Preface

Cad-dill-lac… Cad-dill-lac… the Lac… I saw you drive up… De-ville se-dan, ’79!… Last of the great ones… Did you see Goodfellas?… Cad-dill-lac… hmm.

The syllables rolled around his mouth and off his tongue as if he were tasting them or feeling them for size like bits of broken-up gobstopper in his mouth. Humbert Humbert did not have more fun rolling ‘Lo-lee-ta’ around his mouth, neither was he more obsessed with syllables of a name, nor with its fetishized object. I had just bought a 79 Cadillac Deville from a car drive in Princeton, New Jersey. It was part of the estate of a woman who had died at the age of 99 and had been in her garage from new. It had 70,000 miles on the clock and there was a wheelchair in the trunk, honest! I had driven it down to a classics motor centre in Philly to get an idea of its place in the pantheon of the US golden age. The 72-year-old owner, Steve, owned and ran the place, 500 American antiques from the 1940s to the 1970s piled in line on a shabby lot, most of them in reasonable condition, some very well preserved in a big old shed, some mint-condition gleaming in a small showroom. It was not just the Cadillac name that rolled off his tongue, he seemed to like saying Olds-mob-ile too; there were many models he recited, a bit like a poem, or Chuck Berry or Johnny Cash rattling off place names in classic American pop. Chev-rolet, Bel Air, Pont-tiac Bonne-ville, Bu-ick Wild-cat. The 56 Ford Thun-der-bird started at the first flick of the ignition; as he slipped into the bench seat it roared into life a bit like he launched the syllables from between his lips. Steve lived and breathed these cars, said he was born with them and had grown up with them: their story was his story. Knew the history of every car, some had passed down three generations before getting to him. He was gonna work till he dropped unless he could get his son to take over, to see that the shabby lot was a field of dreams. Of course he’d like to sell me a car but thought I was just fine with mine. If he sold ten a month he could get by. Steve seemed a happy man, branded to his core and loving it.

Of course the experience of the workers embedded in the specific factory conditions and social relations of production which produced these cars in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were far from the experiences outside the factory gate then and now. The glossy brand was a project for the marketers to work on unconnected with the grime of the factory regime. Now the brand name is coming back inside the factory, inside its social relations and inside the
workers’ heads. Walmart has replaced General Motors as the world’s biggest corporation and on the back of every employee’s blue uniform it says, ‘Can I help you?’ Customers are everywhere. In or out of the factory, the corporation would like you to intersperse the syllables of its brand name into every interaction in or out of work. The history of marketing repeats itself, first as dream, then as farce now as nightmare in the factory.

When my Cadillac was made there was still a sign above the factory gate, ‘Entry Forbidden’. It was a ‘hidden abode’ of production. Remember the famous quote from Marx? Freedom, equality and Bentham rule on the labour market. But it is a different story after the labourer has made a contract to sell their labour-power:

we can perceive a change in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae. He, who before was the money owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possess of labour-power follows as his labourer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business, the other, timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but – a hiding. (Capital, p.155, George Allen & Unwin, 1957)

More recently Bruce Springsteen sings of seeing ‘death in the eyes’ of the workers (‘The Factory’) as they make their way through the factory gate for the morning shift. The ‘behind closed doors’ nature of the employment relationship profoundly affected the nature of work experience and of factory cultures. Spatially and symbolically, the factory was removed from everyday experience, also from its norms and conventions. Having nothing to lose but their hides, workers could abandon polite convention and shape their own cultures of survival and bonhomie, with sexism and racism and homophobia rife, with no other social actors (or even of intruding bosses in labour controlled lines) to challenge the basis of their cultures, its transgressions and inversions of external status orders and norms. Steve never went into the factory to check out how his cars were made. Now it is routine. At many car plants, right up to Bentley Motors, the forces and social relations of Production are specifically put on show to visitors, for triple use. As always there is material production; they are further used as marketing strategies to draw customers in to see how ‘their car’ is made; but now their very visibility is used to keep ‘the line’ in line, every one as ambassadors of the marque. As they force the workers to take down their pin-ups and tidy up their clothes and benches, how the managers must long for them to roll ‘Bent-te-ley’ around their mouths lovingly as they work.

There is an urgent need for a revival and reconfiguration of industrial sociology, albeit a more careful one extending beyond the factory gate and without Marxist guarantees but which looks very carefully at the nature of how materiality and culture are intertwined now. Re-inscriptions of the social relationships of the employment contract bring new forms of domination,
declaring themselves as new forms of freedom: the freedom to dance to work and to take a hiding as privilege so long as there is a brand name on the hide. This volume contributes to the tasks of renewal by providing a precise and carefully located discussion of the specific forms and development of new working practices and some examples of the latest and most visible of the ways in which the dominance of the market, of market institutions and marketing drive ever further back not only into the making of commodities and delivery of services but into the very social relations of production and now, putatively, into the very subjectivities and emotions of workers. The face-to-face relation and ‘customer rules’ have long been part of the service economy unprotected by any ‘hidden abode’. Their inequalities may be even greater than in manufacturing and its contradictions must be brought out by ethnographic inspection. One of the interesting things this book brings out about employee branding is that it further plunges whole sectors of the working class, formerly interacting only with themselves, into wider and visible social relations of expressive and communicative exchange and behaviour. This brings its own tensions and contradictions of re-shaping to conformist moulds, but further now, adding irony to contradiction, some sectors try to trade on leisure pursuits and styles which may continue important proletarian or oppositional themes.

So far the discussion of the branded employee has been an above-ground, user, ‘operations’ thing conducted in the mainstream literature. This book releases another current suggesting that employee branding will not always work in the favour of capital. There are submerged mines of potential and real subversion and radicalism, unnoticed or not yet fully deployed, within these new employment relationships and the new mystifications of demands placed on subordinated labour, and as the case studies of this volume show so well, on the body. The elasticity demanded of the body, its emotions and expressions, is multidimensional and allows creative, autonomous and organic elements of cultural practices. Cultures which magically think they are free and are encouraged to see in paid work a seamless extension might turn to real resistance, though, when they meet the grit of underlying compulsion. Cultural production of meaning may be deployed against, not always in line with, employer expectations. Mediated via the body, these meanings can open up different ways of being, thinking and sensing in a multitude of ways in social groups from below in a period of epochal change.

The accounts in this volume are broadly qualitative, being either explicitly ethnographic or case study based, and help to maintain a rich ethnographic tradition based on respect for, and careful recording of, situated conduct and experience. Further, the materials presented here are exemplary in combining ethnographic recording and respect with an analytic strategy that attempts to dig through layers of meaning to show how particular sites of autonomy and cultural experience are always historically and structurally located and owe
something of their internal form to their surrounding economic structures and forms, also in complicated, often unintended ways, helping to reproduce and maintain these structures. The chapters explore the ways in which those who are subject to employee branding practices actively produce and re-produce their effects and affects, even while viewing them with cynicism or even in real and meaningful critique. In doing so, this book encompasses but moves beyond descriptive qualitative accounts to show a particular and new element in the circuit of capital in its cultural and subjective moment.

Steve, read this book! Think again before you ask your son to join you among the oversized tail fins and fish tail running lights. Let him keep his day job and his soul.

Paul Willis, Princeton University, December 2010