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An Amazon fulfillment center in Baltimore in 2017. Photo by Joe Andrucyk.

Surviving Amazon

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Sometimes resistance is the only way to survive.

It is human to resist even when our resistance is barely registered by those in power. In her memoir of working in an Amazon warehouse in Leipzig, Germany in 2010, Heike Geissler recalls these lines from Austrian playwright and novelist Elfriede Jelinek: "Anyone alive disrupts." Speaking to herself or perhaps to the reader — the book is written almost entirely in the second person — she adds, "You ought to prove to your employer that you're alive."

Geissler imagines various disruptive tactics for doing so. One could hide products to "remove them from the commodities cycle," damage products and pretend they arrived that way, or damage them subtly "so that the damage is only revealed once they arrive at the customer." Toward the end of the book, Geissler's boyfriend receives a package that appears to have been sabotaged in just this way.

Inevitably, she writes, you'll get caught. "Everything gets found out in this company, but up to that point you'd have lived a little more in your workplace and you'd have ordered your obedience to retreat."

These small acts of individual resistance — means of asserting one's humanity against a system elaborately designed to blot it out — are versions of what sociologists and anthropologists call "weapons of the weak." They tend to arise when relatively powerless groups contest the conditions of their subjugation by powerful subjugators. James C. Scott's seminal 1985 study of Malaysian peasant resistance by the same name taxonomizes these quotidian acts of defiance, including foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, and sabotage.

Amazon has built a vast logistics empire by subjecting its workforce to extreme forms of

technological discipline — designed to keep workers isolated, fearful, and maniacally productive. This piece sets out to surface the "weapons of the weak" wielded by workers to resist this regime. I talked to current and former Amazon employees, spoke with warehouse worker organizers, read exit interviews on Indeed and Glassdoor, and visited online forums where Amazon workers congregate to complain, commiserate, shoot the shit, and seek and offer advice. I learned a great deal about the regime of total surveillance and bodily control that Amazon has built to manage its growing logistics workforce. And I learned about the counter-strategies that workers deploy to resist the dehumanization, boredom, pain, and mental anguish that Amazon's disciplinary apparatus exacts.

The warehouse workers I encountered play games, against themselves or their coworkers. They cheat to artificially boost their productivity numbers. They pass these tricks around in coded language. They use their scanners to find erroneously underpriced items and buy them in bulk. (Some steal outright.) They play (usually harmless) pranks on overbearing managers. And almost all of them skirt safety rules to move faster. Naturally, my sources were hesitant to disclose the specifics of some tactics, particularly those that openly defy Amazon's rules or the law. In some cases, even when I learned them, I've left the details deliberately vague.

By far the most common form of resistance among Amazon employees, however, is to quit. A warehouse organizer in Illinois told me that employees who have been around for at least six months are considered "old guard." For most workers, an Amazon warehouse job is exhausting, deadening, and unsafe. "They work themselves to the bone and wind up washing out," said Charlie, a fulfillment center worker in Northampton County, Pennsylvania.

For those who stay, the draw is Amazon's generous compensation and benefits package, relative to other low-wage workplaces. "The running joke is that the only benefit to working at Amazon is the benefits," Charlie told me. For full-time employees, Amazon offers health insurance plans and a 401(k); in October 2018, CEO Jeff Bezos established a $15 minimum wage across its US warehouses. Even before then, Amazon tended to pay better than other

employers in the logistics industry.

Amazon builds fulfillment centers in hollowed-out industrial areas and the exurban fringes of increasingly unlivable cities. Warehouse jobs are often the best (or only) game in town. Even so, workers say, it's not always worth the trouble. According to Sam Nelson, an organizer with Jobs with Justice, a national coalition of unions and community groups, a frequent refrain among workers at Amazon's warehouse in Shakopee, Minnesota is, "This is the best job I ever had, and I'm going to quit in two months."

In this context, daily acts of resistance serve as body and sanity-saving strategies. Small workarounds — tricks, games, minor sabotage — extend the time one can bear the relentless and deadening grind. A strategy that saves one's calves an extra trip across the warehouse could make the difference between quitting this week and holding out for another paycheck.

These strategies are not only valuable, then, for privately registering one's discontent but also for survival. At their limit, they may even be genuinely oppositional: functioning as forms of industrial sabotage or fostering solidarity among the workers. In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott writes that everyday resistance enables those he observed to "nibble away" at onerous or unfair policies without risking "more quixotic action." Even when the oppressed decline mass action, Scott argued, petty insubordinate gestures "create a political and economic barrier reef" on which the ship of state (or capital) might eventually run aground.

But there is a danger in over-valorizing the weapons of the weak. You risk conceding that the weak will always remain so — giving up the possibility of collective upheaval. Some acts of resistance actively inhibit mass action. Skirting safety rules and deploying labor-saving tricks may provide the feeling of having pulled one over on the boss, but they often benefit the company. Games displace competition horizontally, among coworkers, and insulate management from labor's ire. And even those techniques which slow productivity may merely function as safety valves, preventing the buildup of more acute and collective rage.

On the other hand, small acts — especially those that involve some sort of coordinated deception — may awaken a willingness to defy that eventually enables larger, more decisive acts. Whether any of the acts of sabotage, subterfuge, or evasion committed by Amazon workers are accreting a hazardous reef remains to be seen. What is certain is that, one way or the other, we need to sink the ship.

The Rule of the Rate

Amazon's global distribution infrastructure — from fulfillment and sort centers, to cross-docks, delivery stations, and Prime Now Hubs — now covers almost 222 million square feet, an area roughly a third the size of Manhattan. In every province of this fiefdom, as one Amazon warehouse worker quipped on Reddit, "the almighty rate rules" — that is, the speed at which each worker does her job.

Amazon has risen to monopolistic dominance by shortening the critical time between the production and *realization* (i.e. sale) of commodities. Incorporating the lessons of "just-in-time" production innovated by Japanese car manufacturers, Amazon's vast logistics network is designed to minimize the amount of time that products sit still. "The longer something sits and isn't in motion, the less money Amazon makes," said Charlie, the Pennsylvania fulfillment center worker. Whether stowing, picking, sorting, or delivering Amazon products, workers are expected to perform at a breakneck pace — while maintaining accuracy.

Since the advent of wage labor, *time* has been a key disciplinary tool for bosses. But Amazon has taken this technique to a new level, building a massive and intricate system of surveillance and control to accelerate the rate of productivity. "There is no privacy," Charlie said. Many sort and fulfillment centers are vast, brightly lit affairs, with unforgiving concrete floors and high ceilings. Cameras are ubiquitous. "You should start thinking of it like a prison structure... We just presume we're always being watched."

When Amazon was granted a patent last year for a haptic wristband with a motion sensor designed to guide workers' hands toward inventory items — or, as some darkly speculated, to buzz when they fall behind and need some haptic motivation to speed up — privacy advocates gasped. But such innovations, current and former workers tell me, would only augment existing tactics.

At a typical fulfillment center, certain workers unpack products arriving from manufacturers and suppliers; others stow them amid vast rows of shelves; and "pickers" fulfill orders by grabbing the correct items from the shelves and putting them in a tote, which is conveyed to "packers" who prepare the order for shipment. Workers log their interaction with each product and its location via a scanner, which almost every one of them carries.

If you're a picker, your scanner tells you the location of the product to be picked and begins counting down the time it should take you to get there. If it takes you longer than the allotted time, the clock starts counting *up*, recording the amount of time you'll have to make up later to stay "above rate." When you arrive at your destination, you scan the shelf or bin, find the item, and place it in your tote. Then you get another location. This process continues until the products needed for the order — or some portion of an order or set of orders — is complete. You set the tote on a conveyor and the process starts again.

The scanner is a powerful surveillance tool. It records your productivity rate — displaying it on its interface — as well as the time between subsequent scans (aka Time Off Task or TOT). If your TOT exceeds fifteen minutes or your rate falls below the prescribed speed for the day, you'll get a visit from a manager or a write-up. Too many write-ups and you'll be cut loose. "Rates are used as Damocles' sword," Charlie said. "You can be king, but there's a blade hanging above your head held by a thin hair."

To encourage competition, managers publicly post a ranking of employee productivity at the end of each day. In some warehouses, there's a whiteboard; in others, a printed piece of paper or an electronic display. Ashleigh Strange, who worked at a warehouse in Breinigsville,

Pennsylvania between 2013 and 2015, said this practice was also a "method of group shaming." "If you were the worst person in the warehouse," Ashleigh said, "you're going to know it. And so will everyone else." In some warehouses, bottom performers are automatically enrolled in remedial training — or written up.

Management also runs what employees called "power hours," during which workers are incentivized by raffle tickets or Amazon "swag" to work as fast as humanly possible. "You get an unimportant reward for working as fast as you can," said Charlie. "Everyone competes. This becomes the new baseline."

Online Amazon worker forums are full of strategies for artificially boosting rates. One worker discovered that managers were basing his productivity numbers on how quickly he started work after a break. By leaving a count loaded in his scanner, he could trick the computer into thinking he had resumed work with a flurry of activity. Others boost their count by rapidly scanning several bins of small items.

These little tricks get shared obliquely, "like hobo symbols," said Charlie. "A lot of, 'I don't do this, but I heard that… ' or, 'This is the way I don't do it.'" These strategies circulate through departments until management catches on, which they usually do. In the meantime, shortcuts and hacks allow for brief reprieves from the relentless pace of the work — sometimes more than a brief reprieve. As one prodigious hustler put it on Reddit, "I get my production really high and fuck around for the rest of the week."

Resisting for the Boss

In *Manufacturing Consent*, labor ethnographer Michael Buroway writes that productivity games often "arise from worker initiatives, from the search for means of enduring subordination to the labor process." But these temporary escapes come at a cost. By "redistribut[ing] conflict from a hierarchical direction into a lateral direction," games can

blind workers to their shared adversaries.

Geissler, the German warehouse worker, observed this phenomenon among her colleagues in Leipzig. "You're in a so-called flat hierarchy," she writes, "in which all flat hierarchists are gagging for an opponent." Seeing the corporation itself as too complex and distant a target, she and her coworkers directed their discontent and irritation toward whomever was closest — often each other.

On the other hand, some workers report deep camaraderie with their coworkers. While managers try to foster a culture of snitching, it doesn't always work. Charlie's job requires him to correct inventory errors, including those caused by his coworkers "creative" scanning. "Some of us try to fix it, but it's not really a priority unless it deals with Loss Prevention" — that is, unless his coworkers are actually stealing products. "Associates try to watch each other, not report each other. We help each other."

In her forthcoming book *Data Driven: Truckers and the New Workplace Surveillance*, the sociologist Karen Levy observed comparable techniques deployed by truckers to evade onboard electronic monitoring. These ranged from brute-force sabotage (covering an onboard recorder "with a small bag of dry ice and tapping them with a rubber mallet" leaves "no outward sign of assault" while shattering the machine's "solid-state innards") to data editing, GPS jamming, and hacking (in one driver's case, in order to play solitaire and *Quake* on the truck's onboard computer).

"There is value to resistance that doesn't challenge the status quo," Levy told me. "Things like identity formation and cultural preservation are also reasons to resist, whether or not you change the system." Workplace games and tricks provide escapes from monotony, while sharing them among coworkers — either in the workplace or in online forums — can foster a sense of shared identity.

But, Levy says, resistive tactics don't necessarily pose a threat to underlying (exploitive)

paradigms; sometimes they even reinforce them. Many of the everyday evasions Levy observed among the truckers were aimed at skirting federal laws that prevent truckers from driving longer, more dangerous hours. Expressions of autonomy, perhaps, which nonetheless benefit the boss.

Similarly, some of the strategies deployed by Amazon workers — especially those that evade safety precautions — allow them to work faster. Rate-based games, even those that aren't sanctioned by management, can have the effect of boosting Amazon's overall productivity.

What's more, Levy told me, "Certain types of resistance can become a release valve for people — like recycling." Or like hating your boss and scribbling graffiti about him on the walls of the men's room. "You feel like you've done something. You say, okay, that's done." In this way, resistance greases the gears of the system, enabling a daily negotiation over power and consent which forestalls any ultimate confrontation. In some cases, the weapons of the weak are not merely insufficient; they impede collective action.

Bad Robot

One of the reasons that Amazon workers resort to resistive measures is to preserve their health in a workplace constantly trying to destroy it. Amazon is consistently rated among the most dangerous workplaces in America — and those numbers would be much higher if workers consistently reported their injuries.

"Workers must reach punishingly high rates, with each act measured for efficiency and quality," writes Martin Harvey, an Amazon warehouse worker and graduate student. "The impacts of this process on human bodies and minds is horrific: joint pain, carpal tunnel, blown backs, anxiety, and depression are all common aspects of the work."

"There is no way to do a job without being 'creative' with 'Do your job safely, do it correctly,

but make rate,'" reads a Reddit post on a thread about safety hazards at fulfillment centers. And because inaccuracy and inefficiency can cost you the job, workers are implicitly encouraged to skirt the safety rules.

Ashleigh told me she frequently ignored aches and pains and injuries while on the job. "You smash your finger in a crate, you're going to hold your breath and keep going," she said, "Because otherwise, A, they're going to find a way to tell you it's your fault or, B, if you stop and complain, go to the [medical] office, that will affect your rate." Then it will be up to a manager's discretion whether the note from AmCare, Amazon's in-house medical office, is enough to give you a break on your numbers.

When they are severely injured on the job, a *Guardian* investigation found, employees have had to fight Amazon for worker's comp. Michelle Quinones of Fort Worth, Texas was sent back to the warehouse floor from AmCare at least ten times after reporting carpal tunnel pain. When her wrist finally needed surgery, Amazon's workers' comp insurer fought her for over a year before paying for the procedure.

Anxiety and severe stress about meeting rate is also ubiquitous in the online forums and groups I visited. "Anybody else have nightmares and stress about not hitting rate?" reads a post with dozens of responses on an Amazon warehouse subreddit. "I constantly dread going to work... I hate stowing and I can't get better no matter how hard I try... I drive home exhausted and lay in bed stressed about how I'm going to do the next day. I've been here 6 months almost, surprise I'm still even employed... I love amazon, but then I hate it. I just can't do it and the stress is killing me."

Some responses offer strategies for stowing quickly, while others debate productivity-enhancing substances. "Caffeine helped me. Red Bull, monster rockstar and now I've discovered 5 hour energy," says one worker. "No the energy drinks just make you sweat a lot more and cause anxiety," counters another. "CBD oil... might help (after work before bed) with stress and anxiety. It[']s not illegal and won[']t fail any drug tests it[']s not like THC."

Public forums like these (and many private ones elsewhere on the internet) are collaborative spaces where agitation — shared expressions of anger and grievance — can congeal into solidarity. At a company that is notoriously parsimonious about Time Off Task, forums function as de facto break rooms where workers commiserate, complain, and perhaps even entertain collective action.

But sometimes these spaces also serve to rationalize the manifestly oppressive pressures of the workplace. Forum participants encourage each other to stick it out, to fight through pain. "It gets better" is a common refrain. They collaborate on techniques for pushing their bodies harder and for evading onerous safety regulations. Few tips are traded about how to flourish at Amazon; they are mostly about how to get by. Veterans advise newcomers to resign themselves to dehumanizing monotony or risk perpetual dissatisfaction: put your head down, get tunnel vision, give in to the flow. Sharing strategies for survival has the effect of normalizing the idea that "work" is something one can only aspire to (barely) survive.

In November 2018, Amazon workers organized demonstrations across Europe under the banner "we are not robots." Responding to the protest, an Amazon employee wrote on Reddit, "No but I sometimes wish I were one. Life would be so much easier and I would be much more pleasant to work with if I had no emotions or pain."

Clotted Arteries

Amazon has built the most advanced system in history for disciplining workers' bodies. It pounds them, with fear and technology, into replaceable parts of a single machine. "All employees are essentially wetware attached to machinery," says Charlie, the warehouse worker in Pennsylvania. The purpose of this machinery is to accelerate the rate of exploitation — allowing for an unprecedented quantity of wealth to be expropriated by a single man.

Amazon's disciplinary apparatus isolates individual workers, encourages competition among them, and wears them down to the point of exhaustion and resignation — at which point, many of them quit. Temporary workers cycle in and out, and slack labor markets ensure a new workforce is always in waiting. Where resistance arises, it often only provides momentary solace — a break for the body, a fleeting feeling of defiance, or a way of letting off steam. Other times, as with safety regulations, the system relies on rule-breaking to function.

Yet Amazon's approach to discipline also points to its greatest vulnerability: its need for speed. "In the idealised world-picture of logistics," writes Jasper Bernes, "manufacture is merely one moment in a continuous, Heraclitean flux; the factory dissolves into planetary flows, chopped up into modular, component processes which, separated by thousands of miles, combine and recombine according to the changing whims of capital." If this dream of frictionless flow has produced the dismal conditions within the Amazon warehouse, it also offers those same workers a potential source of leverage.

Whereas workers in a factory have the power to slow or halt production, workers in the logistics industry have the power to block circulation, to clot the channels through which capital flows and learns about itself. Longshoremen at major ports have wielded this power to great effect for a century, their strikes functioning as de facto blockades. And just-in-time logistics is potentially even more vulnerable to worker disruption, since it eschews the redundancies and backups that might have compensated for circulatory blockages in the past.

Logistics is both the circulatory and nervous system of contemporary capitalism. Amazon prefigures the worker as a seamless conduit — a neuron and a blood cell — in the free movement of information and commodities. Her behavior is minutely calibrated, at every moment, to serve the ever-fluctuating demands of a dynamic and hydraulic world system. If she and her coworkers refuse to play their role in this meticulously choreographed operation,

however, the whole system seizes up.

Of course, such a project will rely on Amazon workers developing the sort of solidarity that is disincentivized by the disciplinary apparatus erected around them. It means reaching beyond forms of micro-resistance that may mitigate the most dehumanizing aspects of the work, but which are ultimately comfortably accommodated (if not actively encouraged) by the company structure.

Community Engagement

To date, the only group of Amazon workers who have managed to collectively force a negotiation with management are those at the Shakopee, Minnesota fulfillment center outside Minneapolis. With the help of organizers from the Awood Center, a worker center funded by the Service Employees International Union, the predominantly Somali workforce has staged a series of protests against an ever-increasing pace of work which punishes devout Muslim employees for using break time to pray. On December 14, 2018, at the peak of the holiday rush, forty Shakopee warehouse workers walked off the job.

These actions have forced Amazon to come to the table. They've agreed to have Somali-speaking managers present for firings related to productivity and to hold quarterly meetings with the workers. An Amazon spokesperson told the *New York Times* that "the company did not see its work with the East African workers as a negotiation but rather as a form of community engagement similar to its outreach efforts with veterans and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender employees."

But the Shakopee workers aren't looking for "community engagement." They're fighting for changes in, and more control over, the conditions of their work. "Workers are using every avenue possible to try and win jobs that are safe and that invest in our families and our communities," said Abdirahman Muse, director of the Awood Center.

During the night shift on March 7, 2019, around thirty stowers at Shakopee staged another walkout, returning to the warehouse after three hours with a list of demands. "In addition to calling for an 'end [to] the unfair rates that force errors and end careers,'" *Labor Notes* reported, "they called on Amazon to stop the use of temporary employees, to 'stop counting prayer and bathroom breaks against rate,' and to better maintain the equipment that most often leads to injury." *[Eds.: On July 16, 2019, during the first day of the two-day Prime Day sale, organizers at Shakopee engaged in another work stoppage to protest working conditions.]*

To be sure, the workers at Shakopee have benefited from a tighter labor market. In Minnesota, Amazon can't rely exclusively on washout and turnover to fix its labor problems. They've also benefited from preexisting cultural and communal ties which have provided fertile ground for building workplace solidarity. "One thing to know about our community — we talk a lot on the phone and chat over coffee," Muse told the *New York Times*. "That makes organizing easier." Most fundamentally, however, the workers have been successful because they've done large-scale actions *together* — actions that a pose a genuine threat to Amazon's productivity goals, to the frictionless flow of goods, and therefore, to its bottom line.

The fact is that organizing beyond daily resistance is hard. So is overcoming fear inside a system designed to inspire it, and developing close bonds when the work demands callousness. Amazon has already begun to retaliate against workers who participate in small-scale protests. They will no doubt intensify their efforts if larger-scale unrest begins to stir. The experience in Shakopee suggests that mobilizing workers' networks outside the warehouse is a necessary part of the strategy. Warehouses packed with thousands of workers can amplify impersonality and isolation; the neighborhood instead of the shopfloor may offer a more promising site for organizing.

And online forums, like those I consulted for this piece, may also be a place where solidarity and strategy is cultivated. "We're not getting a raise unless we could organize something

drastic," wrote one worker in February 2018 on the Amazon warehouse subreddit, "like striking during Prime Week across the network. I'm talking representation in all shifts (days and nights), all departments."

In response, another worker posted, "Funny enough, Someone wrote 'Amazon needs a union!' on the 'voice of the associates board.' Next day it was erased with no response."

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