

YOU ARE NOT A CASHIER

Self-Checkout, Unpaid Labour and the Foreclosure of Refusal

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A manifesto on infrastructural imposition, consumer labour and the operational limits of refusal.

There were three checkouts.

Two were self-checkouts.

One was broken.

The only checkout staffed by a human cashier accepted cash only.

I wanted to pay by card.

Formally, there were three checkouts.

Operationally, there was one.

That difference is where this manifesto begins.

I do not object to the existence of self-checkout. I object to the conditions under which refusing it had already been made impractical before I reached the checkout.

Had a functioning staffed checkout accepting ordinary payment been available, I would simply have chosen between two services.

There would have been no manifesto.

The problem begins when an alternative survives physically but disappears operationally.

The question is therefore no longer:

Which checkout do I prefer?

It becomes:

Who determined, before I arrived, which forms of action would remain practically available to me?

That is an Onoptic question.

1. THE MACHINE IS NOT THE ONOPTICON

A self-checkout machine is not the Onopticon.

Neither is a barcode scanner, touchscreen or automation itself.

The Onopticon concerns something prior: **the composition of the field in which the subject encounters the possibilities of action.**

Two identical machines can therefore belong to entirely different realities.

In one supermarket, staffed and automated checkouts remain genuinely available. I reject the machine, use a cashier and complete my purchase without penalty.

Technology has expanded my options.

In another, staffed checkouts have been reduced; the only staffed till accepts cash; one automated till is broken; and the remaining machine becomes the only operational route for card payment.

The technology has not changed.

The architecture of refusal has.

The political object is therefore not the machine.

It is the reality organised around it.

2. THE COMMAND WAS BUILT BEFORE IT WAS SPOKEN

Nobody ordered me to use the self-checkout.

No order was necessary.

The staffed route had already been restricted.

The infrastructure had performed the command in advance.

Classical coercion says:

Do this.

Infrastructural imposition works differently:

it organises the environment until doing otherwise ceases to be an ordinary possibility.

No manager needs to direct me towards the machine. No regulation needs to declare self-scanning compulsory.

The environment can produce the same practical result.

This is **pre-imposition**.

The decisive choices occur upstream:

how many cashiers work;

how many tills are automated;

which payments the staffed checkout accepts;

which routes remain functional;

what refusal will cost in time;

and which competencies customers are expected to possess.

By the time I arrive, I am acting inside decisions I did not make.

The visible action is mine.

The architecture of the action is not.

3. CONSTITUTIVE AGENCY IS NOT TACTICAL AGENCY

I did not determine staffing levels.

I did not decide that two of three checkout points would be automated.

I did not restrict the human cashier to cash.

I did not design the payment system or interface.

Those are upstream acts.

They belong to **constitutive agency**: the capacity to build, authorise or organise the field.

What did I do?

I adapted.

I took my products to the functioning machine, scanned them, followed its instructions and paid.

That is **tactical agency**.

Constitutive agency creates the infrastructure.

Tactical agency manoeuvres inside one already in place.

Adaptation is therefore neither authorship nor consent.

Yet corporate discourse easily collapses the two.

The corporation constructs the field.

The customer moves within it.

Then the customer's movement is cited as evidence of what the customer wanted.

That reversal must be refused.

I authored my response.

I did not author the conditions that made it necessary.

4. HOMOVICTIMUS AT THE CHECKOUT

Homovictimus is not a passive victim.

The contradiction is more precise: the subject must continually choose, adapt, optimise and accept responsibility while the field of action has already been narrowed by infrastructures beyond the subject's authorship.

At the checkout I am highly active.

I scan.

I search.

I correct.

I pay.

I solve.

I adapt.

And precisely because I act, the transaction can be presented as evidence that I acted freely.

Activity is mistaken for authorship.

But agency and freedom are not identical.

A person may possess considerable tactical agency inside an imposed field while having no capacity to determine why these options, rather than others, remained.

Homovictimus names that contradiction:

The human being acts continuously inside conditions they did not constitute and is then treated as responsible for what those conditions produce.

5. THE RESPONSIBILITY-TRANSFER CIRCUIT

The mechanism is operationally simple.

The infrastructure narrows the field.

The subject adapts to what remains.

Adaptation is counted as autonomous choice.

The outcome is attributed to the subject.

The institution's constitutive intervention disappears.

At the checkout:

The company structures the environment.

The ordinary staffed alternative becomes unavailable to the card-paying customer.

The customer adapts.

The machine records successful self-service.

The infrastructurally generated act now appears simply as customer behaviour.

Then comes the dangerous inference:

“Customers use self-checkout, therefore customers prefer self-checkout.”

Not necessarily.

If staffed checkouts are reduced before self-checkout use increases, observed behaviour cannot automatically be read as unstructured preference.

Otherwise the institution can create a behaviour and invoke that behaviour to justify the structure that created it:

We reduced staffed checkouts because customers use self-checkout.

And:

Customers use self-checkout because we reduced staffed checkouts.

Whether such a feedback loop is actually operating must be empirically demonstrated.

That distinction between evidence and suspicion does not weaken the manifesto.

It makes it harder to dismiss.

6. THE COMPANY DID NOT ABOLISH THE WORK

Automation invites us to imagine that cashier labour has simply disappeared.

But the product must still be identified.

The barcode must still be scanned.

Goods may still need weighing.

Payment must still be processed.

Errors must still be resolved.

The transaction must still be completed.

The work has not wholly disappeared.

Part of it has changed hands.

Work previously performed by a paid employee is now partly performed by the customer.

I remain the buyer, but I also become a temporary component of the seller's operational process.

I purchase the commodity while contributing unpaid labour to the completion of its sale.

The company has not necessarily abolished cashier work.

It has reduced its obligation to purchase all of that work as paid labour.

The remainder may be transferred to the consumer.

That is not merely automation.

It is **labour externalisation**.

7. I PAY - AND I WORK

Normally, a company pays those who participate in its operational process.

Here the participant pays the company.

I scan the company's product through the company's system to complete the company's transaction.

Then I pay for the product.

There is no contradiction if I freely choose self-service because it benefits me.

The contradiction begins when voluntary self-service becomes compulsory self-service.

Then the company receives two things from the same person:

revenue and labour.

The customer receives the product.

The company receives payment and operational participation.

If the economic saving remains on the corporate side, "efficiency" requires interrogation.

8. EFFICIENCY FOR WHOM?

Efficiency is not a neutral answer.

It is often a distributional decision presented as a technical fact.

When an institution says:

“This is more efficient,”

the question should be:

For whom?

Whose time was saved?

Whose time was consumed?

Whose labour cost disappeared?

Whose unpaid task increased?

Who captured the economic gain?

If paid labour is replaced by small amounts of unpaid labour distributed across customers, labour has not necessarily vanished socially.

It may simply have vanished from the payroll.

Corporate accounting records:

lower labour cost.

The customer experiences:

another task.

A cost disappearing from a balance sheet is not the same as a cost disappearing from reality.

9. A CIVILISATION OF MICRO-TASKS

The issue is not that scanning a few products is unbearable.

The issue is cumulative.

Scan your goods.

Download the application.

Create the account.

Verify your identity.

Enter the code.

Remember the password.

Book the appointment.

Print the ticket.

Tag the luggage.

Check yourself in.

Upload the document.

Track the parcel.

Resolve the automated error.

Each task takes only moments and can therefore be trivialised.

But when institutions continually transfer administrative and operational work into ordinary life, the individual becomes the distributed interface through which institutional efficiency is achieved.

The task is small.

The structural transformation is not.

We are gradually constructing **a civilisation of compulsory micro-tasks.**

10. THE IDEAL USER IS A POLITICAL DECISION

Self-service infrastructure presupposes a particular user.

Someone able to see and read the screen, understand its language, manipulate products, use electronic payment, respond to alerts and move at the expected speed.

That user exists.

But that user is not everyone.

There are elderly people.

People with visual, motor or cognitive difficulties.

People unfamiliar with digital systems.

People who do not adequately understand the interface language.

Parents managing children.

People who are ill or exhausted.

And people who simply do not wish to become technical operators of every private infrastructure organising ordinary life.

The problem is not that everyone encounters the same machine.

It is that the machine presupposes capacities that are not identically distributed.

11. DIFFERENTIAL EXPOSURE

The theory must not convert structural exposure into an essence of persons.

The claim is not:

“Old people are technologically incompetent.”

Nor:

“Disabled people cannot use self-checkout.”

The proper unit of analysis is the **position occupied relative to the infrastructure.**

A checkout design may impose negligible cost on one person and substantial cost on another.

Same machine.

Same procedure.

Different exposure.

Infrastructure therefore does more than automate.

It distributes burdens according to the capacities it presupposes.

The disappearance of the staffed alternative is therefore not socially neutral.

12. THE SYSTEM CREATES THE DEFECT IT THEN ATTRIBUTES TO THE PERSON

A person struggles with the machine.

Someone asks:

“Can they not even use a self-checkout?”

Notice what disappears.
Staffing policy.
Payment restrictions.
Design decisions.
Removed alternatives.
The interface.
The cost strategy.
The entire upstream architecture vanishes.
Only the apparently deficient individual remains:
slow, confused, technologically incapable.
The infrastructure produced the difficulty.
Then the difficulty became a characteristic of the person.
This is the deeper Homovictimus operation:
structural effect is translated into personal responsibility.
The system is not judged for failing the human.
The human is judged for failing the system.

13. "THAT IS HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS" IS NOT AN EXPLANATION

"That is how the system works" converts a decision into something resembling a fact of nature.
Why can I not pay here?
Why must I use the application?
Why must I perform the operation myself?
Why is there no human alternative?
Because:
 "That is how the system works."
But systems do not descend from the sky.
They are designed, financed, configured, staffed and restricted.
Somebody decided that the system would work this way.
Technical procedure can therefore launder political and economic choice.
The decision disappears.
The interface remains.
And the interface presents itself as necessity.

14. SOVEREIGNTY MOVES UPSTREAM

At the visible level, I appear sovereign.
I press the button.
I select.
I pay.
I confirm.

But the consequential decisions occurred before these gestures.
Sovereignty has moved from the visible decision to the **decision-horizon**.
The visible decision is downstream.
Power lies upstream.
Power need not tell me which button to press if it can determine which buttons will exist.
It need not prohibit my preferred option if it can remove the infrastructure required to exercise it.
It can preserve the language of choice while pre-structuring its material conditions.
That is why the Onopticon cannot be reduced to surveillance.
Its object is the reality-field in which acting, moving and refusing become possible at all.

15. THE TEST OF FREEDOM IS NOT WHETHER I ACT

I acted.
That proves little.
A person can make tactical choices inside a field they did not constitute.
The decisive question is:
Who determined the field?
The correct test is therefore not:
 “Did the person act?”
but:
“What happened when the person attempted to refuse the architecture within which they were required to act?”
Can I reject self-checkout and still complete the purchase normally?
Can an elderly, disabled or digitally excluded customer do so?
Can refusal occur without disproportionate delay, cost or exclusion?
Where robust, low-cost exit remains available, the claim of infrastructural imposition weakens.
So refusal is not merely a moral demand.
It is an operational test.

16. DO NOT CALL THE REMAINING DOOR MY PREFERENCE

Imagine three doors.
One is locked.
Another opens only under a condition I cannot normally meet.
The third remains open.
I walk through it.
Later you announce:
“Our data show that customers prefer Door Three.”
No.
Your data show that people walked through the door you left operational.
Those are different propositions.
Do not manufacture necessity and measure adaptation as preference.

Do not reduce staffed checkouts and then cite self-checkout usage as evidence that customers wanted their removal.

Where such a feedback process is documented, the theoretical significance becomes much greater.

But first we must know what to look for.

17. IS THIS ONOPTICON?

Here the theory must discipline the manifesto.

No concept survives if it names everything.

Documented Onopticon proper requires more than this supermarket episode can demonstrate: compulsory recognition, multi-domain composition, documented feedback and weak contestability issuing in foreclosure.

This case alone does not establish that conjunction.

It does not demonstrate a multi-domain circuit or documented self-reinforcing feedback.

Its exit cost is not equivalent to losing welfare, housing, legal status or access to credit.

I can leave.

I may obtain cash.

I may shop elsewhere.

These facts matter.

I will therefore not inflate the concept for rhetorical convenience.

But the scene still reveals an **everyday micro-scene of the Onoptic grammar**:

the field is organised upstream;

a meaningful local alternative is closed;

the subject encounters the arrangement as reality;

the subject adapts tactically;

adaptation can be represented as choice;

institutional responsibility retreats behind procedure.

The case does not prove the regime.

It makes the operation visible.

That is not retreat.

It is conceptual discipline.

18. NOR IS EVERY CUSTOMER HOMOVICTIMUS

The same limit applies to Homovictimus.

Homovictimus is not another word for “consumer”.

It is not a permanent identity or psychological type.

It is a relational subject-position produced under determinate conditions of infrastructural closure.

Therefore:

“Everyone using self-checkout is Homovictimus”

would weaken the concept.

The stronger proposition is narrower:

The self-checkout scene reproduces, in miniature, the responsibility-transfer mechanism through which the Homovictimus position is produced.

The company constitutes.

The customer adapts.

Adaptation is observed.

Observed adaptation is interpreted as autonomous conduct.

The constitutive conditions disappear.

That is the operational relation.

19. I REFUSE THE FALSE PROMOTION

Do not promote me from customer to cashier.

I did not apply.

Do not turn the passenger into the ticket clerk, the bank customer into the bank operator, the patient into the administrative clerk, or the consumer into the unpaid operator of the infrastructures through which corporations organise everyday life.

If I voluntarily choose self-service because it benefits me, there is no problem.

If you remove the alternative and still call the relationship voluntary, there is.

The difference is **the capacity to refuse**.

20. I AM NOT AGAINST TECHNOLOGY

I am not against technology.

I am against **infrastructural imposition**.

I am not against automation.

I am against converting automation from option into obligation.

I am not against reducing unnecessary labour.

I am against transferring paid labour to consumers while hiding that transfer behind “convenience”.

I am not against digital competence.

I am against making a particular digital competence the compulsory anthropology of ordinary life.

I am not against efficiency.

I am against an efficiency that counts corporate savings while rendering transferred human labour invisible.

I am not against the future.

I am against a future in which every institutional responsibility becomes another micro-task assigned to the individual.

21. I AM A CUSTOMER

I entered the supermarket as a customer.

I selected a product and intended to pay its stated price.

That transaction does not make me the company's employee.

It does not make reducing the company's labour costs my responsibility.

Nor does it entitle the institution to eliminate my meaningful alternative and describe my adaptation as consent.

I used the machine.

Yes.

I scanned the products.

Yes.

I completed the transaction.

Yes.

But none of these facts answers the central question:

Who made that route necessary?

My action demonstrates my capacity to adapt.

It does not demonstrate the innocence of the architecture.

22. THE MANIFESTO

This is the boundary.

Offer me the machine.

Do not impose it.

Offer automation.

Do not remove the human alternative.

Give me convenience.

Do not manufacture necessity.

Reduce labour where technology genuinely removes labour.

Do not merely remove the wage and transfer the task to me.

Design infrastructure for human plurality.

Do not define one technically competent user as the universal customer and classify everyone else as inefficient.

And above all:

Do not compose the conditions of my action and then call the result my choice.

The Onoptic question begins upstream - where the architecture of possibility is decided.

Homovictimus becomes intelligible at the same point: not as the person who cannot act, but as the person compelled to act tactically within an already narrowed field and then treated as though that tactical action authored the field itself.

The infrastructure forecloses.

The subject adapts.

Adaptation becomes behaviour.

Behaviour becomes preference.

Preference legitimates infrastructure.

Responsibility disappears upstream.

The individual remains downstream, holding the barcode.

I AM NOT A CASHIER.

I am not refusing technology.

I am refusing the laundering of imposition into choice.

I am refusing the conversion of corporate cost into invisible customer labour.

I reject the claim that because I managed to adapt, I therefore consented to the conditions to which I adapted.

My movement through the remaining door does not mean I wanted the others closed.

My ability to operate the machine is not permission to make it compulsory.

My tactical agency is not your constitutive innocence.

And my adaptation is not consent.

Do not compose my necessity and then call it my choice.

Where this operation remains local, it must be named proportionately.

Where it becomes compulsory, interconnected, self-reinforcing and effectively beyond meaningful refusal, the diagnosis changes.

Then we are no longer speaking merely of an inconvenient machine.

We are speaking of a regime in which infrastructure begins to determine the reality available before the human being arrives:

Onopticon.

And of the subject required to carry responsibility inside a field they did not compose:

Homovictimus.