behavior" (Foucault 1994b, 422). Therefore, in both societies, 106 cashiers and 32 managers were interviewed in 20 supermarkets. Table 5-1 presents the number of interviews according to geographical location, job, and number of stores.

The choice of these two settings centered on several aspects. First, work at the cash register is considered a pink-collar job in both countries. Furthermore, the historical evolution of supermarkets in Brazil and Quebec followed a similar path of small shops evolving into self-service stores. This resemblance is even more remarkable when one considers that in both societies there is a predominance of independent supermarkets rather than supermarket chains. Moreover, the state of technological development at the time of the present research was similar in each country and included both automated and nonautomated stores. Finally, because I am familiar with both societies, I was able to form a qualitative judgment on the equivalence between them (Niessen 1982; Sears 1961).

The supermarkets were chosen to make sure a variety of chains and store sizes were represented, since the size of the operation may influence work organization and its effects on workers' health (Billette and Bouchard 1986). In addition, the stores were in geographical locations that were socially and economically diversified.

In both societies, the interest shown in this research by the owners enabled me to study their methods of operation. Personal interviews were conducted and recorded in a private room at the workplace during working hours. Each person was informed of the nature of the project, and was assured that the interview would remain anonymous and confidential.

TABLE 5-1. Interviews per City, Job, and Number of Stores

	Cities			Total
	São Paulo (Brazil)	Quebec (Canada)	Montreal (Canada)	
Cashiers	56	45	5	106
Managers	13	17	2	32
Number of stores	8	11	1	20

Each person solicited was free to accept or refuse the interview and its recording. It was only after receiving the interviewee's consent that the interview was recorded. During the interviews, subjects were never pressured to answer questions, because "the task is never neutral to the workers' emotional life, s/he can talk about her/his job or s/he must be silent about it. Sometimes it is necessary to hide the content of the job from others" (Dejours 1993, 63).

Finally, I interviewed at least one manager (store owners, head cashiers, store managers, or human resource managers) in each supermarket to capture certain dimensions that are not always apparent to or known by cashiers, such as recruitment and selection policies, control over personnel, and other aspects of human resources management. These interviews were conducted in the same manner as the interviews with the cashiers.

One must be conscious of the difficulties that a qualitative approach might engender. For instance, one problematic aspect is the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, which is never neutral and may influence the results of the research. Another potential problem is the number of interviews, since the samples in qualitative studies are typically small. Nevertheless, I was also aware that "the kind of phenomenon we chose to investigate should be achieved through the possible techniques and not through the ones considered as ideal because we risked gaining in formality and losing our object, if we were attached to the most usual proceedings in social research" (Rodrigues 1978, 38).

Cashiers' Work in the Capitalist Paradise

In supermarket cashiers' work one can find the main characteristics of service sector work: relating to the public and performing simultaneous tasks (i.e., providing the customer with information while performing other manual tasks). The encounter between cashiers and customers adds a high level of complexity to this work, which includes emotional, sexual, and class dimensions that do not exist in industrial work.

Work organization at the supermarket checkout is characterized by rigid discipline and control that can be observed in the spatial distribution of cashiers, the control of their bodies, and the control of their emotions (Soares 1995). Most of the time, supervision is placed behind the checkout line or a mirror-window, producing panoptic effect designed to induce in the individual "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power, to arrange things so that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (Foucault 1975, 234).

The cashier remains stationary at her post and the pace of her work is determined, most of the time, by the number of customers in the supermarket and by the number of checkouts kept open by management. Thus, the cashier has very limited control over the pace of her work. She is pressured by both customers and administrators to work more quickly. A cashier can pass, on average, between twenty-four and twenty-eight items per minute through her checkout. However at times she can manage to

pass forty-nine items per minute. Productivity increases as the worker constantly repeats the same movements during the length of the workday:

It's always the same routine. It's always, "Hello," we pass the order, we take the money, it's always the same thing, it's almost like assembly-line work there, but it is still pretty interesting work. (Québécois cashier 12)

The customer arrives at the checkout, we automatically say, "Hello," we wrap up the merchandise . . . , did he pay? "Ciao, good-bye, see you later," that's a routine, isn't it? (Brazilian cashier 3)

The "idle times" of production, like the time cashiers wait for customers, are not considered as stressful components of this work by supermarket managers. During slow periods, a whole set of additional tasks are imposed on the cashier: cleaning, filling (especially in Quebec), helping in certain departments (e.g., the bakery). Work is continuous except for breaks, which are taken according to how busy the supermarket is.

In Brazil, a cashier works forty-four hours per week, spread over six days, that is, seven hours per day from Monday to Thursday and eight hours per day on Fridays and Saturdays. The cashiers work full-time, and there is neither part-time work nor work on Sundays.³ In Quebec, most cashiers work part-time from Monday to Sunday, often accumulating eight to twelve hours of work a day. A cashier can work 25 hours a week or more, depending on how many hours the employer assigns.

In the two societies, one finds strategies adopted by employers that intensify the work of cashiers. This intensification of work must be understood in an economic context in which the rate of unemployment is high, which leaves less maneuvering space for workers. One of the strategies adopted by management consists of opening stores with the least possible number of cashiers, causing a surplus of work for those who are working. A spokesperson from a Québécois supermarket chain articulates the logic of this approach: "Our strategy was to make more with less. Increasing our productivity and producing with the same fixed operating costs, we got closer to our different customers" (Barbès 1995, 30).

In both countries, there are similar management practices, such as the lengthening of cashiers' schedules, especially as related to the time of departures and meals.⁵

One doesn't have regular hours. . . . It's not a regular schedule like in the offices, when at midday everyone goes to lunch. Here it works depending on the customers; if there's a lot of people, you stay there, even though you've finished your shift, if there's no girl to replace you, you stay there. They won't close a checkout during a big rush, because customers are going to shout. (Québécois cashier 12)

Finishing is hard, because it feels like a compromise. I am here from 9:00 A.M. and I leave at 5:00 P.M.. We can't do anything else, have another responsibility, . . . I wanted to return to my studies, but the conditions don't permit it, because I don't leave the checkout at 5 P.M. . . . it's 5:30 . . . 6:00 . . . 7:00 . . . it's at the time that they think they should let you go, you understand? (Brazilian cashier 49)

Work at the checkout has become more and more automated with the introduction of the optic reader, direct payment, machines that fill in checks, and the like. The use of all this machinery has the effect of increasing the pace of cashiers' work in addition to deskilling their work (Soares 1996). These new technologies introduce another dimension of time control to cashiers' work through electronic surveillance, for the machines record the activities and time of every task. In this manner, management can control the net sales of a cashier; they know how many and what types of corrections have been made, the number of times that the till was opened, the number of articles and of customers passed during the workday, the amount of time taken to service the customer, customers' waiting time, the average sales per hour and per client, the length of breaks, and so on.

This rigid control of time is associated with other management practices, such as the lengthening of the workday, the intensification of work through underestimated scheduling, and on-call work. These strategies form a discipline that seeks to guarantee that working time is "totally useful," that is, that the "time measured and paid must also be a time without impurities or defects; a time of good quality, throughout which the body is constantly applied to its exercise" (Foucault 1975, 177).

One notes, therefore, that cashiers are submitted to a rigid discipline that seeks to achieve total control over their work. However, one must not believe that the cashier has no control over her work or that administrators are capable of controlling all aspects of work. When one speaks of the cashier's control of work, it is necessary to make the distinction between the horizontal and vertical control of work,⁶ because a simplified, one-dimensional concept of control does not consider that relations may be unequal (Aronsson 1989). Thus, cashiers certainly have very little vertical control of work, but they can exercise a certain horizontal control and they fight to keep this control, especially that which exists in their relations with customers.

Finally, one must emphasize that cashiers' work includes a lot of challenging responsibilities, with the relationship to the customer being a clear example. However, very often supermarket cashiers consider and perceive their work as monotonous:

When the store is empty, no one comes to your checkout, that's terrible. There are times when you feel tired. I don't like staying there doing nothing. (Brazilian cashier 3)

The monotony in cashiers' work includes the two dimensions underlined by Gunn Johansson (1989), that is, repetitive monotony, whose best measure is the length of task cycles, and uneventful monotony. While in industrial work these two types of monotony represent completely different work conditions and do not coexist, in supermarkets one finds an alternation between them, because there can be uneventful monotony when the supermarket is empty and followed by repetitive monotony when the store is full. The latter must be nuanced, for the presence of customers introduces a factor of variability and unexpectedness that minimizes the repetitive monotony of the work.

When the Cashier Meets the Customers

Work organization at the checkout includes the encounter between cashiers and customers, a "relationship adds a new dimension to the pattern of human relations in industry. When the customer takes an active part in business activity, the whole organization must be adjusted to his behavior" (Whyte 1946, 123). In fact, the encounter⁷ between cashiers and customers represents the intersection of many social relations, such as sex/gender, race/ethnicity, and class. All of these add complex dimensions to cashiers' work.

Of all employees in a supermarket, the cashier is the one who has the most contact with the public, and it is she who most directly "sells" the company. When customer think of the service in a supermarket, they are unlikely to remember a clerk or a butcher; they will most likely think of the cashier, for it is she with whom they will have had their longest contact. However, despite their importance, encounters between customers and cashiers have not been adequately considered in the analysis of cashiers' work.⁸

Customers occupy a central role in the daily work of cashiers; they are a source of communication and social interaction, of variety that breaks up the monotony, of funny or amusing situations, and of challenges, especially with regard to keeping the customers not only satisfied but happy. To accomplish this, the cashier engages in emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), or the work produced to change her own emotions or those of the customer. Like domestic work, emotional labor is an "invisible" effort that is neither valorized nor recognized unless it is not accomplished. One must be conscious that the emotional labor of cashiers is crucial to the quality of the service rendered.

Customers are also a potential source of violence that can be expressed in several ways, from verbal abuse to physical action. The violence can also take the form of racism or sexual harassment. In fact, the majority of cashiers reported cases of sexual harassment from customers.

Thus, cashier's work includes a paradoxical reality: it is, at the same time, the strategic work of interfacing between the organization and its customers that ensures the entrance of money into the organization, and little-valorized work that includes physical, organizational, and technological constraints. It is work that demands a lot of skills that nonetheless remain invisible under the discourses of "feminine nature" and "unskilled" work." Thus, the main question is how cashiers cope with this paradoxical reality. Are they passive victims of the oppression imposed by the organization of work? By administrators? By customers?

One must emphasize that oppression does not exist as an absolute, outside and independent of the social interactions and their material effects (Martin 1988). Cashiers are not detached from the heterogeneous web of micropowers that form the social relations of our daily lives. However, they also exercise their own powers by using the skills acquired in the accomplishment of their work and the maintenance of control over their relations with customers and administrators. Cashiers are not objects, but real subjects who struggle daily to accomplish their work. Cashiers resist.

Resisting the Capitalist Paradise

Because of the emotional labor performed by cashiers, they are often seen as a very passive and docile population. However, when their daily strategies are analyzed, one can identify several strategies of resistance.⁹ Strategies of resistance insert themselves at the heart of relations of power at work and, as Shapiro-Perl (1984, 104) expressed so well, “ironically, these individual acts of economic self-interest are reproduced by worker after worker, side by side, and though performed individually, they nonetheless grow out of a shared class position.” Moreover, these strategies share not only class position, but also positions of gender, race, and ethnicity.

Before presenting the strategies of resistance identified in Brazilian and Québécois supermarkets, two points must be highlighted. First, when one speaks of strategies of resistance, one must bear in mind that workers need their jobs and that in both countries, proportionally speaking, there is economic crisis and an elevated level of unemployment. This means that in most cases being a cashier is not a professional choice, but a job that the workers succeeded in acquiring (Soares 1996a). Besides, a “winning strategy” is one that, in the end, enables the worker to maintain her job. In a context of economic recession, management has more room to maneuver because the workforce is abundant. In other words, the pressure of the industrial reserve army is strong, which can render the expression of resistance strategies difficult.

As one knows, it's difficult to find a job and that was what was available, it was that or nothing, so I took that by default (Québécois cashier 40).

Because in my domain, I didn't find anything, it was really difficult. So my situation became tighter, and I was obliged to decide to be a cashier in a supermarket. (Brazilian cashier 44)

Second, strategies of resistance must not be seen as the solution to all problems in the organization and conditions of work. Workers undergo consequences of this reality at work, especially with regard to their health. A Québécois cashier confessed that “with the years, we get sick of being a cashier.”

Solidarity as a Resistance Strategy

The organization of work at the checkout is characterized, as discussed above, by the existence of a rigid disciplinary system that is reinforced by new technologies and electronic surveillance. Foucault (1994b) suggests that when everyone works under these same conditions of discipline, a collective solidarity against this discipline emerges. Indeed, as workers must collectively solve the problems bound to the organization of work, they form not only production groups but also struggle groups: “It is because their situation in production creates among them a community of interests, attitudes and objectives irremediably opposed to those of management that at the

most elementary level workers spontaneously associate together to resist, to defend themselves, to struggle" (Foucault 1994b, 44).

Solidarity among cashiers can appear under several guises. First, it can be bound to the achievement of tasks—cashiers often help each other by packing merchandise, telling each other the prices or codes of products, or borrowing money from one another, a practice forbidden by management.

I ask one colleague, or I ask another, [for price]. Most people that have worked at the checkout for a long time know the prices. (Brazilian cashier 24)

We are very united. Always, when someone needs money, a colleague lends us some. (Brazilian cashier 55)

When we are in a big rush around 5:00, 5:30, the big rush makes it so that as soon as there is one who doesn't have anything to do, she comes and she helps us. (Québécois cashier 9)

Another form of solidarity functions as a type of compensation or support for difficult situations related to emotional labor. Most of the time this solidarity is bound to relations with customers:

The spirit of cashiers is strong. If there is a customer that hurts a cashier, the other cashiers are all there, and cashiers are going to be polite to the end with her, polite to the point of annoying someone. [One difficult customer] never came back. That was just great by me. (Québécois cashier 8)

When we are at the checkout, we hear what happens at the checkout nearby. Sometimes, if there's a problem with money, we say: "How much do you need? Wait. I am going to lend it to you." If it's an unpleasant customer, my colleague will wink and say, "Sorry, I don't have any." One day a customer quibbled over a penny. The girl [colleague] looked for it from everyone, but no one had it. Then she asked me, "Do you have a penny?" I was going to say yes, but she winked at me and I answered, "No, I don't have any," only because she [the customer] was unpleasant. (Brazilian cashier 11)

Resisting in Silence

The maintenance of discipline by administrators in Brazilian and Québécois supermarkets is not free of resistance by workers. According to Andrew Friedman (1977, 51), "the maintenance of discipline has always been a problem for top managers. Resistance is expressed in terms of time by workers arriving after or leaving before the times specified in their employment contracts. . . . More important for top managers are absenteeism and voluntary quits." In fact, strategies that aim at getting a little free time enable workers to recover their strength. Thus, cashiers will arrive late or ask to leave a little earlier. They will also be absent from work. The amplitude of these strategies can be discerned from the discourse of supermarket managers:

The biggest problem is absenteeism . . . It is enough to trouble us . . . Presently, I changed the timetable, I hired some new workers and I believe that I am putting a final end to this problem. (Brazilian manager 1)

Especially Saturdays, when one needs them most, then there were six, seven absences. (Brazilian manager 6)

That happens regularly enough [absences], not every day, but I would say two times per week, either lateness or an absence, but it happens quite often. (Québécois manager 19)

There are always last-minute replacements, it's things we always have to take care of. Today I had three people to replace. It is not always very easy to do. (Québécois administrator 15)

These strategies must not be seen as arising from cashiers' lack of incentive or bad faith but rather from the organization of the work, with its rigid discipline, its poor work conditions, and all its constraints.

There are also strategies that challenge the disciplinary system. The most obvious example of this was chewing of gum or eating candy, which was forbidden to cashiers:

To chew gum? No! No, but we hide it, since we cannot chew gum. (Québécois cashier 4)

To eat candies [is forbidden]—but I eat them all the time, if I take one, it doesn't show. They don't need to know. (Québécois cashier 8)

Not chewing gum or eating candy in front of customers can be understood simply as a question of manners. However, beyond this initial interpretation, it also involves the issue of focusing the cashier's attention on the "main involvement,"¹⁰ that is, serving the customer. Administrators try to make sure that no "subordinate involvements," such as humming, chewing gum, or eating, exist. These activities constitute a deviation from the main activity of waiting for the customer and signal a contestation of discipline, especially since it is the cashier who keeps control over the situation and over her emotions. For the cashier, chewing gum means that the customer is not the master of the situation. She concedes the customer her attention, but she nevertheless keeps a part of it on herself.

Another strategy of resistance that passes through the system of controls imposed by administrators concerns annulments. For example, when the cashier makes a mistake, she can negotiate with the customer and avoid the annulment without being obliged to call the supervisor:

If you know how to dialogue with the customer . . . if I record two products of small value, I tell him, "Can you take another product at the same price or a similar product?" The customer ends up taking it. (Brazilian cashier 3)

Finally, there is an interdiction against conversation between cashiers:

We chat a lot . . . about the customers, about something funny that happened, or when there's an argument at the checkout. (Brazilian cashier 17)

We are not supposed to speak to other cashiers while we have a customer, but we do it anyway, same thing with the packer. (Québécois cashier 10)

These strategies help cashiers not only bypass a rigid work organization, but also keep at least minimal control over their work.

Gender Strategies

Strategies of resistance are employed to face power relations with customers as well as with management. Obvious examples are those strategies used to counter sexual harassment. Such strategies are not a struggle for power, but a refusal to be treated as an object.

It is necessary to remember that sexual harassment, as demonstrated by Cynthia Cockburn (1991, 142), is "a male intervention for the assertion of power. But this time it is a warning to a woman stepping out of her proper place. It is a controlling gesture to diminish any sense of power she may be acquiring and to remind her 'you're only a woman, that's the way I see you, and that you're vulnerable to me and any man.'"

In both countries, cashiers in most cases use two individual strategies, to counter sexual harassment. Humor is one of the most common:

I take that as a joke. I am going to act as if he made a joke, so it goes unobserved. (Brazilian cashier 36)

I prefer to take that as a joke. (Brazilian cashier 41)

That happens regularly, but we must take it as a joke. We often turn it into a joke to show him that I am not interested. . . . Often, men who come to buy the lottery, they will say in any case, "If I win I'll take you away and give the money to your boyfriend so that he lets us leave together." I tell him then, "Well, I hope that you won't win just for having said that." (Québécois cashier 13)

This type of strategy is very complex, for it includes several important measurements. Perceiving the context of inequality inherent in the policy that "the customer is always right," the cashier manages her emotions, and, with diplomacy, succeeds in transforming the situation with humor. It does not mean that she finds the situation funny, but only that with humor she is capable of keeping control and of coping with the dual power of her interlocutor: his power as a customer and his power as a man.

Another strategy of resistance to sexual harassment is silence. Cashiers play the deaf ear. One imagines silence as a mark of passivity; however, as Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1972, 197) make clear, "silence is not a passive disconnection," and the cashier does not want the respect of a harassing customer. She instead feels

that she is exerting her power as a worker when she keeps silent in the face of this taunting; she is protecting her relationship with her work and her own ego. By treating the customer as if he didn't exist, she refuses his power while making her "person foreign to her performance; it is approval from authority rather than the task that is at issue" (Sennett and 1972, 198).

If they begin to make jokes, I make the deaf ear. (Brazilian cashier 24)

I pretend that it doesn't concern me. I ignore it. (Brazilian cashier 44)

I am not a very shy girl, but there are some things that shocked me. I didn't answer. . . . I only said hello. (Québécois cashier 7)

The thing that aggravates me the most is men with sly comments. . . . I just ignore them, I try to ignore it, because I know they won't like that. (Québécois cashier 44)

Other cashiers preferred direct confrontation as a strategy of resistance against a harassing customer:

The customer arrived and with his hand, he touched my buttocks, but spontaneous as I am, my hand flew up, and he got it full in the face. The customer looked at me and he told me, "You are mean." Well, I told him never do that to me again. He stopped. . . . You must defend yourself in those situations, the more you let things go, the worse it will be. (Québécois cashier 21)

In the case of sexual harassment, store size and administrative support can influence the type of resistance strategy adopted. In the smaller supermarkets, where there is support from management, some collective resistance against sexual harassment is possible:

We were talking about it among ourselves, that [the] guy is annoying. He would get us in a corner, take our hands, bump against our buttocks, it was annoying. So we said that some time we will get together and we will tell him: "Are you going to stop taking our hands? Are you finished cornering me?" We did that, we got the manager to come down, we weren't shy. We were about five or six, we told him, and the client felt the harassment in another way. He stopped coming. Then at one point he started coming back and no one said hello to him. We were very cold toward him. We served him—that's all. Hello, goodbye, no help, without being impolite. Today, he doesn't do that any more. (Québécois cashier 21)

In the strategies of humor and silence, cashiers use the principle of "emotive dissonance" (Hochschild 1983) as they make a separation between what they feel and what they display. These two strategies are not only used in cases of sexual harassment but also in interactions with unpleasant customers:

The best way to remove his bad humor is to speak to him, to joke, to smile. I believe that it is the best way, because if you are going to answer in the same way, it's worse. (Brazilian cashier 56)

Things always go easier with a little humor. (Québécois cashier 21)

If he wants to argue, we don't speak. We must not try and argue. In the beginning, I tried to argue with them to explain other points of view, except that now it's better to just smile, to shrug your shoulders and just say, "Well, it's like that." (Québécois cashier 13)

Sometimes, it's difficult, but I don't unclench my teeth. (Brazilian cashier 4)

The encounter between cashiers and customers includes two parts: the public transcript and the hidden transcript (Scott 1990). The public transcript is the open interaction between the customer and the cashier, and includes all (non)verbal communication. However, the "public transcript, where it is not positively misleading, is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations" (Scott 1990, 2). The hidden transcript "consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript" (Scott 1990, 4-5).

Silence and jokes as forms of resistance constitute part of the public transcript, and thus "an assessment of power relations read directly off the public transcript between the powerful and the weak may portray a deference and consent that are possibly only a tactic" (Scott 1990, 3). For this reason, one cannot agree with Rafaeli's (1989) classification of the strategy of ignoring the customer as a passive one. When one considers the hidden transcript of the encounters between supermarket cashiers and their customers, one realizes that these silent rebellions are not passive but rather a "key survival skill of subordinate groups" (Scott 1990, 3).

In this sense, the offstage speech of cashiers is revealing. Cashiers will speak among themselves of all the situations they have experienced with work and with their customers. In fact, customers occupy an important role in these conversations.

For sure sometimes, when the cashiers meet, we say everything that happened to us. It is incredible all the things we say, you know? That frees us. (Québécois cashier 11)

Still, they do not speak of only the negative dimensions but also of the positive aspects, such as the handsome customer, the kind customer, and so on.

Struggling for Control

Another strategy of resistance employed by cashiers is controlling the speed of their work. For example, cashiers pass an order faster when the customer is unpleasant in order to get rid of the person:

I usually try to get them out as fast as possible. (Québécois cashier 44)

I try to pass their order as fast as possible, to receive payment so that they leave quickly. (Brazilian cashier 30)

The introduction of new technology at the checkout has helped cashiers employ this strategy, since it has appreciably reduced the time needed to pass a client. That is one of the reasons cashiers say they prefer the new technologies despite the deskilling process they cause (see Soares 1996b).

Finally, one can identify another strategy of resistance: politeness:

I just smile. Before I used to be very defensive, I used to take it like, "Why are you being like this to me?" and I've gotten a lot of headaches from it, so now I just smile. . . . Because it is hard to be mean to someone who is not being mean back to you. That's what I've seen, so I sort of kill. . . . I stop the anger with a smile. (Québécois cashier 44)

We give a slap, without hitting the customer's face. . . . He arrives in a bad mood, we treat him the same way, but with a lot of knowledge, we ignore his impoliteness. (Brazilian cashier 40)

In effect, this strategy is especially centered on the diplomacy that cashiers employ to change customers' moods and to protect themselves from possible aggression. Although cashiers must perform emotional work to implement this strategy, while using it they cannot be reprimanded if the customer makes a complaint or has a crisis of frustration. This strategy thus allows cashiers to remain within the norms prescribed by management and gives them a feeling of having done what was necessary and what was within their power to do.

Conclusion

The experiences of supermarket cashiers in Brazil and Quebec, demonstrate that women are far from being passive, submissive, or docile at work. The cashiers show us that oppression does not exist as an absolute power, outside and independent of social relations. The strategies of resistance that they use may seem passive or conformist, if analyzed within the domain of the public transcript.

Obviously, there is not just resistance among cashiers; many have internalized the policy that the "customer comes first." In effect, they exhibit a combination of both resistive and consensual practices that are ambiguous and simultaneous. Moreover, one cannot find a dichotomous division between strategies of resistance and consent, for these strategies are constituted by the social practices of cashiers.

However, behind the image of passivity are many silent rebellions aimed at maintaining control over and within work, so that the cashiers may keep their skills and dignity in the performance of their tasks. These workers' struggles carry "a radical contention of the organization of work and the system of values that can be certainly a source of submissiveness but that can also, in another context, be a source of radical contention of this system to the degree that they attack the base of that system" (Kergoat 1982, 133). In this context, cashiers are not passive victims, for they resist each day in order to keep the expertise and skills they have acquired.

One may explain the similarities in the strategies of resistance used by cashiers in Brazil and Quebec in part by the fact that in both societies their work is considered typically feminine work. Moreover, this type of work presents an opposition to the power of men over women. This opposition constitutes, as Foucault (1994d, 226) points out, both a struggle against the authority present in this type of relation, and a

"transversal" struggle that "doesn't limit itself to a particular country. Of course, some countries encourage their development, facilitate their extension, but they are not restricted to a particular type of political or economic government."

Finally, despite all the economic, social, and cultural differences between these societies, the similarities in cashiers work in both of them are evidence that these are normalized jobs that use the same technologies, management techniques, and low levels of organized labor. In an increasingly globalized world, where work is becoming more and more casualized and similar, it is good to know that silent rebellions are taking place in the supermarket paradise of capitalist production, a resistance that provides some hope for the future.

Notes

1. In the original text, Scott (1985) uses "peasant insubordination" in this remarkable book on everyday forms of peasant resistance in Malaysia.
2. For a complete description of the methodology, see Soares (1995).
3. As Heidi Hirata (1997) explained, part-time jobs are nonexistent in Brazil because the full-time jobs are sufficiently flexible, not because work conditions are better.
4. In 1994, this supermarket chain had an increase of 41 percent in its net profit.
5. Sometimes cashiers in both societies have only half an hour for lunch.
6. Gunmar Aronsson (1989) makes the distinction between having control *over* work (vertical control) and control *within* work (horizontal control).
7. The encounter is understood here as "all those instances of two or more participants in a situation joining each other openly in maintaining a single focus of cognitive and visual attention—what is sensed as a single mutual activity, entailing preferential communication rights" (Goffman 1963, 89). One must point out that the encounter presupposes the immediate physical presence of the individuals (Goffman 1961), whose actions have a reciprocal influence on one another (Goffman 1983).
8. The exception is Anat Rafaeli and Robert Sutton, who have treated the topic in several articles: Rafaeli (1989, and 1990), Rafaeli and Sutton (1987, 1989), Sutton (1991), and Sutton and Rafaeli (1988).
9. I use the concept of strategy as the choice of winning solutions (Foucault, 1994d, 241).
10. Goffman (1963, 43–44) defined the involvement as the "capacity of an individual to give, or withhold from giving, his concerted attention to some activity at hand. . . . A main involvement is one that absorbs the major part of an individual's attention and interest, visibly forming the principal current determinant of his actions. . . . A subordinate involvement is one he is allowed to sustain only to the degree, and during the time, that his attention is patently not required by the involvement."

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