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Braga

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Information Work and the Proletarian Condition Today: The Perception of Brazilian Call Center Operators*

Ruy Braga

University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

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Abstract

The increase in company outsourcing over the last two decades has led to the development of a new type of worker on the margins of the productive system: the Call Center operator. Responsible for a wide range of information services, the rapid expansion in call centers has stirred the interest of a number of researchers in different areas of knowledge. Analyzing the work of the call center operator, the article looks to deepen our comprehension of the sea-change currently affecting today's working class. In contrast to what many forecasted some 15 years ago, the information revolution has failed to dissolve the opposition between manual and mental work activities: instead, it has served as a key instrument for controlling and routinizing intellectual work.

Empleos de información y la condición proletaria: como lo perciben los trabajadores de los Call Center de Brasil

El incremento de la subcontratación en las últimas dos décadas ha producido un nuevo tipo de trabajador en los márgenes del sistema productivo: el operador de Centrales telefónicas (Call centers). Su rápida expansión, motivada por una ampliación de los servicios correspondientes, el tema ha merecido la atención de investigadores variados. Al analizar el trabajo del operador del "Call Center", el artículo trata de entender el gran cambio que se ha producido en la clase trabajadora. En contraste con lo que se pronosticaba hace unos quince años, la revolución en la información no ha liquidado la oposición entre trabajo manual e intelectual, en vez de ello, ha servido como un instrumento básico para controlar y hacer rutinario el trabajo intelectual.

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Travail des services informatiques et l'état prolétaire aujourd'hui: la perception des opérateurs brésiliens de centre d'appel

L'augmentation aux companies qui externalisent le travail pendant les deux dernières décennies a mené au développement d'un nouveau type d'ouvrier sur les marges du système productif: l'opérateur de centre d'appel. Responsable d'un éventail de services de renseignement, l'expansion rapide aux centres d'appel a remué l'intérêt d'un certain nombre de chercheurs dans des domaines diverses de la connaissance. Analysant le travail de l'opérateurs de centre d'appel, l'article regarde pour approfondir notre compréhension de la transformation qui affecte actuellement la classe ouvrière d'aujourd'hui. Contrairement à ce que beaucoup en ont prévu il y a quinze ans, la révolution informatique n'a pas dissous l'opposition entre les activités manuelles et mentales de travail : au lieu de cela, elle a servi un instrument principal pour commander et routiniser le travail intellectuel.

Keywords

call centers, intellectual labor, information services, labor, working class, outsourcing

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyze some of the main characteristics of the work performed by Call Center operators – centers that are well known to all, and subject to the pressures of information flows.¹ To this end, we present data collected from field research conducted among this group of workers for the last two years. Because this is a segment which to a certain extent condenses a varied range of tendencies inherent to the structure of capitalist production, large-scale production in the sector of informational services represents a unique field for observing the contradictions within contemporary workplaces generally. Such contradictions (and accompanying ambivalences) become even more significant when we imagine the formation of a proletarian condition, always reinforced by the increasing computerization of the workplace, by the fragmentation of workers' associations and unions, by the increased offer of job positions in the service sector, and by the decline of "traditional" salary relationships.

We intend to follow some of the useful theoretical and methodological precedents laid out by Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux in their study of a worker's group in the Peugeot factory at Sochaux-Montbéliard (France).²

¹ We use the expression *Call Center* (comparable to the French, "*centre d'appel*"), although we consider the activity closer to a "production activity" rather than simply a "call" or "contact" center.

² Beaud and Pialoux 1999.

Despite its being ethnographic research that aims at understanding a central process in contemporary French society – that is, the deconstruction and disorganization of unskilled workers' groups – we are of the opinion that part of the problem analyzed by Beaud and Pialoux is not restricted to French conditions, but is part of global society.³

Actually, Beaud and Pialoux show the restructuring process of work as stages in a context marked not only by deep technical-organizational transformations, but also by the liberalization, deregulation, and globalization of capital, leading therefore to increased unemployment. The interviews conducted by the authors show the workers' daily routines in the globalization of capital. Furthermore, we perceive similarities between France and Brazil with regard to the distance between reality and fiction, or more specifically, between reality and the representations made by the spokespersons of the manufacturing and financial companies. These spokespersons claim that the workers are a privileged group who enjoy stability and a secure work contract. We also noticed how workers respond to the intensification of productive rhythms and the subsequent degradation of work conditions – the workers being compelled to live with more stress in the workplace, as well as precarious employment and salary compression.

Therefore, we accept Beaud and Pialoux's general arguments, which are based on reflecting on the great ruptures and discontinuities in class relations during the last 15 years, all of which took place at the expense of unskilled workers.⁴ At the same time, the originality of their work lies in their analysis of the intersection between technical-organizational and economic changes

³) To a certain extent, we intended to follow a path set out earlier by researchers who studied work organizations in Sochaux-Montbéliard (historical cradle of the Peugeot factories), who focused on the emergence of social insecurities when faced, primarily, with economical insecurity (see Castel 2003).

⁴) Among which stands out generational discontinuity or the interruption of social mechanisms responsible for the transmission, from one generation to the next, of the ideas and social views traditionally belonging to unqualified workers (cf. Beaud and Pialoux 1999, pp. 29–67, 293–332). This aspect of historical rupture includes both the arrival of the new generation of Peugeot's top management when computerization of the factory were introduced, and the disassociation between parents and children, resulting largely from school policies related to the changes in the technical and professional schools. Here we see one of the great treasures of Beaud and Pialoux's analysis – the study of the subsequent path of Sochaux workers' children. It should be noted that this aspect of the rupture of class relations has been much less studied by sociologists of work than, for instance, the restructuring of work processes.

and forms of political and union awareness, well beyond the social space of the factory.⁵ In addition to our seeking better understanding of these dynamics, we also sought to enhance the perception of Call Center operators about the restraints imposed by the information flow, in addition to identifying and posing strategies for their resistance and self-valuation. We tried, therefore, to relate an understanding of both contemporary worldwide corporate dominance and of the specific contradictions within local sites to the prevailing proletarian conditions created by global capitalism.⁶

The Objective Truth about Exploration

As Beaud and Pialoux remind us, being a common worker today means to be condemned to remain in a depreciated realm. And this denial of the old class-conscious vocabulary brings with it a crisis in the faith of political language. For a significant number of youths, “class talk” seems to be completely outmoded. For the same reason, their starting point is anchored in the evidence that the worker’s condition seems to have been affected by the increasing precariousness of its old Fordist state and by the frequency with which workers are challenged by the new system of exploitation and dominance.

Starting with a wider theoretical question, which concerns the manner of existence and the construction of a worker’s group, Beaud and Pialoux develop a theme about the transformations of the mode of reproduction of that group through the emergence of the logics of fragmentation and deconstruction of their condition.⁷ According to the provocative formula proposed by the authors, workers “have disappeared from the social scene. In short, workers exist, but we don’t see them any more. Why?”⁸ In the last 15 years the workers have become the subject of so much repression that it has made

⁵ Following, in a certain measure, a tradition inaugurated by Engels (1988) – and taken up again, among others, by Gramsci (2001) – which consists of privileging subjects related to the “proletarian” way of life, beyond a “means of production,” simplified by techniques and stylized by the economy.

⁶ As, for instance, the wide use of “ultramodern” equipment (TICs), associated to “archaic” contractual forms (remuneration by task). Or the production of “post-modern” services (internet, deoconferencing, data centers) regulated by “modern” mechanisms (Taylorist) of work control and organization.

⁷ Beaud and Pialoux 2005.

⁸ Beaud and Pialoux 1999, p. 15.

them invisible. Through social forces they cannot control, workers have become objects of compassion or indifference.⁹

It should be noted that the authors position themselves, from the start of their research in 1983, clearly against the tide of workplace studies developed in the late 70s and the 80s. As in the majority of industrialized countries, in France workplace studies were deeply marked by the successive “good-byes to the proletariat” and, within organizational sociology by the rehabilitation of companies and by a downgrading of workers’ concerns.¹⁰ In fact, mere mention of the working class or of the existence of social classes is rare, and class analysis has badly atrophied. As Beaud and Pialoux note:

The rehabilitation of the concept the company emerged in the beginning of the 80’s and narrowly coincided with the “good-bye to the proletariat” of several Marxist intellectuals, making workers appear as obstacles to the modernization of the industry, as heirs to a revolutionary past, necessarily leading to rearward combats. Progressively, and callously, they left the horizons of opinion makers (intellectuals, journalists, politicians, etc.), exactly when, as a result of the weakening of the means of collective resistance, work is intensified at the workshops, social relationships in the workplace deteriorate, and workers are, so to speak, transformed in simple variables of the adjustment, reduced to components of the salary mass that needs to be increasingly compressed. During the last 15 years, the ‘worker’s issue’ was truly repressed.¹¹

In this context, Beaud and Pialoux elected as their object of reflection the system of practical solidarities and of collective defense employed by Peugeot’s workers. Such a system configures a certain set of social relationships essentially compatible with exploitation, since it leaves untouched the relationship between capital and work, not questioning the salary relationships – on the contrary, tending to reinforce them. But, at the same time, this “political system” was contrary to the *full development of exploitation* as it succeeded in structuring barriers to the intensification of the rhythms,

⁹ On the other hand, after many years away from public debate and even from academic work, the social classes theme has been renewed and revalued by a certain type of sociology heir to a tradition that dates back to Marx (cf. Bouffartigue 2004).

¹⁰ This is an approach that privileges the analysis of the culture and the identity of companies, disclosing the social system comprised by the existing formal and informal collaboration networks among diversified social forces. In the French case, the sociology of organizations was developed along the lines of Michel Crozier’s writings, starting from the study about power relations in organizations (Crozier and Friedberg 1977; Sainsaulieu 1977, 1987; more recently, see also Uhalde 2001).

¹¹ Beaud and Pialoux 1999, pp. 16–17.

stimulated the organization of forms of resistance to supervision, and provided the workers with freedom spaces inside the factory.¹²

The style of analysis elected by the authors privileged a type of ethnographic study centered in symbolic fights and in the attempt to relate the different fronts of a worker's life: work, politics, family, school, way of life.¹³ It concerns highlighting situations of exploration and dominance, as well as their forms of resistance: in time, new work loyalties emerge, symbolic affinities and politics are built, and new activisms appear in the shop floor.¹⁴ The “deletion” of the worker configures a “symbolic defeat” that contributes to demobilize that which was formerly known as the “working class.”

Through the interviews, the authors noticed the specific importance of the loss of trust – often translated into difficulties to remain an activist, whether in the union or politically, inside the factory – in the old resistance models associated with the disappearance of the communist hopes that accompanied the events subsequent to the fall of the Berlin Wall.¹⁵ There was a “symbolic defeat” that represents, above all, a certain correlation of social forces unfavorable to the working class:

Their spokespersons (labor unions, factory deputies, activists, the “Party”), who used to represent them (the workers) in public spaces, lost their influence considerably. The image workers had of themselves has paled now. The representation crisis contributed strongly to the group's lack of visibility. Let us say it clearly: workers slowly ceased to be

¹² However, as of the early 80s, the interviews show that five major elements came together to destroy the political system of practical loyalties: the rapid increase of unemployment; the introduction of new production technologies and new forms of control and organization of work and production; competitiveness; the fall of USSR; and the advantages for the company of the the physical and moral exhaustion of workers the longer they worked for the company.

¹³ Under capitalist production, relations among social classes cross and mix with other relations, such as family, gender, race, and generation, without suppressing their specific effects. Beaud and Pialoux (1999) demonstrate how these excluded identities are reinforced in as much as the awareness of belonging to a given social class is weakened. They show how the increase of religious and racial references is associated to the weakening of the worker's class identity. Actually, through outsourcing, unskilled jobs have “shifted” globally and to the service sector.

¹⁴ In the same way, the authors study the symbolic destabilization – categories, hierarchies, values and principles – of the old professional unionist culture of political activism. In the authors' opinion, the current resistance originates from a group defending their own “dignity.”

¹⁵ Beyond a simple political defeat, the disappearance of the USSR has become a true symbolic defeat, lived by workers' groups used to defining their collective historical perception by adhering to the tenets of the October Revolution.

feared by entrepreneurs and executives. This is a significant rupture in the history of class relations. It means that the dikes built during the years by the workers' movement to oppose exploration, to impart class awareness to the group and to best resist the symbolic dominance have given in completely. The result is that the pride, the arrogance and the several forms of contempt of the "ruling classes," long blocked by the existence of a labor political culture (institutionalized), were released and able to emerge without restraints.¹⁶

In this sense, the hegemonic emergence of the job category, "operator," points to a deep restructuring of the working class during the period of neoliberal globalization. This restructuring is associated with a general decrease of political awareness in the workplace, which has immediate effects – increasing workers' feelings of abandonment and detachment from the social hierarchy, thereby contributing to their demoralization. It could be expected, therefore, that Peugeot's management took advantage of the opportunity to deepen the deconstruction of the "political system" of the factory.

The change in the reproduction of the workers' groups through the logic of fragmentation and deconstruction of their condition within globalized capitalism seems to be decisive. This globalizing concern on the part of Beaud and Pialoux, as they sought to clarify the deconstruction of workers' solidarity associated with the changes in the dynamics of class dynamics, inspired us to select a group of workers – Call Center operators – which, in spite of differences with the French Peugeot workers, illustrates a logic that is equivalent to that of the Sochaux workers: the logic of de-politicalization of social relations in production and the impossibility (never final, it should be noted) of collective means for social action in capitalist globalization.¹⁷

Actually, the growth of Call Centers, as part of this phase of globalization of capital, corresponds to a strong trend towards outsourcing, predominant worldwide during the 80s and 90s.¹⁸ It is one of the main aspects of globalized capitalism: the drastic change of the institutional environment of companies, enjoyed by networked companies who enjoy financial hegemony.¹⁹ It

¹⁶ Beaud and Pialoux 1999, p. 16.

¹⁷ The idea is not to replicate the French authors' study in another context – this would be otherwise impossible. However, some of the major trends identified by Beaud and Pialoux may be generic to global capitalism, and therefore evident in Brazil.

¹⁸ See Cousin 2002; Zarifian 2004.

¹⁹ In the words of Durand: "Customer' calls strongly disturb the employees' work as well as services companies or public services. These workers have to adapt immediately to a new

also should be noted that the 80s and 90s witnessed the consolidation of an accumulation regime under financial hegemony that centered around asset profitability, domination of information flows, and concentration of financial capital on a worldwide scale.

However, it was only in the 90s that general historical trends were consolidated, producing a foundation capable of structuring a reasonably coherent accumulation regime. We then witnessed the deconstruction of the Fordist company directed by a generalized outsourcing process, compression of hierarchical levels, and development of managerial strategies that aim at the permanent mobilization of the workforce to insure imposed employee cooperation, management by goals, as well as the fragmentation of the salary relationship. As defined by Thomas Coutrot, it is a “new capitalist Utopia”: the neoliberal company.²⁰

On the other hand, increasing unemployment, in addition to the competition among workers associated with the fear of unemployment, as well as outsourcing of production and supply chains, provided companies with an instrumental base for deepening the deconstruction of collective employee bargaining. Through outsourcing, for instance, labor concentrations were dispersed and “old” political relations were destroyed – in addition to making the new jobs “shift” to the services sector.²¹ In the same way, the construction of new factories, significantly different from previous ones, with a restructured conception of space and abundance of computers and equipment, has allowed a deep transformation of the work organization. Not all members of the “old working class” could adapt.²²

demand, usually added to the task in course, before they return, only to be disturbed again. Furthermore, the issues may often be solved by less qualified personnel. Then we begin to see personnel installed over phone platforms, qualified to answer the majority of questions after identification of the customer, and having an available database in a computer terminal. Quickly the idea emerges of transferring this ‘customer service’ to outsourced companies. At the same time, other massive telephone applications appear: researches made by telephone, telemarketing, handling of calls directed to television shows, and others, such as telesales, sales by correspondence, etc.” (Durand 2004, p. 232).

²⁰ See Coutrot 1999.

²¹ In this way, a competitive structure emerges and takes root among workers, located predominantly inside the subcontracting relationship. The competition structured by capital among outsourced workers is not regulated by wages, but by job preservation. Another source of competition among workers should be mentioned: that which originates from the antagonism among those in a “privileged” position, that is, those who work for the contracting company, and those who work for subcontracted companies, such as Call Centers.

²² The consequence was an accentuated practical depreciation of work: salaries are indi-

The diffusion of Call Centers, in our opinion, shows the hegemony of the productive model represented by the neoliberal company, at the same time centralized in the financial sphere. It is a type of company that has developed very quickly in the last decade and has attracted the interest of several scholars of contemporary economies.²³ For some, such as Durand, Call Centers correspond to a business segment that comprises predominantly activities of low-added value and attract a low-skilled unqualified workforce.²⁴ At the same time, Call Center companies themselves place Call Centers at the center of information and communication technologies and of the contemporary service economy – supposedly in line, therefore, with the “modernity” represented by the information economy.²⁵

From the point of view of the general job characteristics of Call Center operators, we would say that: (a) the activities are performed 24 hours a day, seven days a week – consequently, Call Centers demand wide availability on the part of workers; (b) such availability is associated with difficult work conditions, the result of what Paulo Freire refers to as strong “intermittence”;²⁶ (c) the work is subject to intense information flow: at the end of a call, the next call is connected, whether automatically (in intervals of 0 to 20 seconds, depending on the type of transaction), or whether manually, after a maximum of two or three rings.²⁷

Before we characterize the work of the Call Center operator, however, we should say that the very appellation, frequent nowadays, of “operator,” given to workers in general and to unskilled workers in particular, denotes an economical and political process whose axis consists of dissolving the differentiation among qualified and unskilled workers, reinforcing the disappearance of the hierarchy inside the working class. More concisely: the category of “unskilled worker” gives way to the homogeneous and undifferentiated category of “operator” – or, in our case, “Call Center operator.”

vidualized; the productive rhythms are intensified; new bonus are introduced; and increases in competition among workers.

²³ See. Cousin 2002; Delaunay 2003; Zarifian 2004.

²⁴ Durand 2004.

²⁵ Call Centers also stand out by their capacity to generate jobs with relatively low investment. Evidently, this is a very seductive characteristic, if we consider the present situation of the Brazilian economy.

²⁶ For more details, see Freire 2002.

²⁷ For a characterization of the Call Center operator as an “information worker,” see Delaunay 2003, ch. 10.

In spite of the differences, we think that the reality of the information work in Call Centers accompanies the tendency highlighted by Beaud and Pialoux of a general de-politicalization of work. Evidently, it should be pointed out that we work with a “trend” and not with a relentless process against which there are no countervailing social forces. Even if submitted to the constant information flow, the Call Center operator is always capable of creating spaces of freedom inside the production of services. Yet, this is not the “creative freedom” supposedly inherent in the nature of information work, described by the so-called “Cognitive School.”²⁸

We are talking of a type of freedom limited by the invention of subterfuges to escape computer control or to negotiate, whenever possible, restricted margins of autonomy.²⁹ Usually, the work of Call Center operators is fundamentally regulated by the pressure of the information flow, dominated by the incessant flow of communications, and subordinated to a rigid script,³⁰ whose main objective consists of increasing commercial effectiveness, associated with the reduction of the connection time, with pressure exerted by the constant stream of calls through all the time of work. Therefore, the autonomy of the Call Center operator is significantly reduced while the supervisors listen to the conversations to assure compliance with the script.³¹

There is an average of one supervisor to every 15 or 20 Call Center operators at the workplace. This high rate of supervisors is explained by the need to maximize control of the workers, which prevents workers from leaving the information flow and gives them no moment to relax.³² This is a type of work that illustrates as no other the Taylorization of intellectual work and of the service sector: disciplined communications coerced under information

²⁸) Corsani, Dieuaide and Azaïs 2001; Galvão, Silva and Cocco 2003; Lazzarato and Negri 2001; Vercellone 2003.

²⁹) It seems that the technical promise of a supposed “interesting professional insertion” for all those “included in informatics” did not materialize (cf. Grün 2003).

³⁰) Concerning the script and its influence on the work of Call Center operators, see Mascia and Sznalwar 2000.

³¹) The information technology allow an extremely accurate count of the duration of calls, “log offs,” whether authorized or not, delays in answering calls, and pauses.

³²) One of the main tasks of supervisors and quality monitors is to make an operator’s “displacement” (workstation abandonment) difficult. Supervisors systematically forbid operators to interrupt their work to use the restroom or to smoke. Since the regular break of a work shift is only 15 minutes and since the operator needs to constantly ingest liquids to moisten their throat to prevent health problems, it becomes evident how the operator’s need to use the restroom generates a serious problem to be managed by the company.

flows and limited by the instrumental character of the script imposed by the company on the operator. The objectives are clear: to multiply transactions and to decrease their cost through the reduction of all communications to simple tools, devoid of meaning and devoid of all humanity.

With the taylorization of the service relationship and the automation of the Call Center operator job, productivity earnings are attained through marked increases in part-time labor agreements, but also in workers' physical fatigue, automated and repetitive actions, indifference regarding the function of tasks, vertigo caused by the multiplicity of calls, and Repetitive Stress Injuries (RSIs).³³ In short, everything seems to concur regarding the degradation of work in this service sector, increasingly worsened by the demands imposed by productivity earnings.³⁴

Another way to describe the degradation in this sector is to highlight that it also involves a slow but steady transfer of part of Call Centers workload to the customer. Inside the field defined by the service relationship between the company (or the Call Center operator) and the customer or user, it is increasingly the case part of the workload is "shared" between operator and customer.³⁵ This, in turn, becomes an efficient tool for disciplining workers.

Therefore, one realizes that the slogan which says that "the customer is always right" is complete nonsense, no longer taken seriously by customers, who are increasingly less deceived, but is constantly repeated among employees of the companies, to maintain or to develop this implication in the process of rationalization of service production. Which undergoes, currently, an outsourcing trend concerning those tasks easiest to standardize (call centers, but also several other subcontracted companies: cleaning, maintenance, understood as the concept of a routine of products or subsets, etc.) and, in some segments, by the trend to create procedures that slowly eliminate the communications content that characterizes a service relationship.³⁶

³³) On RSIs in Call Centers, see Marx 2000.

³⁴) See Ughetto, Besucco, Talard, and Tertre 2002.

³⁵) Actually, the customer helps to co-organize the work of the Call Center operator and, furthermore, remunerates the service provider company. Call Centers increase the pressure on operators due to the customer calls waiting line. Call Center operators are, almost always, insufficient in number during peak hours, often forcing the customer to call at a time when the service is less overloaded. Therefore, the customer aids in the organization and in the regulation of the company's information flow. There are also cases, as, for instance, in the city of São Paulo, where this co-production of the service means that the customer remunerates the provider through phone rates.

³⁶) Durand 2004, 243.

The taylorization of the activity of Call Center operator consists in *imprisoning the spiritual character of the work* – as well as the practical knowledge involved – in a productive routine marked by the interaction with information technologies, as well as by coordination of information among services. By means of the pressure from the information flow, the work of the Call Center operator becomes, finally, the object of a technological regulation centralized by the regime of permanent mobilization of the workforce. The unified technical base provides the opportunity for the company to establish “scientifically” the productive rhythms using procedures, with the inevitable degradation of work and of working of the working conditions. The intensification of rhythms and the increased control on the part of supervisors and coordinators merely crown this process.

The ultimate objective of taylorism as a model for work organization finally prevails,³⁷ tending to subject significant part of the service relationship – particularly that marked by the displacement to the periphery of the system – of activities considered of low added value. The use of information technologies to increase control over the collective worker becomes an imperative made even more vigorous through the relentless drive to reduce costs. The work subject to the information flow produces a certain class experience that attests as no other does to the taylorization of knowledge. This taylorization originates in the practical activity of collective workers.

The Subjective Truth of Dominance

Our field research began in 2003 and is still continuing.³⁸ We selected the two main companies of Brazil’s of Call Centers, and monopolize the Brazilian market. As Table 1 shows, the aggregate number of employees of the two researched companies – distributed in the following way: Company A, 38,000; Company B, 37,926 – corresponds to 75,926. In number of job positions, Company A has 14,500 and Company B, 17,507. All the other

³⁷⁾ That is, to guarantee to capital the necessary instruments for the appropriation of practical knowledge and the collective dominance of workers (see Braverman 1981).

³⁸⁾ The steps of our research were as follows: 1) Visits to the companies for direct observation; 2) Interviewing the main actors (managers, operations coordinators, supervisors, union people and Call Center operators) involved in the process and in the work organization; 3) Distribution of a detailed questionnaire to Call Center operators; 4) In-depth interviews with Call Center operators. For a more detailed description of the study, see Braga 2005.

13 larger companies of the segment, together, have 59,721 employees and 35,353 job positions. In percentages, this means that, in total number of employees, the companies A and B together represent 56 percent of the segment. In number of positions, the companies A and B hold 47.5 percent of Brazil's market.

Table 1 Call Centers A and B: number of operator employees, number of positions, and total participation in Brazil's market

	Number of operator employees	Total number of positions	Total participation in the market (operators/ positions)
Company A	38,000	14,500	24.7%
Company B	37,926	17,507	26.9%
Other companies	59,721	35,353	48.4%
TOTAL	135,647	67,360	100%

In the remainder of this paper, we focus only on Company A, and refer interested readers to another paper for more extensive analysis of both companies.³⁹ Of the 131 questionnaires completed by the Call Center operators from Company A, 68 percent were women and 32 percent men.⁴⁰ Disproportionate many are young workers: 43 percent were between 18 and 24 years old, 21% between 25 and 29 years old, 18% between 30 and 40 years old and 18% between 40 and 50 years old, and none over 50 years of age. A majority had no more than a high school degree (65%), and, of the remaining, 29% were attending college and 6% reported they had graduated from college.

Regarding the work rhythm, the answers indicated a uniformly negative perception of the pressure exerted by the information flow: no less that 62% of the respondents reported that the work compromised their health in some way. Many reported stress due to the intensity of the work rhythm (26%) or

³⁹ See Braga 2005.

⁴⁰ For an interesting analysis of the inequalities in the services sector and, more particularly, in the telecommunications sector, see Georges (2003, 2004); on the same theme, see Segnini (2001) and Nogueira (2005).

difficulty to adapt to the rhythm (21%). The majority (56%) had negative perceptions of work – as stressful and controlling (39%) or as monotonous and tiresome (17%), while fewer had positive perceptions – opportunities to be creative and independent (9%), participate with freedom (6%), and compatible with personal satisfaction (26%). Forty-one percent reported positive feelings about work. Only 3% of the respondents did not answer this question. Clearly, the perceptions of Call Center operators from Company A are divided, but with a perceptible predominance of negative evaluations over positive ones. Through interviews with Call Center operators from Company A we perceive there are some, though in the minority, who are adapted to the work rhythm and feel, at least in some measure, satisfied with the type of work they perform.

These workers are around 20 years old and are both coping with their own family responsibilities as well as supporting their own mothers and fathers. Many of them are single mothers. We also found that workers whose spouses are unemployed, they are more likely to have positive work values (namely that their jobs are consistent with their expectations for creativity, independence, solidarity, or freedom). Based on interviews, we found that positive work values were more likely when the conditions of household responsibilities had what we call a “disciplinary effect.” This disciplinary effect on positive work values is evident, for example, among single mothers who greatly depend on their employment to support their children. In fact, recruiting single mothers is a well known and frequent strategy of recruitment for companies. These companies can count on such women to be hard working and loyal employees.

To help capture the underlying dynamics, it is useful to explore this further. We found that 26 percent of the Call Center operators interviewed clearly indicated that they felt motivated, intended to follow a career in the area, and thought that professional progress was possible. What we call an “expressive contingent” (41%) reported that the profession of Call Center operator is “a career with a future, in spite of difficulties to grow in the profession.” Evidently, the “difficulties” concern the characteristics of the institutional environment of these companies with their extremely compressed hierarchical levels. This seems to explain also the contingent of 33% of Call Center operators from Company A who are seeking an alternative to working in Call Centers – 24% said that they considered the position, “interesting,” but intended to move to another area; 3% did not consider their work to be a career with a future, and 6% reported not to see any future at all in the profession, being there temporarily while they are looking for another job.

In any case, 67% of Call Center operators saw a “future” in the job. Actually, the interviews indicated that many Call Center operators saw the profession (in spite of the clearly perceptible problems preventing professional advancement) as an “entry level” job to the formal job market and also for the acquisition of some technical qualifications. In this sense, the network type of company, regulated by the information flow, produces a curiously ambivalent effect: on the one hand, it makes Call Center operators understand that they should not expect professional advancement, but on the other, they might expect to be supervisors, or, at most, quality monitors. On the other hand, Call Centers perpetuate an image as being “seductive” and “democratic,” with fast access to “stable” jobs in the “modern” business world.⁴¹ From a symbolic point of view, it is always interesting to observe the equivalence between this “seduction” exercised by corporate modernity over Call Center operators and the one from managerial rhetoric at the large French car assembly factory recorded by Beaud and Pialoux. In the French case, the human resources managers took advantage of the workers’ political inexperience to dissolve old workers’ entities. They knew how to diffuse among the new employees the idea that one of the few advantages that they could obtain working in Peugeot consisted in debuting in the universe of productive modernity through the factory’s new workshops. To this end, they had to prove themselves efficient, available, cooperative, and so forth.⁴²

Perhaps the operators’ ambivalence – associated, obviously, with the unemployment issue – allows us to understand the reason the competition for these jobs is so intense in spite of the negative perception related to the work rhythm imposed by the information flow, as well the association of

⁴¹) In fact, the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 1998) exercises a degree of seduction over young call center operators: to enter into the world of information means, among other things, to have perspectives that are very different from the traditional ones of the workers’ movement. The term, “exploration,” for instance, is not a part of the vocabulary of young Call Center operators when considering their future. Instead, they look forward to a succession of small changes without a direction.

⁴²) Therefore, the younger ones made sure that they learned the new vocabulary of the company, – and adopted the “quality” theme – something that the old workers always refused to do, in order to underline their distance from the company management. It is understandable that the workers from the previous generation simply did not see younger ones as “true” workers and considered themselves to have been through a long struggle, with a shared labor history and political aspirations (cf. Beaud and Pialoux 1999).

the job to negative values.⁴³ Even Call Center operators mentioned this competition. It should be out again that many of them experience household discipline that makes them compliant as workers and happy enough to have any job.

The operation coordinators and the Human Resource (HR) managers, as we discovered in the interviews, make a sustained effort to explain to Call Center operators that they are privileged to have a job under the conditions of intense labor competition, seeking to discourage workers from engaging in any class action of an activist of political nature. While it may seem surprising that operators mention this competition, the work itself demands certain behaviors such as their availability, flexibility, and readiness to accept new rules. Such demands make them inclined to be subordinate to the system that makes these demands. Additionally, we should not forget that Call Center operators are often recruited for temporary work of short duration, permanently hired only when they demonstrate availability and loyalty to the company.⁴⁴

As for the average time required for each transaction, we verified that 24 percent of Call Center operators considered the time “more than enough to guarantee the service to the customer with the necessary quality”; 27 percent indicated that, in spite of the problems, “in general, the time is enough to assist the customers with quality”; 22 percent indicated that the time was just enough “to guarantee the basic service to the customer”; 24 percent reported that the time is “insufficient to assist the customers with some degree of quality, even if basic service”; and 3 percent did not answer. In spite of the apparent resignation evident in the questionnaire answers, in the interviews carried out with Call Center operators we found several who mentioned the conflict between, on one hand, the information flow pressure, and on the other, the desire to assist the customer with the quality considered necessary.

The cooperative character of the operational activity in Call Centers occupies an outstanding space in the perception of the Call Center operator regarding his/her work. This is because cooperation is strongly linked to the

⁴³) Human resource (HR) managers of the companies researched mentioned this. For more details, see Cousin 2002.

⁴⁴) In this sense, it is possible to conclude that Call Center operators do not have a profession – one with a language, culture, means of transmission between old and new – associated with the hierarchical organization of the company, but instead disciplined work linked to a task: in general, they are contracted for a specific objective.

goals imposed externally by companies (contracting party and contractor) on Call Center operators. Despite the fact that the immanent nature of the work of a Call Center operator is individual, the goals will hardly be attained without the combined efforts of all. This means a commitment of the individual to the team and strong collaboration, translated as mutual support, and, if possible, no absences from work. In order that there is no impairment of goals whenever a Call Center operator is absent, the others try to compensate through an intensification of the work rhythm.

This may help us understand the number of interviewees that responded in the questionnaire: “I cooperate with my colleagues, since I consider cooperation essential to attain the goals defined by the company” (44%). The indication seems clear: cooperation is the instrument to attain the goals imposed by companies. Answers concerning the pleasure of working in a team (41%) is also extremely expressive and indicates how the work of a Call Center operator fits a given workforce generational profile: we know that it is not uncommon that youths generally, and the young worker in particular, have a certain inclination to work in groups, given their generational characteristics.

The perception of cooperation as a privileged means to reach the objective defined by the company is also reinforced by the answers concerning the policy of goals: 52 percent of Call Center operators marked that “as long as everyone cooperates, the goals are always very reasonable.” A contingent of 15 percent answered that “usually the goals are reasonable, in spite of compelling me to make an enormous effort.” Another 18 percent indicated that “rarely are the defined goals reasonable and, usually, the difficulties are enormous.” The other answers were split between the 6 percent who said that “no matter how much effort I make, I rarely get to attain the goals, since they are never reasonable” and another 6 percent who said: “the goals are always impossible to attain, making the work stressful and the difficulties insurmountable.” Three percent did not answer.

It is necessary to point out that their definition of the goals include, evidently, reasonable chances of success. Otherwise, continuous failure would produce a situation of dejection contrary to the “stimulating” environment required by the regime of permanent mobilization of the workforce. And the company always tries to define the goal in a way that makes attainment possible, but not without considerable effort on the part of the operator (“I make an enormous effort”). The ideal is to maintain Call Center operators always tensed in the direction of attaining the objectives of the company. Also, we should note the role that the team plays in relation to individual

activity. Actually, the effort is also collective. The operator extracts from the group part of the motivation to reach the objectives imposed by the contract.

On the other hand, the supervision activity has divided the operators in three blocks: a majority group of answers according to which the freedom of expression is “total” (50 percent); an expressive group to whom freedom of expression exists, even considering that their opinions “are not taken seriously” (38 percent); and finally a minority group of answers (12 percent) ranging from “being afraid of expressing their opinions” (6 percent), “not having freedom to express their opinions” (3 percent), not having “any freedom to express opinions,” to considering themselves “watched the whole time” (3 percent). In spite of this last block, it is significant that the perception of the Call Center operators of Company A about freedom of expression in supervision activities is high (88%). It is possible that part of the explanation lies in the characteristics of the supervising function itself: often the supervisor is a former Call Center operator that stood out in some way and was promoted by the company.⁴⁵

On the one hand, the Call Center operator sees the supervisor as a person who is close; on the other, he/she understands that, besides being somebody who is also interested in the attainment of goals – a kind of ally – the supervisor position represents the main horizon of functional advancement. In this sense, the supervision activity is viewed as a means of “escaping the flow” and engaging in a less stressful activity. As the average turnover time of Call Center operators is approximately 2.5 years, the supervision activity quickly becomes a feasible way for the Call Center operator to remain in the universe of the “modern” company. Many Call Center operators stated that the supervision activity corresponds to the main objective of advancement in the company. The supervision activity is mentioned with more frequency than a change of position or working with a quality team as a means to functional advancement.

But, above all, it is about the rest interval, or break, that the dissatisfaction with the activity of Call Center operator shows more strongly. No less than 88 percent considered that the break was insufficient (and 38 percent of Call Center operators marked the option “completely insufficient”). Evidently,

⁴⁵ This is, as may be noticed, an experience of freedom lived as a “symbolic privilege,” that is, the concession of a certain “expressive” margin for maneuvering (free spaces) seeking a higher work investment on the part of the operator.

this is a critical situation that links the pressure of the information flow to the lack of autonomy of the Call Center operator. Taking into account the interviews conducted later, it is possible to conclude that break time represents one of the central points of antagonism inherent to the field of taylorization of the service relationship: on the one hand, we have a source of workers' resistance regarding the information flow, and on the other hand, a permanent matrix of criticism directed to the company.

Many of those criticisms point to one of the best known problems in companies of this nature: moral harassment. Not just the active type of harassment derived from a pressure for results and centered in the daily *action* of some supervisors and operations coordinators that disrespect operators with yells and insults. Or even the institutionalized and covert harassment in the form of "games" – the "clown's nose" and the "abashment shirt" as forms of embarrassing those who do not reach the goal. But many Call Center operators report a type of "passive" moral harassment centered in the *absence of action*, that is, in the supervisor's systematic denial of authorizing the operator to go to the restroom, or to "log off" to smoke a cigarette.⁴⁶

We found that within this realm of worker dissatisfaction with breaks grows an embryonic type of latent resistance. Even if seduced by the perspective of entry into the job market and by all the promises coming from the "modern" business universe, Call Center operators repeatedly mention "their" individual dignity as a type of limit to the pressure exerted by the company for results. It is a significant tension: Call Center operators are often reticent, or even hostile, concerning the traditional forms of collective organization, but, frequently, fall back upon the unions when they feel their personal dignity is offended.

Final Considerations

From the interviews conducted it is possible to extract a wider understanding of this phenomenon: it is one of the symptoms of the deconstruction of

⁴⁶ Dissatisfaction with the restricted break time even expands and monopolizes the whole domain of eating; many criticized the snacks that are sold in the automatic machines in the company. Since the break time is insufficient for the operator to leave and eat elsewhere, many irately criticized the quality of the food available at the company, adding to the anxiety about work. Besides, the sugars and starches of the food that is available is responsible for obesity among many Call Center operators.

the old working class organized around outdated forms of composition of the Fordist company and of formerly effective modalities of action through the unions. In Call Centers, young workers do not obtain a practical insertion in the logics of political and symbolic identification with the former working class and end up being swallowed in the spiral of a proletarianization, marked by individual attempts at social progress. Even the heterogeneous conditions lived by Call Center operators – originating as much from the logic of individualization as from the logic of wages, goals, bonus, etc. – contribute to the interdiction of the configuration of a collective identity at work, of common interests, and the feeling of belonging to a group subject to the same economical and political conditions as the rest of the working class.⁴⁷

On the contrary, the fight for individual dignity seems to represent the horizon, at least the immediate one, of the collective action of operators. We are not saying that traditional forms of protest, such as strikes, are discarded. They exist, and in spite of other forms mentioned, they are even frequent in the universe of Call Center operators.⁴⁸ However, according to the report of unionists in charge of developing base work, the accumulation of union experience is very slow and the organizational work conducted by the unions is repeatedly lost due to the high turnover of Call Center operators.

Thus, the logic of individual action, inherent in the structure of the network company prevails over the logic of collective action, inherent in unions. The fragmentary condition of the insertion of the operator in this type of work produces an asynchronous effect: the multiplicity of temporality, derived from the routines of daily labor, severely “blocks” any collective action. When a sequence of workstations interrupts their activity in protest, other sequences continue to work; when an entire transaction is paralyzed, other transactions remain active. And the fights are more or less linked to the recognition of individual dignity – against moral harassment, for the right of going to the restroom, for longer breaks, for the improvement of snacks – occupying the space formerly reserved to salary fights for the whole category.

Bourdieu helps us to better understand this point:

⁴⁷) In Call Centers, it is true, nothing favors the emergence of forms of union or political solidarity, since almost everything is organized to prevent Call Center operators to be with each other: the breaks, for instance, are short and the working hours tend to vary greatly.

⁴⁸) At the end of August 2005, for instance, there was a strike of one of the units of Company A, which paralyzed the sale of web connections and broadband services for several days.

In the more compelling work situations, such as working in assembly lines, the investment in the job tends to vary in the inverse reason of the external coercion on the job. Consequently, in several work situations, the margin of freedom left to the worker (the uncertainty portion in the definition of tasks, which opens the possibility of playing games) constitutes a central piece: it introduces the risk of non-work or even of sabotage, vandalism, etc.; but it also opens up the possibility of investment in the job and of the self-exploration. This depends largely on the way that it is perceived, appreciated and understood (therefore, on perception mechanisms and, particularly, on professional and union traditions, as well as on the memory of the conditions in which it was acquired or conquered, and the memory of the previous situation). Paradoxically, it is because it is seen as a conquest (for instance, the freedom of smoking a cigarette, of moving around, etc.) or even a privilege (granted to seniors or to the more qualified) that it can contribute to mask the global coercion that bestows all value to freedom.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹) Bourdieu 2001, p. 249.

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