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Precarious Labour in Portuguese Call Centres: An Anthropological Study

by Patrícia Ribeiro Mendes Alves de Matos

Department of Anthropology
Goldsmiths College, University of London

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

This is to certify that the work presented in the following thesis is my own.

Patrícia Matos

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the themes of alienation and exploitation within the Portuguese call centre sector by focusing on the nature of value-creation in the organisation of labour, the effects this regime has on workers' consciousness and agency, and how these effects are expressed in terms of class, gender and age. These questions are examined within the broader political and economic context.

In recent years the 'call centre domain' in Portugal has been transformed into the main symbol of *precariedade laboral* (labour precariousness). The categories of *trabalho precário* (precarious labour), *trabalhador precário* (precarious worker) and *precariedade laboral* (labour precariousness) have recently entered into everyday language in Portugal. They are used by politicians and journalists as well as social movements and citizens as a way of protesting against the growing insecurity, contingency and vulnerability of formal wage employment as is found, for instance, in the increase of 'atypical forms of employment' such as temporary agency work. Call centres have been described as 'electronic sweatshops' because of such characteristics as repetitive tasks, high turnover, stress and burnout, psychological aggression from 'angry' customers, low autonomy in work tasks and automatism (scripting), leading to the stereotype of call centre workers as 'human answering machines'.

My research argues that, in the call centre labour regime workers are subjected to management by tight surveillance which robs humans of their defining characteristics of creative/symbolic thinking and complex communication and language. This management also imposes a gendered division of labour which separates men working in technical support help lines from women working in commercial help lines. The dispossession of call centre operators from what they do comes both from the gap between their expectations of and aspirations to social mobility, which were inculcated through their circles of socialization (family, state, school), and the feeling of 'falling from grace' after finishing their college degrees and having to enter into call centre work. This is a form of work which is not only socially perceived as unskilled, inferior and lacking career options, but most importantly as a form of work in which humans are disguised as robots. I conclude by situating my main findings within the anthropological and sociological scholarship related to the nature of value-creation in the capitalist labour process, gender commodification and the subjective experience of dispossession, downward class mobility and stigma.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION AND ABSTRACT…………………………………………………..2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS………………………………………………………..8

DEDICATION……………………………………………………………………10

CHAPTER 1 11

Introduction 11

1.1. Why call centres and why Portugal? 11

1.2. Alienation 15

1.2.1. Emotional labour 21

1.2.2. Skills and the capitalist labour process 23

1.2.3. Discipline, surveillance and gender 26

1.3. Exploitation 28

1.3.1. Neoliberalism and the subjective experience of dispossession 30

1.4. Overview of chapters 34

1.5. Fieldwork, methods and positionality (and a clarification about motivation) ... 37

CHAPTER 2 42

Portugal: past and present 42

2.1. *Estado Novo* (1933-1974): *condicionamento industrial* (industrial conditioning) and *corporativismo* (corporatism system) 45

2.2. *A Revolução dos Cravos* (The Carnation Revolution) 47

2.3. Membership of the European Union: privatizations, neoliberalization and labour market flexibility 55

2.4. Employment transitions: ‘atypical forms of employment’ and temporary agency work 59

2.4.1. Temporary agency work: ‘the right worker in the right job at the right time’ 60

2.4.2. Temporary employment in Portugal 63

2.5. Conclusion 68

CHAPTER 3 .... **71**
Precarious labour and call centres in Portugal **71**
3.1. A brief chronicle: the EuroMayday movement, the 'precariat' and 'San Precario' 71
3.2. Media representations of call centres: the precarious '500 euros generation'... 79
3.3. The politicization of the call centre sector 84
3.4. The point of view of trade unions 90
3.5. Conclusion 98

CHAPTER 4 .... **101**
Learning to be a call centre operator: from recruitment to the workplace **101**
4.1. Recruitment 102
4.1.1. Skills and docility 103
4.2. The training process 105
4.2.1. Getting into the 'group spirit' 105
4.2.2. Uncertainty and powerlessness 107
4.2.3. Being a 'professional assistant' and automatism 109
4.2.4. The client and 'keeping a low-profile' 111
4.3. Being 'integrated' as a new 'assistant' and learning with co-workers 112
4.3.1. Getting rid of emotions 115
4.3.2. How to domesticate clients 117
4.4. The process of work, bureaucracy and dysfunctions 118
4.4.1. The sovereign client, the 'face of the company' and the militarization of call centre work 118
4.4.2. Procedures, authority and dysfunctions 120
4.5. Internal politics and hierarchy: 'internal' vs 'external' workers 122
4.6. Conclusion 127

CHAPTER 5 .... **129**
The 'transcendent client' **129**
5.1. The segmentation of clients and workers 130
5.2. Manufacturing the 'transcendent client' 134
5.2.1. 'We need to take good care of our clients' 135
5.3. The cult of the client 139

5.3.1. Working for the team, or teams without team-working 141
5.4. Challenging the client, internalizing discipline 142
5.4.1. Operators talk about the clients 144
5.5. The 'stupidification of the client' 150
5.5.1. Gossip 150
5.5.2. Humour and joking 152
5.5.3. Rumours 154
5.6. Conclusion 156

CHAPTER 6 158
Frames of self-discipline, quantification and surveillance 158
6.1. 'Strategic management', benchmarking and outsourcing in the call centre business 159
6.2. Frames of self-discipline 165
6.2.1. The 'Code of Conduct' 165
6.2.2. Evaluations 169
6.3. 'We are only numbers to them': quantification and numbering (or the fetishism of numbers) 172
6.3.1. Productivity reports 172
6.3.2. The 'symposium' and the wallboard 175
6.4. Surveillance, control and depersonalization 178
6.4.1. 'I can see everything that they are doing!' 179
6.4.2. Team meetings 180
6.4.3. Email as a tool of control 181
6.5. Strategies of improvisation 182
6.6. Conclusion 184

CHAPTER 7 189
Male shop floor culture: humour, electronics and the 'feminine other' 189
7.1. Making distinctions: technical and commercial call centres 190
7.1.1. Female and male voices 192
7.2. Masculinised power, technology and the 'feminine other' 195
7.3. Precarious labour, call centres and the threat of 'demasculinization' 198
7.3.1. Ritualized sexism 200

7.4. The view from the ‘feminine other’: Luísa’s story 206
7.4. 1. Entry into precarious and male jobs.. 206
7.4.2. The feminine other in the call centre sector.. 207
7.5. Conclusion 212

CHAPTER 8 215
Beyond the workplace: shame, dispossession and stigma 215
8.1. Flexible trajectories, generation and resentment 216
8.1.1. Trajectories and social hopes 217
8.1.2. Failure and resentment... 223
8.1.3. Ana 226
8.2. The temporal experience of dispossession and class 230
8.2.1. Alexandre 231
8.3. Social anxieties: isolation, shame and family 234
8.3.1. Victor 236
8.4. The sources of stigma and bodily injuries 240
8.4.1. Humans or robots? 240
8.4.2. Inferiority 242
8.4.3. Infantilization 243
8.4.5. Jorge 244
8.5. Conclusion 247

CHAPTER 9 250
Conclusion 250
9.1. ‘April is still to be accomplished’ 250
9.2. A regime of disciplined agency 251
9.3. Class, gender and generation 254
9.4. Contribution to the discipline and further research... 256

Bibliography 261

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Recent trends in employment, EU-15 1997-2005 66
Table 2: Temporary employment as percentage of total employees, EU-15, 1997-2005 68
Table 3: Daily productivity report of call centre operators 173
Table 4: Operators' year of birth and average age... 217
Table 5: Operators' parents: level of education and occupation.................................. 219
Table 6: Operators' level of education... 222

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Contribution of temporary work to overall employment growth in EU-15, 1997-2005 67
Figure 2: The saint protector of precarious workers, San Precario 74
Figure 3: San Precario prayer 75
Figure 4: Selected information about four of the six major companies in the call centre sector.. 80
Figure 5: Call centres and agent positions in Portugal, 2003-2005 81
Figure 6: Snapshot from the demonstration Marcha Contra a Precariedade, Lisboa, 12-09-2008 89
Figure 7: Geometrical representation of the call centre at EVA.................................. 113
Figure 8: Graphic representation of 'the client' and 'the call centre' at EVA............. 123
Figure 9: Organigram of EVA showing in which call centre fieldwork was conducted 131
Figure 10: Main duties of operators at EVA's call centre 144
Figure 11: 'Code of Conduct' at EVA's call centre 166
Figure 12: Worker report as formulated by Symposium 176
Figure 13: The 'wallboard' 177
Figure 14: Email I – Imaginary drive-in automatic cash machine, use instructions for women.. 202
Figure 15: Email II - Imaginary drive-in automatic cash machine, use instructions for men.. 203
Figure 16: Email III – Sexist humour 204

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To my parents,

the deepest of all absences

CHAPTER 1
Introduction

1.1. Why call centres and why Portugal?

This thesis explores the themes of alienation and exploitation in the Portuguese call centre sector. It focuses on the processes of value creation within the call centre of labour and how these processes are put into effect along the lines of class, gender and age, taking into account the broader political and economic context.

As an industry with global proportions, the call centre emerged in the USA in the late 1970s designed as a paradigm of customer service according to the most modern technology and management techniques available. The recent Global Call Centre Report (Holman, Batt and Holtgrewe 2007) which covers 2500 call centres in 17 countries provides some revealing facts about the development of this industry. Although call centres might represent the paradigmatic case of the globalisation of service work, evidence also shows a 'remarkably national face' in terms of work organization and employment conditions (Weiss 2007). Contrary to the idea that outsourcing is a key feature of call centres (due to the public visibility that India gained through the media) 86 per cent of call centres serve their own local and regional market.

Since the mid 1990s, call centres have provided the most dynamic area of growth in white-collar employment internationally (Taylor and Bain 1999). Long after intellectuals started to promote the thesis that the Fordist model of production has been replaced by 'the post-industrial' (Bell 1973), at about the time that they took up the 'post-bureaucratic' (Castells 1996) model of society, the call centre became a symbol of the recurrence of Fordism and Taylorism in modern contexts of work. According to Taylor and Bain (1999), call centre work is seen as containing elements which represent a further evolution in the deployment of Taylorist methods for the organization of work with the aid of information and communication technologies (ICT). The expansion of the call centre environment was made possible with the integration of telephone and computer technologies, and put into effect with the creation of one specific technical device: 'automatic call distribution' (ACD). This device allows the distribution of calls to a specific group of people (terminals), itself part of a large technology which

integrates interactions between a telephone and a computer, called 'computer telephony integration' (CTI).

The main activity of any call centre is to receive and/or make phone calls. Call centres are distinguished according to the management terminology between 'inbound' and 'outbound' call centres. Call centres pervade almost all areas of human activity from telecommunications, banking, insurance and utilities, to call centres specifically designed for spiritual counselling[1]. Furthermore, call centres can appear to insinuate themselves into the lives of almost anyone in both developed and developing countries; as a call centre operator once told me, 'everyone knows someone who knows someone working in a call centre'. Also, call centres are physical structures which are easy to set up, do not require high investments costs, and demand little investment in training. A call centre can be as easily located in London as it can in the Gaza strip[2]. A great number of call centres are open 24 hours a day, 365 days per year; and they can be located in India, but serve clients in Britain. Call centres are therefore an exemplary case of 'time-space compression' in the regime of flexible accumulation (Harvey [1989] 1990).

Call centres are to a great extent *terra incognita* to anthropologists. The sparse research conducted so far, most of it based on the Indian industry, tends to be focused on the themes of globalization and transnational capitalism (Krishnamurthy 2004; Bear 2007; Varma 2007). However, my focus is slightly different. Following Collier and Ong (2005) the most important issue about domains which have a 'global quality' is the fact that they present themselves as 'sites for the formation and reformation' of anthropological problems, which are defined by the authors as being:

> Domains in which the forms and values of individual and collective existence are problematized or at stake, in the sense that they are subject to technological, political, and ethical reflection and intervention (4)

In Portugal in recent years the 'call centre domain' has been transformed into the main symbol of *precariedade laboral* (labour precariousness). The categories of *trabalho precário* (precarious labour), *trabalhador precário* (precarious worker) and *precariedade laboral* (labour precariousness/precarity) have recently entered into everyday language in Portugal. They are used by politicians and journalists as well as

[1] See http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100411/OPINION/704109916/1033.
[2] See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6381995.stm.

social movements and citizens who are critical of the growing insecurity, contingency and vulnerability of formal wage employment, i.e. the increase of 'atypical forms of employment', such as temporary agency work. According to the most comprehensive Portuguese language dictionary (Porto Editora) *precário* means: 1-unstable, insecure, uncertain; 2-contingent. The Latin origin of the word (*precari*) means 'to pray for' or 'asking by praying'. Within this context the call centre workplace has been represented (by workers, unions and media reportage) as the main symbol of labour precariousness on the basis of three main arguments. The main strategy for hiring workers comprises the outsourcing of call centre activities to temporary work agencies. Workers hired in these conditions receive a low income (sometimes below the official minimum wage), fewer social benefits and face poor career prospects given the short duration of employment contracts. Call centres are represented in Portuguese public opinion as a 'last resort' for young people entering the labour market leading them into the trap of becoming 'permanent temporary workers'.

When characterizing call centres as the new 'electronic sweatshops' several defining aspects of the work process have been remarked on by the Portuguese media: repetitive tasks, high turnover, stress and burnout, psychological aggression from angry customers, low autonomy in work tasks and automatism (reading out scripted questions and answers). This has led to the stereotype of call centre workers as 'human answering machines', or even images which are much more stigmatizing. For instance, in 2005, in the UK, an insurance company television advert depicted call centre workers as chickens[3]. A British call centre employers' association tried to take legal action against the advertisement in order to have it banned from the UK TV screens, but lost the case.

A very large proportion of Portuguese call centres are associated with temporary agency work which represents at this moment one of the most rapidly growing forms of work in Portugal. Temporary work was officially designated by law in 1989. Statistical data on the specific incidence of temporary agency work in the Portuguese call centre industry is difficult to measure through official sources because it is poorly documented. For instance, only in 2006 was the activity of call centres included in the Portuguese Classification of Economic Activities (*Classificação das Actividades Económicas*), although the number of call centres has been growing in Portugal since the beginning of the 1990s. The statistical data to which I refer is the result of selected information made

[3] The advert can still be seen: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEN8rP0ePOA.

available in the media (since 2000) and data gathered by the Portuguese Association of Contact Centres (*Associação Portuguesa de Contact Centers*) founded in 2005. It should not be taken as completely reliable, but nevertheless it provides an image of some important growing tendencies. According to the Portuguese Association of Contact Centres it is estimated that in the 450 call centres in existence in Portugal, there are more than 20,000 tele-operation positions. It also says that the industry employs 55,000 persons, which represents more than one per cent of the national economically active population. More than 50 per cent of Portugal's call centres are located in Lisbon and the typical call centre outlined by the association is small with around 30 tele-operation positions. The average growth of this industry in Portugal is about seven per cent per year, contributing one per cent of the gross national product. In Portugal there isn't as yet any collective agreement for call centres and the unionization is almost non-existent according to interviews made with the two major union confederations.

Within this setting I aim to answer the following questions:

- How is the call centre regime of labour shaping the constitution of subjectivity and consciousness of workers?;
- How is this experience understood according to class, gender and age?;
- In the spheres of personal relationships, family and individual feelings of self-worth what is the impact of the feelings of dispossession and stigma attached to call centre work?.

In order to answer these questions I have chosen two concepts which will guide the analysis of the data gathered: alienation and exploitation. In the sections below I review each of these concepts by engaging with the anthropological literature to which this thesis will contribute and in which these concepts were approached through either an ethnographic or theoretical lens. To a great extent these concepts have been important tools in linking the themes of: the nature of value-creation, skills, work and time in the capitalist labour process, gender commodification, neoliberalism and the subjective experience of dispossession, downward class mobility and stigma. Afterwards I provide an overview of the chapters in the thesis and how they are linked to the research questions previously outlined. Finally I discuss the methodological options taken during fieldwork and sources of data.

1.2. Alienation

In 1998 Fernie and Metcalf characterised call centres as the 'new sweatshops' of the 21st century : '… for call centres Jeremy Bentham's 1791 Panopticon was truly the vision of the future' (Fernie and Metcalf 1998). The portrait provided by these authors is one in which the operator, who resembles an automaton, is trapped in an 'electronic panopticon', in which management has 'total control' over the organization and pace of work:

> This occupation merits study because the possibilities for monitoring behaviour and measuring output are amazing to behold – the 'tyranny of the assembly line' is but a Sunday school picnic compared with the control that management can exercise in computer telephony. Indeed, the advertising brochure for a popular call centre software package is boldly titled TOTAL CONTROL MADE EASY (Fernie and Metcalf 1998: 2)

The image of the call centre composed of isolated alienated individuals looking at a screen in front of their faces, with headsets on their heads, reading scripts, and behaving like automatons reminded me of the assembly line portrayed by Chaplin in 'Modern Times'. The call centre was soon compared to the factories at the beginning of industrialization (Fernie and Metcalf 1998; Buscatto 2002). However, contrary to the anthropological tradition which stresses the embeddedness of economic relations (Narotzky 1997; Gudeman 2001; Bourdieu 2005) the call centre was, for a long time, treated as a 'disembodied entity' (Ellis and Taylor 2006). That is, uncritically abstracted from the economic and political contexts in which it operates, and unrelated to changes in the nature of value-creation and the constitution of subjectivity and consciousness.

The volume edited by Sandra Wallman in 1979, 'Social Anthropology of Work' (Wallman 1979b) shaped in definitive terms future anthropological research on work and labour. In the introduction, the author argues that the anthropologist's role in the study of work should not be either to confirm the cross-cultural variation in the meanings of work, or to propose an all encompassing conceptual definition of work. Instead, it should 'proceed by compromise' in the exploration of the relations between 'constituent dimensions of systems of work' (Wallman 1979a). The author then reviews each one of these dimensions (energy, incentive, resources, value, time, place, person, technology, identity and alienation). In the section concerning 'identity and alienation' the latter is considered in contrast to identification. Neither of the terms is conceptually

defined but it is said that ‘the relationship of the worker to the product is most often used to assess the extent of his identification/alienation with work. The product, in effect, is a projection of self, its value an extension of the value of the worker. If it is taken from him, he loses part of himself and is presumably diminished unless that value is returned (…)’ (Wallman 1979a: 18). The remarks of the author regarding alienation are important because they signal the importance of analysing this dimension of work and labour within the context of the changing structure and values of each society historically situated, which later studies in economic and political anthropology to which I refer ahead came to pursue.

Marx wrote in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* that ‘labour produces not only commodities: *it produces itself and the worker as a commodity* – and this at the same rate at which it produces commodities in general’ (Marx [1959] 1977: 68). Given the Marxist historical conception of nature this means that the processes through which ‘productive and purposeful activity’ become wage-labour change through time and space. Necessarily they do not stay the same through the history of capitalism. According to Mészáros (1970) the concept of alienation developed by Marx is crucial for understanding not only the specificities associated with a whole complex of alienations which are derived from the alienation at labour; but also the historicity of the practices and events subsumed under alienation. That is, alienation ‘is an eminently historical concept. If man is ‘alienated’, he must be alienated from something, as a result of certain causes – the interplay of events and circumstances in relation to man as the subject of this alienation – which manifest themselves in a historical process’ (Mészáros 1970: 36). One of the main goals of this thesis will be to clarify which are the observable processes taking place at the workplace level in the call centre and embedded in the recent economic and political history of Portugal which might illuminate the nature of value-creation in the ‘global service sector’.

In the economic theory developed by Marx, labour stands as a significant ontological matrix in the relations between man, nature and material life. His much quoted distinction between the labour of an architect and the bee is worth remembering:

> A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. *But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.* At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already

> been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purpose in those materials (Marx [1867] 1990: 284)

This distinction is manifested by certain elements of human labour which, according to Marx, should be taken as independent of its social formation. These elements are: 1) human labour as a purposeful activity; 2) the objects to which labour is directed, like raw materials; and 3) the instruments and methods of labour (machinery and technological processes). What was critically disclosed by Marx in the functioning of capitalism as a system was the progressive metamorphosis of these elements into instances external to man. Thus, human labour became commodified as 'labour power'; and the objects and tools of labour (means of production) became appropriated by a specific class, and subordinated to specific financial processes of capital accummulation.

As an eminently historical concept, 'alienated labour' is taken to be the root of a whole complex of alienations. In the *threefold interaction* between man, nature and industry (with the advent of the factory system) human beings were deprived of the ability to deploy meaning and intentionality in their labour. Furthermore, given that labour is understood by Marx as an ontological predicament of the human condition, with the advent of industrialism and the factory system, man was transformed into his product and lost the capacity for 'creational labour' (Mészáros 1970).

The Marxist concept of alienation (Mészáros 1970; Ollman 1976; Mandel and Novack [1970] 1986) has been used in anthropology, particularly in economic and political anthropology. In this context it has usually been connected with the concepts of mode of production and commodity-fetishism. Eric Wolf, for instance, in his path-breaking book *Europe and the People without History* (Wolf [1982] 1990) set out to provide a detailed account of the expansion of capitalism based on Marx's concept of the mode of production. It is important to emphasize how and why the author appropriated this concept. According to Wolf the particularity of Marx's method of inquiry when compared with other philosophers like David Hume (and later Comte), which affirmed that we can only have access to the 'perceived characteristics' of human reality, is that Marx started his inquiry with 'undeniable aspects of human experience'. And these are "the relations of human beings to nature, the social relations of human beings with one another, the human capacity to transform nature to human use, and symbolic capabilities of homo sapiens" (Wolf 2001: 339).

The inquiry into these undeniable aspects of human experience, according to Wolf, should begin on the basis of theoretical approximations which enable the study of concrete phenomena. The first theoretical approximation should first clarify the concept of labour and the labour process; and the distinction between work and labour. The first undeniable aspect of human experience is that human beings are both a product of nature as well as agents engaged in the transformation of nature for their own purposes. This aspect, according to Wolf, conceals an important distinction, that between work and labour. That is, "work can be the activities of an individual, expending energy to produce energy. But the labour process as a whole is a social phenomenon, carried on by human beings linked to one another through social relationships. This concept of labour in general, as opposed to particular kinds of work, is not self-evident" (Wolf 2001: 340). This means that the study of the labour process should be the study of its two facets: the social relations of production as well as the processes of work-, and these two facets in turn constitute a mode of production, an historically shaped set of social relationships through which social labour is organized, deployed and mobilized by means of tools, organization, skills and knowledge (Ibid.: 342).

According to Eric Wolf the capitalist mode of production came into being only when:

> Monetary wealth is enabled to buy labour power. This specific capability is not an inherent attribute of wealth as such; it develops historically, and requires the installation of certain prerequisites. Labour power is not a commodity created to be offered for sale in a market. It is a form of human energy, a capability of Homo sapiens. (...) Thus, for labour power to be offered for sale, the tie between producers and the means of production have to be severed for good. This means that holders of wealth must be able to acquire the means of production and deny access to all who want to operate them, except on their own terms (2001: 343)

In other words, only when labour power was put up for sale like any other commodity did the capitalist mode of production come into being. That is, the institution of wage labour, or 'commodity fiction' (Polanyi [1957] 2001), became an organizing principle of industrial societies influencing and determining all its institutions. What is important to emphasize is that in order for the 'commodity fiction' to be institutionalized the social relation which is involved in the productive activity of human beings was objectified in the commodity, which involved the *thingification* of social relations. In

the capitalist mode of production, relations between persons are disguised as relations between things. As Taussig (1980) remarks:

> In the case of labour the transmutation in status and meaning that occurs with the shift in paradigm is highly critical. As a commodity labour becomes the disguised source of profit to the employer in a transaction that appears to be the equal exchange of values so long as those values are judged as commodities. But labour is not only an exchange value, a numerical quantity of labour power. What the capitalist acquires in buying the commodity of labour power as an exchange-value is the right to deploy the use-value of labour as the intelligent and creative capacity of human beings to produce more use-values than those that are reconverted into commodities as the wage (26)

The subordination of people to things – the process of reification (Lukács [1968] 1971) – damages the constitution of worker's subjectivity as was documented by Aihwa Ong (1987). Ong critically analyses the, sometimes not manifest, relations between market economy, work discipline and the historical constitution of female subjectivity in a context of transition from peasant society (household, village and agrarian labour) to industrial production (global factory). Other studies have focused on alienation and the effects of industrialization and the implementation of factory regimes (Nash 1979); as well as the study of 'de-industrialization' in the context of post-industrial production (Mollona 2009a).

In her research among Bolivian tin miners Nash (1979) comments that while giving a lecture she was asked if workers were alienated. She replied that the workers were not alienated 'from the work situation nor from the community which has grown out of these working relations, but they are alienated from the system of exploitation on which it is predicated' (Ibid.: 11). The author suggests that among tin miners there was a greater 'fulfilment of expressive needs', that is, (male) workers felt pride and excitement in their work as well as a sense of comradeship that provided the basis for a shared class consciousness. The author further adds her personal impression of how the miners were able to find self-meaning and self-respect amid the harsh working conditions in the mines, was that through public gatherings among the community the workers 'asserted a profound respect for their work and lives'. The author also states that while political economists have written a great deal about the alienation brought about by industrialization they have not devoted so much analysis to which are the main forms of resistance to *estrangement* among workers (Ibid.: 310). Among Bolivian tin

miners ritual solidarity among members of the community served to preserve a space of resistance against the inherent alienation of industrial capitalism (Ibid.: 330).

Further anthropological analyses have explored the notion of alienation, although not always referring to it directly, and not always using the Marxist concept. I am referring to the studies related to consumption both in western and non-western contexts (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987; Carrier 1994); the study of religion and its role in social reproduction (Sangren 1991); the study of the relation between self, product and production process from a Maussian perspective (Schwimmer 1979; Carrier 1992) or the study of the commodification of human bodies (Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant 2002). Although the concept of alienation is directly or indirectly present in anthropological research few studies have used alienation as the main theoretical guiding concept. According to Gerd Spittler (2008) only Schwimmer and Taussig have adopted the concept of alienated labour as their main analytical tool (265). In his book *Keywords* Raymond Williams (1988) finishes the entry on alienation by stating the following:

> It is clear from the present extent and intensity of the use of alienation that there is widespread and important experience which, in these varying ways, the word and its varying specific contents offer to describe and interpret. There has been some impatience with its difficulties, and a tendency to reject it as merely fashionable. But it seems better to face the difficulties of the word and through them the difficulties which its extraordinary history and variation of usage indicate and record. In its evidence of extensive feeling of a division between man and society, it is a crucial element in a very general structure of meanings (36)

While taking into account 'the difficulties of the word', my goal will be to follow up the anthropological literature quoted above, taking alienation as an important concept in the analysis of the nature of value-creation in the call centre regime of labour.

1.2.1. Emotional labour

Recently David MacNally (2006) reviewed political and academic research on the issue of selling body parts, which the author calls 'the business of bodies'. MacNally argues that without serious analysis and critique of the commodification of human labour it is not possible to give density to the former critique – regarding the commodification of body parts. The author argues that the German philosophers Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and G.W.F.Hegel (1770-1831) both agreed that since the body was 'the embodiment of freedom' the violation of human bodies would constitute a violation of freedom. Although capitalism was only minimally developed at the time these writers were reflecting upon this issue, they were already facing the slow introduction of wage labour then taking place. The solution presented by both authors was different. According to MacNally (2006) Kant's solution was that while the buying and selling of goods was acceptable, the person who was engaged in the selling of his labour power should be disqualified of his citizenship. And Hegel's solution was to distinguish between selling 'the use of my abilities for a restricted period of time and alienating the whole of my time' (Ibid.: 43). According to MacNally however Hegel's solution was far from being unquestioned and thus the author observes:

> At what point, for instance, would selling some parts of my life energies and time – "the substance of my being" – constitute my transformation into a beast of burden? After all, if I spend a huge part of my life treating my energies, talents, and bodily powers as things, commodities for sale, mustn't this in some significant way imperil that which makes me free, my differentiation from thinghood? Is it not probable that the systematic and persistent commodification of my labouring energies and skills will affect my personhood in some fundamental way? If my body is "the embodiment of my freedom", then are not the continual commodification of my embodied abilities and my regular treatment as a beast of burden contrary to the personal (and bodily) autonomy that is integral to human freedom? (Ibid.: 43)

Following closely the Marxist theory of alienation Arlie Hochschild (1983) introduced in the early 1980s the concept of emotional labour. By an examination of the labour experience of a group of flight attendants the author concluded that beyond physical and mental labour a third category should be introduced: emotional labour. The author begins by defining emotional labour as:

> I use the term *emotional labour* to mean the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*. I use the synonymous terms *emotion work* or *emotion management* to refer to these same acts done in private context where they have *use value* (Hochschild 1983: 7)

From this it follows that emotion work has a use value in private contexts and an exchange value in public/institutional contexts. Although in both contexts there is an investment which is done in terms of emotion management, in the public setting a 'transmutation' occurs, in which 'the worker must give up control over *how* the work is to be done' (Hochschild 1983: 118). This transmutation is accomplished through the management configuration of strategies of emotional exchange, namely 'feeling rules' and 'deep/surface acting'. 'Feeling rules' are cultural and moral prescriptive modes of conduct in emotional exchanges (appropriated, expected); 'deep/surface acting' are forms of emotional self-presentation which might involve the display of theatrical feelings or only the appearance of belief of some sort. When the profit motive rules, one of the consequences of these strategic uses of emotion is the redefinition of the self, which the author exemplifies with the expression of 'go into robot' or the efforts of depersonalization. The former expression – 'go into robot' - Hochschild argues were used by workers when they did not want to comply with 'deep acting' thereby pretending to feel something but not hiding the feigning. On the other hand, depersonalization is described as a consequence of the obligations of 'deep acting'. That is, in order for workers to sound 'real' towards customers they are advised not to take the situation personally (be it a compliment made to the client or a complaint).

The redefinition of self, which is portrayed by the author within the context of the commodification of human feelings, finds its echo in the main practice of alienation. According to Mészáros:

> selling is the practice of alienation [as] alienation is characterized by the universal extension of "saleability" [and] by the conversion of human beings into "things" so that they could appear as commodities on the market (1970: 35)

The relations between flight attendants and customers, as well as the relations between clients and call centre operators, are fetishized to the extent that human relationships are

reified as exchange values rendering invisible the social relations of production; they acquire therefore a 'phantom objectivity' (Lukács [1968] 1971: 83).

The concept of emotional labour introduced by Hochschild has been approached and reformulated through other authors. For instance Hardt and Negri (2000) suggest that changes in the capitalist mode of production – namely the introduction of communication and information technology – have changed in definitive terms the process of capital valorisation. Nowadays, the authors argue, the content of capital valorisation is not dependent on the fragmentation of the labour process (conception and execution) but the 'worker's personality and subjectivity' constitute the immateriality through which the quantity and quality of work is organized in order to produce surplus value. More recently Richard and Rudnyckyj (2009), departing from the work of Michel Foucault (1991) on governmentality and subjectification, proposed the concept of 'economies of affect' as a tool for analysing how affect is mobilized to facilitate neoliberal transformations while achieving 'the rationalization of the exercise of government'.

1.2.2. Skills and the capitalist labour process

Hochschild's work had repercussions in the 'de-skilling thesis' previously set out by Braverman (1974). As the subtitle of the book indicates (The degradation of work in the twentieth century) the author explores from a Marxist perspective the increasing alienation in the capitalist labour process emphasizing some of its historical stages. These historical and continuous stages are constituted by the introduction of machinery and its relation to the capitalist mode of production; the scientific and technological revolution; the advent of modern conceptions of management; the rise of the clerical service workforce and its progressive 'proletarianization'. As Harry Braverman (1974) indicates, Taylor developed a set of management methods for the organization of labour, which were to be known later as "Taylorism" in management theory, with the implied intention that they could be applied to different forms of work regardless of the country or type of production[4]. For Braverman, Taylorism is intended

[4] Such is confirmed, for instance, by Martha Lampland (1995) in her study concerning the implications of collectivization of agriculture in Hungary under socialism. The author vividly describes Lenin's fascination with Taylorism: '(…) the extent to which numerical calculation and scientific rationality were seen to be valuable tools for economic practice across ideological barriers is best illustrated by Lenin's fascination with Taylorism, piece reates (e.g., work units), and statistics as important components of

to give employers the answer to the problem of 'how best to control alienated labour' (Ibid.: 90). Frederick Taylor definitively changed the concept of control when he asserted as the 'absolute necessity' for management 'the dictation to the worker of the precise manner in which work is to be performed' (Ibid.: 90). It was not only the pace of work which needed to be controlled by the managers but also each movement of the worker when realizing his tasks should be predictable before its own realization.

Braverman presents us with a detailed outline of the principles that guided Taylor in his development of the model of *scientific management* (Taylor 2003). The first principle should be the *dissociation of the labour process from the skills of the workers,* which means that the labour process should be oriented to the execution of tasks strictly coordinated by management, regardless of the crafts and skills of the workers. The second principle is the *separation of conception from execution.* According to Braverman this is an important modification of the usual separation between manual and mental labour. According to this principle, workers, who were previously deprived of the means of production, are now also deprived of their own labour, which is transformed into a commodity, an object. Finally the third principle is the *use of this monopoly over knowledge to control each step of the labour process and its mode of execution* (Braverman 1974: 118).

The second aspect I mentioned earlier concerns the way in which science was put to the service of the 'capitalist enterprise', which in a way complements the 'Taylor project'. By this I mean that since the last decades of the nineteenth century and also during the twentieth century, as Braverman enunciates, science is transformed into a 'capitalist property' (1974: 156). This means that science was utilized with the objectives of, not only developing new techniques and new machinery for the work but also of *treating the workers themselves as machines*. Frank B. Gilbreth continued the work developed by Taylor on 'time study' (timing every part of the work process in hours, minutes and seconds) and introduced the 'motion study'. That is, 'the investigation and classification of the basic motions of the body, regardless of the particular and concrete form of the labour in which these motions are used' (Ibid.: 173). Other authors have investigated the ways through which industrial discipline shaped in profound ways the experience of time (Pollard 1963; Thompson 1967; Smith 1986); and

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industrial progress and economic development. Lenin appropriated those forms of calculation, which he saw to be progressive, modern, technologically innovative. His fondness for Taylorism is well known. Lenin believed strongly in the power of numbers to capture social reality, a belief reflected in his approach to centralized control and planning' (Lampland 1995: 241).

how this change was bodily incorporated by specific 'disciplinary devices' (Foucault 1977). Tim Ingold (2000) has contested the inherently deskilling nature of the capitalist labour process as proposed by Braverman. For instance, the author does not accept that there is a strict contrast in attitudes towards time and work between pre-industrial societies and the 'task-orientation' imposed by industrial capitalism. From an analysis of locomotive drivers the author concludes that 'the very instruments – above all the industrial machine and the clock – that in theory serve to disengage the time and work of production from the current social life, are in practice re-appropriated by the operators in the process of production, not of commodities for the market, but of their own personal and social identities' (Ingold 2000: 323).

However, the computer revolution of the 1950s and 1960s has given rise to technological developments which demand further discussion of the issues related to emotional labour, skills and commodification. Tessa Morris Suzuki (1997) argues that the process of automation which has been in progress since the 1970s is based on a radically different principle from earlier forms of mechanization; this is the separation between hardware and software. The author begins by clarifying the relations between knowledge, labour and machinery stating that knowledge was always a crucial factor in the elaboration and deployment of tools and machines for the exploitation of both natural resources and labour. This means that knowledge was always an integral part of the production process but remained hidden either in the form of labour or machines. Since the beginning of capitalism efforts have been made to commodify knowledge i.e. in the form of printed books or the patent and copyright systems. With the development of software following the 'computing revolution' of the 1950s and 1960s, Suzuki argues, a new form of knowledge commodification began to take shape.

Software is a set of instructions which can be stored in a computer. The development of robots in manufacturing production was greatly enhanced by the development in software, robots could then be programmed according to the needs of production in terms of movements and tasks. As Suzuki remarks 'this enables robots to perform complex and coordinated operations, and to mimic more closely the flexibility and responsiveness of the human worker' (1997: 17). The application of software to manufacturing is highly significant for two reasons: robots can be programmed without altering their mechanical structure; and 'the worker's knowledge can be separated from the physical body of the worker and may itself become a commodity' (Ibid.: 17).

1.2.3. Discipline, surveillance and gender

Following up Hochschild's discussion about how call centre operators are trained in how to deal with 'angry customers' this might also be considered a form of deskilling in the sense that they have to follow a serious of established discursive and emotional procedures for dealing with these situations (not to be impolite; to use positive words; to build rapport/empathy with the client). However, in the case of call centres, due to the extensive surveillance established over the processes of work by resorting to ICT technologies it is not only control over the labour process or the externalization of worker's knowledge which is accomplished. What is accomplished is a *regime of disciplined agency*. This point will be further developed in chapters 5 and 6, however, at this point, I briefly indicate how surveillance is embedded in workplace practices.

Numbering pervades everyday life at the call centre to the point of being physically materialized in an electronic wallboard which presents in real time the number of calls answered, the number of clients on hold, the number of operators who are 'logged' into the system, etc. This information is further expressed in statistics which are delivered to the operators on a daily basis. Operators receive their individual 'productivity report' as well as the 'team productivity report'. As Zaloom (2006) observed in her ethnography of the pit traders in Chicago and the electronic traders in London, numbers are intended to convey a sense of rational and 'informational transparency', which finds its origin in the premise of modern financial markets as presenting 'market information as self-apparent facts free from the distortions of social information'. In addition to numbering them, the activities carried out by operators are submitted to electronic monitoring which not only serves for performance evaluation but are also for storing records. Computer-based performance monitoring encompasses not only the voice register but also films the activity on the computer screen, that is, the gestures which the operator executes when he consults a software application, when he writes information, etc.

Control and surveillance over the labour process are not new; nor are they unexamined in the social sciences. I previously mentioned the contribution of Foucault to the study of the emergence of disciplinary devices in the 17th and 18th centuries (1977), but it could also refer to the notion of the 'total institution' introduced by Goffman (1968) as a form of accounting for enclosed institutional spaces which

homogenise their members in behaviour, bodily postures and speech. More recently Gary T. Marx (1999) ironically suggests the ideal type of the new workplace as the 'omniscient organization'. The omniscient organization is based on several principles, including the creation of 'accountability through visibility'. Furthermore, the omniscient organization accomplishes control and discipline on the basis of persuasion instead of consent or coercion[5]. Thus, some of the justifications advanced for the strict control of the workforce are as follows: 'this is for your own good', workplace surveillance increases safety; monitoring increases productivity; 'monitoring is fair' – workers who achieve a good quantitative and qualitative performance are rewarded and the others have the opportunity to improve; monitoring helps to improve the service rendered to the customer; and monitoring is neutral, objective and accurate because it is carried out by a machine instead of a manager.

Anthropologists have contributed to the study of regimes of discipline by pointing out that discipline cannot be conceptualized solely in terms of external and impersonal structures of control (Dyck 2008). In the call centre regime of labour the technological mechanisms of surveillance are not only anchored in the deployment of electronic technology, but are also established inside and outside the workplace, and in both cases through power-laden social relationships, as in client vs operator, and precarious workers vs permanent workers. For instance, inside the workplace peer pressure usually originates in self-surveillance fuelled by the rhetoric of 'team values'. This rhetoric of team working and team values is discursively fetishized outside the workplace in the 'neoliberal imagination' to which individuals are daily exposed (Bear 2007).

Urciuoli (2008) explores how skills are discursively constructed in internet business and education marketing services. The author argues that in the neoliberal imaginary 'soft skills' (mostly clustered within the themes of communication, team and leadership) have replaced the value of 'hard skills' (technical abilities). 'Soft skills' became fetishized in the sense that they were made part of the production process and in that process are made commensurable with other skills. According to the author:

> Soft skills discourses are largely about persuading workers that these skills are what they are made of: Soft skills become objectified as workers learn to regard

[5] The three kinds of power relationships which Amitai Etzioni (1961) identified in modern organizations (coercive, remunerative and normative) were seen as distinct strategies of achieving the same goal, that is, 'compliance' instead of coercion.

> themselves and their education in this way. (…) The deployment of quantification rhetoric becomes part of the loose association of terms in this register, suggesting that all these disparate skills are commensurable. Their commensurability lies not in explicitly comparable qualities but implicitly in the notion that they can be assessed and inculcated in the same ways. This presupposition of workers as a set of measurable capacities is, in effect, an update of the Enlightenment notion of an abstract human that can be segmented into pieces, with each piece individually designed into what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls 'the very shape and movement of the machine itself', or, if not machine, then some kind of cybernetic social process (Ibid.: 217)

Cameron (2000a; 2000b) further argues that call centre work is a paradigmatic example of the commodification of language in the so-called 'new work order' due to the extensive surveillance which is exercised over the main activity of the worker: speaking. Such surveillance may assume different forms, such as the prescription of standardized forms of beginning and ending a phone call to the covert monitoring of calls carried out by team-leaders and managers (as well as 'mystery callers'). The author further adds that not only do call centre operators have to speak a scripted language but they must do so in a specified style so, scripting (what is said) is complemented by styling (how is said). More importantly, 'the style is gendered, produced through a consistent and deliberate preference for ways of speaking that are symbolically coded as "feminine" ' (Cameron 2000b: 333) – to show a smile in the voice, expressive intonation, rapport/empathy, minimal response.

I show in this thesis that in the call centre regime of labour workers are subjected to tight surveillance which entails the expropriation of characteristics of humans as a species-being – creative/symbolic thinking, complex communication and language – as well as the maintenance of a gendered hierarchy among the workforce – that between man working in technical support helplines and women working in commercial helplines. In the section below I explore the concept of exploitation and how it relates to the anthropological literature on neoliberalism and the subjective experience of dispossession.

1.3. Exploitation

In Marxist theory exploitation has a double meaning. The first is related to the human exploitation of natural resources for human use, that is, 'to exploit natural resources "productively" is to utilise their natural properties to create objects of human

use' (Torrance 1977: 240). This is done by expending labour power. The second meaning is related to the exploitation of labour power. The specificity of the exploitation of labour power lies in the fact that 'whereas the properties of natural resources are "nature-given", the natural property of human labour is "society-given", in the sense that it appears as the natural property of a totality of social labour' (Ibid.: 240). Furthermore, the exploitation of labour is always 'the exploitation of *other's* labour power'.

> Exploitation therefore is a relationship between a set of agents defined as the bearers of social labour-power, or living labour, who are its objects; and another set, its subjects, defined by the negation of the first, as non-workers' (Ibid.: 240)

The set of agents to which the authors refers are social classes, and what is implied is that in order for the bearers of labour power to exist as an opposite category, labour power had to be socially defined as a thing which could be possessed (labour power as property) and thereby exploited as a natural resource. Since labour power creates value (which is realized through use or exchange) that which is being expropriated by the owners of the means of production is the surplus value. Marx detailed how in the capitalist mode of production surplus value is realized in the labour process. When capitalists buy labour power the worker is entitled a wage. However, what is being paid for by the wage is not the value of the labour produced but only that which is necessary to maintain the reproduction of labour power. According to Marx:

> The useful quality of labour-power, by virtue of which it makes yarns or boots, was to the capitalist merely the necessary condition for his activity; for in order to create value labour must be expended in a useful manner. What was really decisive for him was the specific use-value which this commodity possesses of being a source not only of value, but of more value than it has itself. This is the specific service the capitalist expects from labour-power, and in this transaction he acts in accordance with the eternal laws of commodity-exchange. In fact, the seller of labour-power, like the seller of any other commodity, realizes its exchange-value, and alienates its use-value. He cannot take the one without giving the other. The use-value of labour-power, in other words labour, belongs just as little to its seller as the use-value of oil after it has been sold belongs to the dealer who sold it (Marx [1867] 1990: 300)

The difficult task from the point of view of the observer is to understand what are the aspects in the organization of the production process which conceal the process of surplus extraction. As Burawoy (1979) has noted in his ethnography of the Allied

corporation's factory in Chicago, the major art of capitalism is to hide the main sources of labour exploitation, replacing them with an all-encompassing ideology which (partly) ensures the complicity (or consent) of the exploited. In the remainder of this section I refer to neoliberalism as a political and economic project which legitimizes the (de)regulation of employment relations, leading to the growth of precarious forms of employment; which is expressed among Portuguese call centre operators through the feelings of dispossession, stigma and relegation.

1.3.1. Neoliberalism and the subjective experience of dispossession

Several authors have emphasized the effects of neoliberalism in dismantling protected labour regimes (Bourdieu 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Sassen 2003; Procoli 2004b; Harvey 2005; Ong 2006). For instance, David Harvey (2005) argues that neoliberalism is a political project to ensure the restoration of class power (through the reconfiguration of the upper class, in which the main 'winners' were the CEOs, the key operators of corporate boards and figures who were able to acquire great fortunes in the areas of biotechnology or information technologies). The author traces how the idea that individual freedoms are dependent on the freedom of the market and trade was modified after Keynesianism, which depended on a compromise between capital and labour (and in which labour had access to certain guarantees provided by the state and strong trade unions). The author documents how since the 1970s, in both Britain and the US, the premises of neoliberal thinking became hegemonic through an emphasis on the deregulation of labour with a fierce attack on organized labour, deindustrialization and the increase of financial capitalism. At the global level, institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank became instruments for the propagation of the free market orthodoxy in developing countries through the euphemism of 'structural adjustment' which meant enforcing flexibility in labour relations or privatizations.

Ong (2006) argues that neoliberalism should be viewed as a 'new mode of political optimization' whereby relations between governors and governed are reconfigured. In non-western contexts the author says *neoliberalism as exception* 'articulates sovereign rule and regimes of citizenship', and on the other hand *exceptions to neoliberalism* can produce political decisions which aim to protect a specific parcel of the population from the market-driven policies, by which it can both 'preserve

welfare benefit for citizens and exclude non-citizens from the benefits of capitalist development' (Ibid.: 4). Thus, the exception can both serve to include and exclude.

> Neoliberal governmentality results from the infiltration of market-driven truths and calculations into the domain of politics. In contemporary times, neoliberal rationality informs action by many regimes and furnishes the concepts that inform the government of free individuals who are then induced to self-manage according to market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness" (Ibid.: 4)

The author further adds that by focusing on neoliberalism as a form of 'biopolitical mode of governing' it is possible to distinguish two kinds of optimizing strategies. The first ones, *technologies of subjectivity*, constituted by a set of prescribed forms of knowledge expertise which suggest to citizens which are the best forms through which to maximize (in economic terms) their choices, and *technologies of subjection*, which correspond to a set of political regulations which determine citizens uses of space (urban space, control of travel, etc). Furthermore, 'the elements that we think of as coming together to create citizenship – rights, entitlements, territoriality, a nation – are becoming disarticulated and rearticulated with forces set into motion by market forces' (Ibid.: 6).

Since the revolution of 1974 Portugal has gone through profound institutional changes in the relations between capital and labour. As I show in the next chapter, although the revolution introduced certain protective frames for labour relationships as well as the development of certain citizenship guarantees associated with the welfare state (education, health, social security), at the same time it gave rise to the growth and development of atypical arrangements of employment relationships. When Portugal joined the European Union in 1986 market liberalization became the principal matrix of a political rhetoric which was legitimized by the language of modernization. The great majority of call centre operators were born after the revolution. Thus, they were exposed to a kind of diffused Fordist imaginary associated with the idea of stable employment and middle class lifestyle and consumerism. The trajectories of these workers – whose parents were (and are) mostly from a working class background - was deeply shaped by the social production of prestige associated with higher educational achievement (*ser doutor*) and stable employment. The 'free trade faith', however, instituted a regime of living in which these goals are not attainable anymore especially due to the hegemonic paradigm of flexibility in employment relationships. In this sense

the subjective experience of call centre operators in Portugal is shaped by feelings of dispossession, downward class mobility and stigma.

Bourdieu (1998) argues that the neoliberal utopia of the self-regulated free market is realized in a 'programme of the methodical destruction of collectivities'. The 'neoliberal utopia of a pure and perfect market' questions all the collective structures which might be an obstacle to its execution. By collective structures the author means both large scale (nation-state) and small scale (work groups, unions, family) spheres of social life. According to Bourdieu:

> In this way, a Darwinian world emerges - it is the struggle of all against all at all levels of the hierarchy, which finds support through everyone clinging to their job and organisation under conditions of insecurity, suffering, and stress. Without a doubt, the practical establishment of this world of struggle would not succeed so completely without the complicity of all of the *precarious arrangements* that produce insecurity and of the existence of a *reserve army of employees rendered docile by these social processes that make their situations precarious,* as well as by the permanent threat of unemployment. This reserve army exists at all levels of the hierarchy, even at the higher levels, especially among managers. The ultimate foundation of this entire economic order placed under the sign of freedom is in effect the *structural violence* of unemployment, of the insecurity of job tenure and the menace of layoff that it implies. The condition of the "harmonious" functioning of the individualist micro-economic model is a mass phenomenon, the existence of a reserve army of the unemployed (1998)

When analysing the 'new spirit of capitalism' Boltanski and Chiapello ([1999] 2005) emphasised the shifts that have accompanied the ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism. This is engagement not only by the ones who directly benefit from it, but also by the wage-earning class which is defined by the authors as the class which 'derives income from the sale of its labour, not from the sale of the products of its labour' (Ibid.: 8). The authors argue that in this process a paradigmatic change happened between the 1960s and the 1990s. Through a systematic analysis of texts which constitute the management rhetoric in these two epochs (the 1960s and the 1990s) a change is clear. In the 1960s 'job security' was defended in order to assure the adhesion of *cadres* to organizations. The idea of security alongside the welfare state constituted the mechanisms through which firms were able to control and maintain the adherence of individuals through their life cycle, based for instance, on the idea of career. In the 1990s the dominant requirement of flexibility transformed liberty and creativity into concepts which justified a rhetoric maintaining that individuals should

look for ‘personal fulfilment through a multitude of projects’ (Ibid.: 90). Individuals should, through the course of their lives, seek to attain a greater degree of *employability* by moving from one job to the other. That is, they should pursue the paradigm of self-management and continuous improvement in order to ensure the survival of the nation, the corporation and the person (Martin 1997). Through this emphasis on ‘job flexibility’ individuals should have the ability to accumulate ‘life skills’ which are taken to be more important than having a specific occupation or craft. As Boltanski and Chiapello ([1999] 2005) remark, this new science of exploitation has consequences in the instrumentalization of some of the most specifically human dimensions of workers. Neoliberal management does not have the Taylorist ambition of transforming humans into machines, the rhetoric of neo-management emphasizes that it wants workplaces to become more humane. However, as Boltanski and Chiapello ([1999] 2005) remark:

> The Taylorization of work does indeed consist in treating human beings like machines. But precisely because they pertain to an automation of human beings, the rudimentary character of the methods employed does not allow the more human properties of human beings – their emotions, their moral sense, their honor, their inventive capacity – to be placed directly in the service of the pursuit of profit. Conversely, the new mechanisms, which demand greater commitment and rely on a more sophisticated ergonomics, integrating the contributions of post-behaviouristic psychology, and the cognitive sciences, precisely because they are more human in a way, also penetrate more deeply into people’s inner selves – people are expected to ‘give’ themselves to their work – and facilitate an instrumentalization of human beings in their most specifically human dimensions (98)

In Portuguese call centres the exploitation of labour power is anchored in the neo-management rhetoric identified by Boltanski and Chiapello. Call centre operators are asked to ‘devote themselves entirely’ to their work in the name of ‘customer satisfaction’. Consumer sovereignty is a central justification of the neoliberal imaginary. In ‘consumer capitalism’ the freedom of citizens is equivalent to the freedom to consume goods and services. Furthermore, Portuguese citizenship has been represented since the revolution – and particularly since the inclusion of Portugal in the European Union – as the attainment of higher education and a middle class lifestyle.

The dispossession of call centre operators from what they do comes from both the gap between the expectations/aspirations of social mobility which were inculcated through their circles of socialization (family, state, school) and the feeling of ‘falling from grace’ after finishing their college degrees and having to enter into call centre

work. It is a form of work which is not only socially perceived as unskilled, inferior and lacking career options; but most importantly one in which humans are disguised as robots.

1.4. Overview of chapters

The analytical concepts which I discuss in the sections above also guide the structure of this thesis, starting with recent changes in Portuguese economic relations. This is followed by the advent of call centres and their co-option as *the* main symbol of labour precariousness; the call centre regime of labour; and finishes with a chapter in which call centre operators reflect on their labour trajectories, call centre work experience and their feelings of self-worth. My intention was that this last chapter could persuade the reader to reflect on the previous chapters through the workers' biographical narratives.

In chapter two I provide some historical and economic background on Portugal emphasizing three important periods in the development of the capitalist mode of production: the dictatorship of *Estado Novo* (New State); the April revolution (1974) and joining the EU in 1986. The first period is important because of the length of the dictatorship (around 40 years) and the ways in which it contributed to a slow industrialization while at the same time promoting capitalism through a protectionist frame. The April revolution had important consequences in employment and labour relations, some of which were the fixing of a national minimum wage, free union organization and nationalizations of key sectors of the economy. Joining the EU in 1986 facilitated the model of market liberalization in the country which conflicted with measures previously taken during the revolution. In a very short period of time Portuguese economic structure changed marked primarily by the decline of agriculture and the growth of the service sector. Due to the vulnerable nature of the Portuguese productive system it is argued that the valorisation of capital was constituted through the expansion of atypical forms of employment and the continuous devaluation of the labour force, a scenario in which temporary agency work has played a major role. This chapter underlines the historical continuities of the Portuguese setting which shaped the emergence of the call centre sector.

In chapter three I discuss the emergence of the categories of *trabalho precário* (precarious labour), *precariedade laboral* (labour precariousness) and the *precariado*

(precariat) in Europe and Portugal. In Portugal, the terms are used by politicians, journalists, anti-precarity social movements and citizens as a way of referring to the growing insecurity attached to formal wage employment and the rising prominence of ‘atypical forms of employment’, such as temporary agency work. In Europe (particularly in Spain, Italy and France) these terms not only describe new forms of employment; but also represent an emancipatory terminology used by activists as a critical way of addressing the neoliberal conditions of labour (de)regulation. I provide a brief summary of the emergence of the terms mentioned above within anti-globalization and anti-capitalism social movements and afterwards I concentrate on the peculiarities of the Portuguese case, emphasizing recent economic and political debates.

In chapters four to seven I concentrate on specific aspects of the call centre labour process. In chapter four I address some of the dimensions of the call centre organization of hiring, recruitment, training and job allocation as they are presented to those seeking employment in the centres. I discuss the following: the process of recruitment which demonstrates the desirable skills for the job and how they are interpreted by future workers; training and interpersonal relations with co-workers in the call centre landscape. I also show how the call centre labour process is anchored in bureaucratic procedures which increase the individualized level of the tasks associated with the job of a call centre operator. Last, I demonstrate how the division of the workforce inside the call centre – between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ workers – mirrors another division, that between the ‘client’ and the company.

In chapter five I concentrate on exploring the role and function of ‘the client’ within the call centre regime of labour. I examine the manufacture of the ‘transcendent client’ in marketing strategies as a form of legitimizing the intervention into the organization of paid work; and the ‘cult of client’ in the everyday life at the workplace. Operators have to display normative feelings of friendliness (*having a smile in your voice*) and comprehension, while at the same suppressing negative emotions in order to meet qualitative targets of ‘customer satisfaction’. The everyday elaboration of the primacy and sovereignty of the client (and sometimes customer) within the workplace involves symbolic production and ritualization as a way of enacting the ‘group spirit’ among workers; which involves both contestation and the internalization of self-discipline. A set of strategies are deployed both by workers and management. Gossip, rumours and humour simultaneously contribute to share critiques among workers but

also to the maintenance of an 'operational consensus' (Goffman [1959] 1969: 9) which benefits management purposes of using the client as a tool of labour control.

In chapter six I analyse how discipline, quantification and surveillance are enacted within the labour process in order to clarify the main distinguishable characteristic of the nature of value-creation within call centres. I argue that the computer-based mechanisms used in the call centre sector for measuring labour output and the informal and formal strategies of labour surveillance contain one central paradox which is indispensable for profit maintenance: workers have to execute their work according to quantitative and qualitative targets of productivity. By following these two different kinds of work prescription management attains two goals, making workers accountable for their work performance yet inciting workers to have an agential intervention in the labour process through linguistic engagement. I define the call centre regime of labour as a *regime of disciplined agency*. That is, call centres present the most advanced system for the exploitation of a rarefied form of human labour: linguistic engagement or human communicative competence. In order for call centres to subsist as a rentable economic activity they need specific human intervention for which no kind of machine can substitute. As such, this rarefied form of human labour needs to be watched over and disciplined.

In chapter seven I explore how gender is embedded in the products of labour in the call centre regime, so making gender a commodity, fulfilling the management purpose of creating specific kinds of customer relationships. Given the specificities of the call centre where I did my research – among 54 workers 52 were men – masculinity will be explored from two perspectives: how manliness is enacted on the shop floor in relation to a 'feminine other', and how this, in conjunction with the technological emphasis of the activities performed, recreates an unequal social division of labour which involves the constant diminishment of women. It is argued that male call centre workers confront the threat of 'demasculinization' attached to precarious and call centre labour with attitudes and discourses leading to broader gender inequalities at the societal level (*ritualized sexism*).

In chapter eight I concentrate particularly on workers' own reports about their sense of dispossession, shame and stigma. The chapter is based on semi-biographical interviews with 40 call centre workers. I focus on three main aspects: how the uncertainty and vulnerability attached to precarious labour is experienced as dispossession and how this is connected with the experience of downward mobility

(‘falling from grace’); social isolation in personal relationships and feelings of shame towards the family; the interpretation of the stigma attached in Portuguese society to call centre operators. I argue that these have an important impact in how agents constitute their subjectivity and consciousness. Workers’ accounts of their circumstances reveal a considerable degree of insight into what exactly it is about the workplace and the conditions of work that produces such a profound sense of disenchantment.

In the last and concluding chapter I locate my main research findings within the context of the anthropological and sociological scholarship to which this thesis contributes. I also outline specific aspects which I have not developed sufficiently throughout the thesis; and how these might constitute topics of future research.

1.5. Fieldwork, methods and positionality (and a clarification about motivation)

Between August 2007 and January 2009 fieldwork was conducted in a call centre belonging to a private sector telecommunications company in Lisbon. The company, which I will call EVA[6], was created in 1994 and is a sub-holding company for the telecommunications, media and software systems integration (SSI) areas of a multi-industry company. The call centre in which I conducted fieldwork provides technical support for the corporate segment of clients. Around 45 operators and three team leaders are contracted through an agency for temporary work and the coordinators are hired directly through EVA. The fieldwork also involved 40 semi-biographical interviews with call centre operators; semi-structured interviews with members of trade unions, employers’ associations and anti-precarity social movements; as well as historical analysis of secondary material and media analysis.

Fieldwork was shaped by the specificities of the site, I refer to these because they are instructive about spatiality, trust and social relations in call centres. Call centres are closed work spaces which tend to be ‘out of sight’. In most circumstances the buildings where the call centres operate are not known to the public (neither is access permitted), and call centre operators are not allowed to reveal their location to clients. Security guards monitor and control who goes into call centres. Beside the vigilance

[6] Anonymous designation.

exerted over labour through the technical infrastructure of the call centre, the particular geography of the call centre tends to homogenise movements and condition the relations which are established between people inside the call centre. Therefore, if someone is not involved in normal operations he/she is noted, talked about and observed. In short: no-one is invisible inside a call centre (except the clients). And such was also the case with me although I had some illusions prior to beginning fieldwork that this would not happen.

My first strategy for getting into a call centre was to contact the agencies for temporary work which recruit such staff. I asked if I could work as a call centre operator for one year for the sole purposes of my research. More than 20 agencies answered that this was not possible given the strict confidentiality of clients' data as well as their own business practices. Furthermore, they all emphasized that the buildings where the call centres are sited do not belong to them but to the user firm. So I should contact the user firms directly. I then started to contact the user firms, first by email, then by letter and finally by phone.

I had a positive answer from a private telecommunications company which had been one of my main 'targets'. They had several technical support units and for reasons which I explain further below I was particularly interested in conducting fieldwork in a technical and not commercial call centre. After receiving my positive answer from this company I had a first meeting with the area coordinator of the call centre where I explained the main purposes of the research. I was asked about the methods I was going to use, with whom I would need to talk and for how long. A week later I was informed by email that a letter from my university was needed in order to verify the 'truthfulness' of my intentions. I was finally authorized to begin research after this letter arrived and started by following a group of new recruits for the call centre.

I had to negotiate and justify my presence constantly inside the call centre, either with management or with workers. The management demanded that I ask their permission to listen to calls between operators and clients and to attend team-meetings, training sessions and recruitment interviews. Listening to calls was fully permitted but I was not allowed to record them. My presence in team-meetings, training sessions and interviews was conditionally permitted, that is, I had to ask every time there was some specific situation where I thought I should be present. I had to assure workers that I was not going to 'sell my thesis to the company', that I was not interested either in getting a position inside the company, and that my research had not been commissioned by the

company with the intent of studying the workers (these were all aspects which I was directly asked about).

After around five months one of the operators came to me and told me in private: 'I owe you one', to which I replied 'why do you say that?'. He said, 'you know after giving you the interview I began thinking about my life and all the years I have wasted inside this call centre… if it wasn't for you that would not have happened. This year I am going again to try entering university. If it wasn't for you…'. Prior to this comment I already had the intuition that neutrality was something I was never going to achieve. After this comment I realized that neutrality was something I did not want to achieve. Many times my presence served to mitigate the demands made to operators by team-leaders, and even the tone of voice used by managers when talking with operators. I was completely aware of that and I used the small parcel of symbolic capital I had to protect the operators whenever I could, but without putting their position at risk.

I spent eight hours a day inside the call centre, five days a week, on morning, afternoon or evening shifts. I followed operators, team-leaders, the team coordinator and the area coordinator. I could not answer or make phone calls, but I could help in small tasks. Taking copies, helping operators while they were on calls, getting them coffee or water, taking minutes from the team-meetings, helping with the preparation of training sessions, receiving and storing equipment sent by clients. And, most importantly I was someone with whom operators and team leaders could talk in the small intervals between one call and the next while I was following their work as well as while they were smoking, on break or having their meals. With time I began being invited to 'lan-parties[7]', team-dinners and other activities outside the workplace and with time operators and team-leaders began to make comments such as, 'when is Patricia going to answer a phone call? She has to answer a phone call!'. It is common in call centres for new male recruits to be subjected to a kind of rite of passage. A senior operator is supposed to call the line of a 'freshman' and pretend to be a very angry client. After this he becomes 'one of the guys'. No matter how much I was able to gain the trust from operators and team-leaders I was never 'one of the guys'. Not only because I was not a 'guy', but also because I never answered that or any other phone call.

On the part of management, however, the attitude towards me changed through time in the opposite direction. During the period I conducted fieldwork there happened

[7] A 'Lan-party' is a gathering of persons with computers connected to each other in order to establish a 'local area network' (LAN) in which computer games are played.

to be a particularly large flow of news from the media drawing attention to call centres where unacceptable practices of labour exploitation were taking place, where workers had to follow a military regime for the sake of the company's profit. It was also noted that user firms were deploying illicit strategies in order to avoid having to follow the legal prescriptions for the uses of a temporary labour force. Taking this into account, plus my public good relation with the operators and team-leaders, managers began to apply a strategy of indifference towards me acting as if I were not present, not saluting me, and sometimes asking me to leave meeting rooms. Through several other strategies, there was also the covert attempt of persuading operators and team-leaders that maybe my presence was not helpful. However, every attempt at this was unsuccessful and that was the reason why I was not forced to finish my fieldwork earlier than planned.

More important, what these episodes reveal is the degree of suspicion among the workforce, particularly among casual and permanent workers, that is to say, between operators, team leaders and management. The dependent/vulnerable employment condition of all those involved in the work makes trust very hard to achieve. This is common in other call centres I came to know during my personal trajectory before beginning my doctoral research in 2006.

In 2000, I started working part-time in a call centre in Lisbon as an operator on a commercial helpline run by a telecommunications company. Initially my shift was from 8.00am to 1.00pm, but while working at the call centre I changed to other shifts, from 2.00pm to 7.00pm and also from 4.00pm to 9.00pm. After five years working as an operator I was promoted to team leader, and in 2006 I quit my job to start my PhD studies in London. When I started working at the call centre my goal was not to conduct any kind of research on the call centre industry: it was simply a job and a way of earning a salary. In 2000, the call centre industry was growing tremendously in Portugal following what was happening in other countries in Europe, the USA and in India. From June 2003 onwards I decided to pursue an informal research project about emotional labour, control and surveillance in the call centre labour process. Such research was supported by the adoption of a previous theoretical and conceptual framework and later it assumed a more formal shape which became the basis of my PhD proposal. Until September 2006 I continued to collect empirical data about the day-to-day organization of work in the call centre.

As the project became more clearly formulated it was still marked by a preoccupation (perhaps common to all anthropologists, to a greater or lesser extent)

about my simultaneous distance from and closeness to the site of my fieldwork. Having opted to conduct anthropological research in a setting I was very familiar with, I knew that awareness of this issue would have to be taken in account. But at the same time I could not avoid thinking that I had been in an 'insider position' which might benefit and enrich, from the standpoint of participant-observation, the study of the topics I have delineated. It gave me a social memory which was an important guide for the fieldwork later conducted. I emphasize social because it is based on an embodied knowledge, which although autobiographical, is simultaneously interpersonal, and as such finds similarities and contrasts with the experience of 'others' (Okely 1992: 8).

I never told my informants that I had previously worked in a call centre, I was afraid that they would reply 'well, if you have worked for so many years in a call centre why do you need us?. Today I am still not sure if this omission was or was not the right decision. Nevertheless, I am certain that my omissions are not as important as the ones deployed by the research participants during fieldwork - omissions which I could easily detect given my previous full participation in what was first my work-field and later my fieldwork site. Having said this it could be deduced that the main motivation for this piece of research had been my previous working experience in a call centre. And this is partly true, but only partly. In his posthumous book, *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*, Pierre Bourdieu (2007) writes an epigraph glossing the sentence Magritte uses in one of his paintings: *this is not an autobiography*. I would say the same regarding this piece of research, but I would also add that 'to understand is first to understand the field with which and against which one has been formed' (Ibid.: 4). The search for understanding was my main motivation.

CHAPTER 2

Portugal: past and present

A modern study of Portugal is necessarily framed by certain anthropological traditions in the study of southern Europe. Goddard, Llobera et al. (1994) provide a rough periodisation of themes analysed since the end of the second world war. In the early post-war period the main focus of anthropological study was the relations between peasant societies and culture, following the analytical premises introduced by Robert Redfield (1947), such as the 'folk-urban continuum' and 'the great tradition' vs 'the little tradition'. The literature of the 1960s was shaped by the invention of the Mediterranean as an area-type in which the honour and shame debate assumes a leading role (Pitt-Rivers [1954] 1971). The early 1970s was shaped by the emergence of Europe as a distinctive category of anthropological research; there was an intensification of the critique of previous rural studies – particularly the traces of the structural-functionalist paradigm which are accused of dismissing analysis of wider processes implicated in the nation and the state – as well as an emphasis on the themes of patron-client relationships which followed the work of Eric Wolf (1966).

The critique of the functionalist paradigm shaped the themes and methods which were explored in the anthropology of Europe during the late 1970s. This critique stimulated new avenues of research such as the study of individual behaviour and 'informal codes' inspired by the work of Lévi-Strauss and others, the study of gender relations and kinship, and an emphasis on the wider economic, political and economic contexts in which the communities studied by anthropologists are implicated. The 1980s was shaped by the so-called 'crisis of representation' in the discipline, the dismissal of 'grand narratives' for the explanation of social phenomena, and economic and political changes occurring in Europe such as the 'neoliberal turn', the end of the Soviet bloc, and the increasing role played by the European Union. There was, too, a revival of the debate about the validity of the category of the Mediterranean as a cultural area for the purposes of explanation.

In brief, peasant societies, the myth of 'amoral familism' (Banfield 1958) and the persistence of the honour and shame syndrome are themes which were consonant with the quest for 'primitiveness' by North American and North European anthropologists. As Charles Stewart remarks:

> (…) Considering these models today one sees how anthropology has carried forward time-worn prejudices about Southern European 'others'. Already in the nineteenth century Tylor had considered Mediterraneans as less civilized than Northern Europeans because of their need to gesture while speaking, rather than conveying their message in plain language. In the 1950's and early 1960's models we see Southern Europeans cast as backward, basically because they are unable to adapt to the rational demands of state administration and the ideals of capitalism ([1996] 2010: 265)

Despite this, the 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of new themes of research perhaps partly driven by changes in the regional (and local) economy as well as the rising number of southern European anthropologists trained in the 'Global North'.

It is not my intention to review the anthropological literature produced within the context of southern Europe. Rather I wish to emphasize some of the most important trends which clearly show a discontinuity with the topics of study in previous decades and to point out some representative studies then carried out. I highlight three main topics of research: bureaucracy, nationalism and the state; changing forms of production and the informal sector; and gender. For instance, Michael Herzfeld's study on bureaucracy has provided insights on how to understand the role played by both personal factors and symbolism in the institutional arrangements of the state in western contexts (1992). Michael Blim has investigated the impact of flexible specialization in central and north-eastern Italy (1990); and in a later co-edited book (Rothstein and Blim 1992) explored the coexistence of different modes of production (usually called pre-capitalist or pre-modern, and the capitalist mode of production) in the same societal context. Victoria Goddard (1996) has carried out fieldwork in urban Naples among outworkers in which she emphasizes the role played by gender in the reproduction of the male ideology of 'familism' and its interpenetrations with material processes. More recently Smith (1999), in addition to the proposal of a 'realist historical anthropology' Narotski and Smith (2006), outline a method of ethnographic research for the study of 'informalized regional economies in western Europe' based on fieldwork carried out in Spain. The 'informalization process' of the economies is taken to be constituted by the increase of flexibility in labour relations, the replacement of vertical networks in the structure of organizations by horizontal ones and the increase of the practice of subcontracting. The research carried out by the authors mentioned above testifies to the growing openness of anthropology towards anthropological study of urban societies and

a new focus on themes far from peasant-based studies of the ‘Mediterranean era’. The theme of ‘precarious labour’ and ‘precarity’ in south European contexts has not yet been the focus of extensive research. The only significant exception is the research recently carried out by Noelle Mole (2007; 2010). The author focuses on the emergence and institutionalization of the practice of ‘mobbing’ in Italy, specifically in the northern city of Padua[8].

One aspect which remains central to anthropological research, and which is independent of the main topics under investigation, is the importance of framing ethnographic data in its historical context. This has been emphasized in some of the anthropological studies of rural communities in Portugal, in order to understand patterns of social inequality (O'Neill 1987), change and continuity in gender roles (Pina-Cabral 1986), or the study of social reproduction by focusing on property, religion and kinship (Sobral 1999). In the remainder of this chapter I provide a brief portrait of the fascist regime which ruled Portugal from 1933 to 1974 (*Estado Novo*). Afterwards I describe the main changes in the relations between capital and labour derived from the Carnation Revolution in 1974. This is followed by a synthesis of the main changes effected in the economic and social fabric of Portuguese society as a consequence of joining the European Union in 1986. Finally I describe the significance of temporary agency work within the context of increasing forms of atypical employment.

The global quality of the call centre sector is usually associated with the phenomenon of outsourcing and particularly – with the integration of telephone and computer technologies – the relocation of certain functions to peripheral and semi-peripheral regions, India for example. A report cited earlier (Holman, Batt and Holtgrewe 2007), however, covering 2500 call centres in 17 countries, concludes that 86 per cent of the call centres serve their own local and regional market. The following historical background is meant to provide a perspective on the Portuguese case and how certain historical features laid the groundwork for the emergence of the call centre sector.

[8] ‘Mobbing’ is seen by this author as a gendered cultural discourse regarding the increase of precariousness in labour relations. Both protection and precariousness in labour relations are seen to be penetrable categories as seen through the ‘cultural biography’ of mobbing and immersed in the economic and political project of neoliberalism.

2.1. *Estado Novo* (1933-1974): *condicionamento industrial* (industrial conditioning) and *corporativismo* (corporatism system)

Portugal's emergence in the 20th century as a member of the European Union was shaped by specific features, in particular the structural relationship between agriculture and industry inherited from a fascist regime which ruled the country for 40 years. In this section I explore how the regime of *Estado Novo* contributed – through protectionist economic nationalism, corporatist trade unions and devaluation of the labour force – to a tradition of labour devaluation, whose presence I would find while conducting fieldwork in the call centre sector.

The impetus towards industrialization came during a dictatorship – *Estado Novo* (1933-1974) - which had been able to establish a regulatory ideology of capital and labour based on two main principles: *condicionamento industrial* and *corporativismo*. During the *Estado Novo* the market and the right to private property were considered to be central for the organization of economic activities; but at the same time, within a framework of protectionist economic nationalism, the modern institutions of a market economy were thought to lead to negative consequences in the relations between capital and labour. It was through the non-democratic constitution of 1933 that *Estado Novo* insisted on the protection of national and collective interest to the detriment of foreign investments and individuals' interests (Confraria 2005). In the framework of protectionist policies in 1931 *condicionamento industrial* was established as a means of regulating investments in industry.

Corporativismo was also implemented through the constitution of 1933. Its bases are inscribed in the *Estatuto do Trabalho Nacional* (National Labour Statute) in the same year[9]. Portuguese *corporativismo* allowed the state to be an omnipresent figure in all economic activity and promoted the idea that individuals should only produce for and contribute to the common good, and that must be through belonging to an organization approved by the state. Through this ideology the state controlled the economy, assigning to each one of the professional groups specific obligations and privileges thereby opening the ground for the existence of monopolies (Ferreira 1975). The system had a pyramidal structure. At the base there were state-ruled unions defined

[9] The inspiration was Italy's Carta del Lavoro (Charter of Labour) instituted in 1927 and governing labour during fascist rule (1922-1943).

as *grémios*, in the middle the professional federations and on top of the pyramid the corporations. This regime aimed, first of all, to regulate and control conflicts between capital and labour through state courts of labour thereby abolishing the right to strike. The *Estatuto do Trabalho Nacional* specifies that 'Individuals and the corporatist organisms which are constituted by them are obliged to execute their activity with a spirit of social peace; and subordinating themselves to the principle that the function of justice belongs solely to the state' (Ferreira 1975: 7). Portuguese corporatism was thus an ideology which was very favourable to the economically dominant classes which supported the regime allowing them to benefit from cheap labour both in the country and in the colonies. Furthermore it was ideologically justified as cooperation between capital and labour in which only the dominant classes had the legal means to protect themselves. Labour should be at the service of speculative capital, not productive capital. This subordination of labour to capital was reinforced with a planned state policy of low salaries also elaborated in the *Estatuto do Trabalho Nacional*. This statute stipulated the need to ensure industry 'high margins of profit' and also that, although there should be a minimum wage in order to assure the subsistence of workers, its level should not be fixed by the state, due to the fact that 'the normal necessities of production and enterprises should have priority over the needs of workers'. This subordination of labour to capital was further reinforced by the absence of free unions and the general economy of 'underemployment' in the country (Ferreira 1975: 10).

There seems to be a consensus that after the crisis of 1929 and during the war years there was an increase in industrial prosperity in the country. Nevertheless, as Rosas (1998) remarks, it was prosperity without technical and economic modernization of the productive apparatus. This lack of modernization was emphasized during the second world war as a consequence of the difficulty of importing oil, raw materials and machinery. Thus, 'the industrialization of the 1950s and the 1960s never led to a sustained policy of direct or indirect state intervention, whether financial, political or economic' (Rosas 1998: 93).

During the 1930s and 1940s the argument that Portugal was a 'naturally poor country' was used by rural conservatives against the advocates of industrialism as a 'road to progress'. For the rural conservatives, change leading to the modernization of the land structure was incompatible with a country considered to be 'naturally agricultural and naturally poor'. This resistance to the modernization of agriculture blocked the agrarian reform needed in order to favour industrialization and urbanization.

Rosas (1998) designates what happened in Portugal during 1930s and 1940s as 'industrialization without agrarian reform' with enduring consequences in the country's capacity for development. Thus, writes Rosas:

> When, beginning in the 1960s, the moment for European integration could no longer be delayed, the Portuguese industrial economy entered a progressively liberalized market equipped with obsolete traditional industries, or other more recent ones based on foreign capital, which were competitive only because of low-wage labour. It was not long before the strategic sectors, which had been largely administratively created and maintained, began to suffer in the open market. The same could be said for the traditional sectors, which were also based on cheap labour (1998: 100)

According to Silva Lopes (1996) Portugal in the 1960s was then in a state of general 'underdevelopment'. Agriculture was the activity of 45 per cent of the population, the industrial sector was poor and used backward technologies, underemployment was common in the countryside as well as in urban areas and there was poor provision of the basic public services – electricity, health and education with a resultant poor quality of life. These were largely the consequences of protectionist political and economic policies carried out under the aegis of the dictatorship of 1933 to 1974 (Rosas, Serrão and Marques 1992). Some of the aspects discussed in this section shaped the Portuguese 20th century, in particular, the rigid suppression of labour and a constant devaluation of the labour force through, for instance, the practice of paying low salaries. These aspects laid much of the ground for the emergence of the call centre sector. In the next section I discuss the changes brought about by the revolution of 1974.

2.2. *A Revolução dos Cravos* (The Carnation Revolution)

I showed in the previous section how for 40 years Portugal maintained an archaic relation between agriculture and industry and how this relation was partially anchored in the ideology of the 'naturally poor and agricultural country'. In addition to this the corporatism system implemented by Salazar enforced a tradition of extreme labour exploitation which the revolutionary process which began on the 25th of April of 1974 attempted to reverse. In this section my main aim is to show that the significant advances of the Carnation Revolution in changing previous structures of inequality were

not enough to prevent the continuation of labour devaluation in the emerging service sector (which is addressed in the next section).

Among certain critical leftist sectors of Portuguese society today, especially those occupied by people in their sixties, it is common to use the phrase 'Falta cumprir April' (April is still to be accomplished). For this generation the hopes of a more just and fair society opened up the by the revolutionary process were diluted as soon as Portugal began the process of 'democratic normalization'. Even for someone who was not born early enough to live through such a transformative phase of recent Portuguese history, the 25th of April evokes the sense of the possibility of a different history. The genesis of the revolution of the 25th of April 1974 was the *Movimento das Forças Armadas* (Armed Forces Movement), a movement driven by 300 officers and organized over less than a year (Ferreira 1993: 20). One of the causes of rebellion was the frustration in the armed forces about the course of the colonial war during the previous 13 years[10]. The military operation behind the military coup carried out on the 25th of April 1974 was called *Fim-Regime* (End of Regime) and its main priority was to control the radio and TV stations.

The left-wing military coup of 1974 was the beginning of a process of economic and political change in the country which would have enduring consequences. The revolutionary movement's ultimate goal of social justice contributed to changes which, if only for some years, changed the established relations between capital and labour (Rosas 2006). The national minimum wage was for the first time codified in law and the right to strike was legalized in 1975. Social security benefits for sickness and the right to paid holidays were universalized, general access to education and health was achieved and freedom of speech and the press was consecrated in the constitution. More citizens of all classes participated in political life to the point that during one period the popular movement rivalled the military movement for political affiliation and leadership (Rosas 2006: 24).

The revolution also generated the 1976 constitution in which the first article stated that Portugal was a sovereign republic *committed to the transformation of Portugal to a society without classes*. The second article added that it should *ensure the transition to socialism*; and in the section concerning economic organization it was stated that *the social and economic organization of the Portuguese republic is based on*

[10] For a detailed account in English of the genesis of the movement see Blackburn (1974).

the development of socialist relations of production through the collective appropriation of the means of production and land, as well as natural resources and the democratic exercise of power of the working classes (Ferreira 1993: 113). In the first revision of the constitution in 1982 this last article was changed to satisfy the requirements of the European Union, which Portugal had requested to join in 1977.

According to J. M. Ferreira (1993) the revolution signified the most profound structural change in the Portuguese economy in the twentieth century. The independence of the Portuguese colonies in Africa, the nationalizations of key sectors of industry and the process of agrarian reform (Clarck and O'Neill 1980) were key factors in the change. Both internal and external factors contributed to changes in Portugal's economic structure after the Carnation Revolution, leading to a greater availability of capital and labour. The two petrol shocks, of 1973/4 and 1979 had major consequences in the world economy, putting an end to what Eric Hobsbawn (1994) called 'the golden age'. It became clear that the crisis was global and had devastating effects on capitalist developed countries in the late 1980s. In Portugal the revolution and its aftermath led to an enormous increase in the supply of labour due to a fall in emigration, the reduction in military forces and most of all the inflow of *retornados* (returning migrants) from the colonies. The *decolonization* in Africa led to the return to Portugal of about 600,000 people. From 1975 to 1976 the Portuguese population grew by seven per cent, one of the reasons (but not the only one) for the rising rate of unemployment.

Domestic capital became scarce which reinforced the traditional pattern of labour-intensive industries and the decrease of real wages. According to Confraria (1999) 'in the end, labour markets proved to be remarkably flexible, and workers accepted declines in real wages following the macroeconomic stabilization packages agreed with the IMF in the late 1970s and 1980s' (281). Another important process which had consequences for the economic and political structure was the effects of *nationalizations* of some of the most important industrial and financial firms (such as cement, pulp, electricity, banking and insurance) which increased the assets of the state. Nevertheless, problems arose due to the absence of an institutional framework for the management of nationalized firms. The main socioeconomic goal of nationalization had been to implement in firms wider social objectives than profit maximization. Firms were given an exceptional status (*empresa pública*) concerning, for instance, the bankruptcy rules which applied to private firms. Private firms could not participate in the following sectors: cement, fertilizers, refining, basic petrochemicals, steel,

production and distribution of electricity, water, gas, telegraphs and telephones, airlines, banking and insurance.

Despite these special conditions some limitations were detected in the management of state firms. According to Confraria:

> (…) inefficiencies accumulated in many state firms: pricing policies of public firms were systematically set according to macroeconomic short-run objectives related to reducing inflation, public firms were forced to borrow abroad to ease balance of payment constraints, state debts accumulated, employment policies and careers were possibly too much dependant on political considerations (1999: 285)

In 1977 the *Lei de Delimitação dos Sectores* (Sectors' Delimitation Law) was approved by the government (Socialist Party) with the support of the Social Democratic Party. Although the banking system, insurance, electricity, water, mail and telecommunications, public transport and airports remained in the public sector, the 1977 law allowed private initiative in other sectors (refining, basic petrochemicals, armaments). The main controversy among the different political factions concerned the banking system. With the constitutional revision of 1982 a new law was passed which opened the way for the privatization of the banking system, the cement industry and insurance. Private initiative was further reinforced by two political measures: the re-privatization of nationalized companies and the payment of indemnities to the owners of previously nationalized firms and expropriated properties (Ferreira 1993: 126).

Krugman and Macedo argue that the most enduring consequence of the April revolution was the transformation of Portugal into a 'politicized market economy', in which the price of labour was seen as the main dilemma (Krugman and Macedo 1981). Classifying Portugal before the revolution as a 'newly industrializing country' the authors state that the reasons that led to some economic growth during the 1960s and the 1970s were firstly, the exploitation of an abundant supply of semi-skilled workers, secondly, the exportation of labour-intensive manufactured goods and thirdly, the export of labour through emigration.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1985; 1992) confirms this thesis through a sociological lens. The author considers Portugal as a semi-peripheral country within the world economy and in the international division of labour. Although the author uses some of the concepts introduced by Immanuel Wallerstein (1984) he is critical of its use without the necessary material context which would explain the concept in practice. To

do this de Sousa Santos departs from the assumption that in Europe 'semi-peripheral' societies are primarily characterized by a non-coincidence between the capitalist relations of production (production) and the relations of social reproduction (consumption). Portugal is such a case in which the development of the social relations of production lag a long way behind the level of development of the social relations of reproduction.

According to de Sousa Santos, although capitalist production dominates the country[11] (in the period studied, 1974-1988) the country remains in a state of semi-industrialization marked by devalued traditional industrial sectors, low wages, an uneven public sector, a heterogeneous bourgeoisie containing both elements of modernism and conservatism and a working class without collective organization. On the other hand, the relations of social reproduction already present a combination of mass consumption with subsistence strategies of consumption usually linked to traditional societies (i.e. *pequena agricultura familiar* – small family agricultural production). Here the author is in particular referring to the weight of *pequena agricultura familiar* in Portugal. This non-capitalist form of production works as a means for families to increase their revenues while at the same time it contributes to the reproduction of the labour force. Furthermore, it also generates social relations which are not conducive to the development of the social relations of capitalist production. The author refers to the persistence in Portugal of social formations such as the peasantry and the semi-proletariat (belonging to both the 'salariato industrial' and 'pequena agricultura autonóma') who hold to non-capitalist forms of action and social ideologies. This leads to the internal fragmentation of the working classes. In consequence, it blocks the development of the social relations of capitalist production with repercussions for the relation between capital and labour.

[11] According to Villaverde Cabral (1979) the Portuguese transition to the capitalist mode of production was established between 1880 and 1890, although it had to coexist for a long period with other forms of production and their consequences. Concerning this issue see Cabral (1979) and Castro (1976).

In terms of the fordist employment relationship[12] de Sousa Santos writes that after the April revolution there was a general increase in wages which was not accompanied by the technological changes necessary for a sufficient increase in productivity to assure the reproduction of capital. Given that this did not happen a movement towards the 'devaluation of the labour force' took place through two developments: a) inflation, devaluation of the *escudo* (the national currency before the Euro replaced it in 1999), and b) the introduction in 1976 of the law of *contratos a prazo* (short-term contracts of work). According to de Sousa Santos this double pressure to devalue the labour force undermined the possibilities of workers' organizing and influencing the productive process. Further to this, the author emphasizes the continuation of wage payment delays, an illegal practice which represents 'a social practice typical of social relations from the period of capitalist accumulation. In fact, this is today in Portugal the functional equivalent to pillage in the period of primitive capital accumulation' (Santos 1985: 887).

Immediately after the April revolution during the first constitutional government the tendency was to make social structures more flexible and to emphasize the role of market mechanisms. Although this agenda has not been consensual among all the social sectors, one point meets general agreement, namely, the need to make labour relations flexible in order to stimulate the economy. This was made manifest in the implementation of changes in labour law and union representation. In 1976-77 through the law decree nº 864/76 firms are allowed to suspend collective agreements of work

[12] Throughout this chapter the noun fordism and the adjective fordist are used according to what David Harvey ([1989] 1990) designated as the 'fordist regime of accumulation'. That is, the author considers that the postwar economic growth (in the USA and some western European countries such as the UK, France and Germany) between 1945 and early 1970s was characterized by a kind of social compromise between business, labour and the state. The state intervened through Keynesian economics which, according to the author: "strove to curb business cycles through an appropriate mix of fiscal and monetary policies. Such policies were directed towards those areas of public investment - in sectors like transportation, public utilities, etc. - that were vital to the growth of both mass production and mass consumption, and which would also guarantee relatively full employment. Governments likewise moved to provide a strong underpinning to the social wage through expenditures covering social security, health care, education, housing, and the like" (Harvey [1989] 1990: 135). Thus, Keynesian state interventions prevented capitalist crises of over accumulation, and ensured that workers had the desirable conditions (full employment, good welfare benefits, high wages and strong unions) to be compelled to consume the goods produced through fordist mass production. The conflict between labour and capital in the late 1960s and early 1970s led to what David Harvey designates as the 'flexible regime of accumulation', of which the most prominent characteristic is the dismantlement of the social contract between labour and capital from the postwar fordist economy. This was done not only by increasing the mobility of corporations (which relocated production to developing economies where the labour costs associated was substantially reduced) but also by increasing flexibility among the workforce (for instance, by increasing practices of sub-contracting) (Harvey [1989] 1990: 147-51).

(*contratos colectivos de trabalhos*) in 'economic crisis situations' (*situação de crise económica*), applicable to the public and private sectors. The conditions for short-term contract of work (*contrato de trabalho a prazo*) were introduced by law-decree nº 781/76, which created two groups of workers with antagonistic interests, the permanent and the short-term (casual) workers. The *Lei de Unicidade Sindical* (Law of Trade Union Unity) set up after the revolution was also undermined. This law had been passed after the revolution, shaped by the influence of the Partido Comunista Português (Portuguese Communist Party) and it guaranteed that the *Intersindical* had a monopoly of union representation. The law was annulled and in 1978 a new union confederation was galvanized by the Socialist (PS) and the Social Democratic (PSD) parties as a way of decreasing the influence of the communist party through the *Intersindical*. This new union confederation - *União Geral dos Trabalhadores* (UGT) - rapidly gained presence in the service sector (Ferreira 1993: 124-5).

Since the 1970s the fordist employment relationship had been changing in capitalist advanced economies (Castel 2002). Portugal has presented two specificities in relation to the evolution observed in capitalist economies: firstly, the mass consumption and employment stability which is associated with fordism arrived in Portugal quite late compared to other developed capitalist countries; and secondly, the arrival of that kind of employment relationship happened for specifically political reasons, given the state had more power than was usual in relation to the owners of capital (Santos, Reis and Marques 1990: 175).

From 1969 onwards, when the serious crisis of the *Estado Novo* began, it had been possible to introduce in some sectors of the economy (naval construction, banks and insurance) some measures leading to the fordist employment relationship. But it was only with the April revolution that it was possible to extend to a great number of Portuguese workers stability and security in employment, as well as, for instance, sickness protection. A new employment relationship was being constituted, one in which the protection of workers' rights was taken into serious consideration and consolidated in the 1976 constitution.

In the context of the crisis which followed the April revolution, the state regained its role as regulator of the new employment relationship. This had three main consequences: 1, this new model of regulation was imposed on the business community, it was not negotiated; 2, the rise in real wages during the revolutionary process did not take into account productivity gains; 3, with the development of the revolutionary crisis

the defence of workers' rights was emphasized in the name of the transition to a socialist society, and not as a defence of the introduction of a new capitalist order as happened in other countries. These three consequences shaped profoundly the way the fordist employment relationship came to be established in Portugal. It has also shaped the terms on which Portugal is integrated into the global movement of creating new forms of regulating the workforce.

In this process de Sousa Santos et al. (1990) emphasize the role of the state and labour law as a mirror of how Portugal converges and diverges with other countries in the process of changing the terms through which the employment relationship is established (176), during the period from 1974 to 1988. The most distinctive aspect in Portugal is a relatively rigid labour law concerning workers' rights and the almost total ineffectuality of the laws. This has created a gap between legal framework and social practices. This may happen, for instance, when the state fails to enforce labour inspections (*Direcção-Geral de Inspecção do Trabalho*) and tolerates labour law violations which should be prohibited through state action. If this is done systematically it may give rise to an *Estado Paralelo* (parallel state). According to the above authors, in this period, 1974 to 1988, when there was more emphasis on flexibility of labour, the gap between the patchiness in practice of workers' rights and the law which assures these rights was the distinctive trait of the Portuguese situation.

As I have shown throughout this section the revolutionary process which began in 1974 did introduced some momentary changes in the relations between capital and labour. Some of these changes contributed to a diffused Fordist regime of accumulation associated with stable employment and the inherent social rights (i.e. health, social security and education). Nevertheless, this model was never entirely assimilated as a compromise between capital and labour as happened in other countries. As such, the system which developed after the enforced labour devaluation has continued. After joining the EU – which I discuss in the next section – the process of labour devaluation was carried over into the emerging service sector, of which the call centre sector is an integral part.

2.3. Membership of the European Union: privatizations, neoliberalization and labour market flexibility

Portugal's entry into the EU in 1986 was followed by a wave of privatizations of key economic sectors, an emphasis on 'free market' rhetoric and a definitive change in the economic structure characterized by the growth of the service sector. In this section I discuss these events with the aim of stressing how they contributed to the creation of the desirable conditions for the growth and expansion of the call centre sector in the present.

Portugal's first and formal request to join the European Union was made in March 1977, but full accession was signed during the *IX Governo Constitucional* (IX Constitutional Government) represented by Mário Soares in 1985. In 1986 during the government of Cavaco Silva Portugal signed the *Acto Único* (Unique Act), which symbolised an economic and political option quite distinct from the one proclaimed by the revolution. The Treaty of Accession established a transition phase for the country concerning liberalization of capital movements, commodities and people in the 'common market'. The different timings imposed by the European Community for this transition phase were not always beneficial for Portugal. For instance, in order to protect its industrial sector Portugal made several requests for the prorogation of the requirement for the free movement of capital fearing that foreign capital would come to dominate its firms and companies (Ferreira 1993: 124).

The period after Portugal's accession to the European Union was deeply shaped by a wave of *privatizações* (privatizations). Privatizations of major state firms began in 1988 under a law which allowed for 'partial privatization'. In 1990 a change in the constitution made possible the full privatization of state assets. As Confraria (1999) remarks: 'according to the privatization law, the objectives of privatization were related to improving firm and market performance, as well as to the development of capital markets' (287). Before 1994, major privatizations occurred mostly in the financial sector; the major industrial privatizations (still partial) were in cement, refining, and petrochemicals. There were also changes in the utilities market. Production of electricity was opened to the private sector, the water distribution and sewage industries went

through major changes, natural gas distribution became an entirely new industry organized with one main carrier and regional distributors.

From 1987 to 1993 there was some investment leading towards the modernization of the country. This was largely supported by transfers from the European Union for the purpose of improving the infrastructures of roads, telecommunications and energy. The goal was to minimize the problem of technological backwardness that, for most of the century, had been at the core of Portuguese industrial policy. Nevertheless, although Portugal received 1100 millions of *escudos* between 1986 and 1991 some authors have doubts regarding the extent to which this amount was used within a structured plan of development (Mateus 1992).

In 1986 accession to the EU shaped the economic development of the country by introducing policies in line with those of the other countries in the EU. Although some good aspects were observed in the macroeconomic picture of Portugal, for example the unemployment rate of 8.7 per cent in 1985 fell to 4.1 per cent in 1991[13], entry to the EU was marked by an expansive opening of the country to foreign capital, liberalization of the markets and the beginning of extended privatizations of important industrial sectors of the state. This was further reinforced by the installation in the 1985 parliamentary election of a decade in power of a centre-right government (*PSD – Partido Social Democrata*. From 1985 to 1995, beginning with an early election in 1987, the PSD won two parliamentary majorities, obtaining each time more than 50 per cent of the votes which gave them to more than 145 seats in the 250-seat assembly. The economic language promoted in the two mandates hung on the idea of 'structural reforms in institutions, regulations and in the functioning mechanisms of the market'. It promoted the idea of the 'free working of market forces and private initiative'. This rhetoric was effected in specific social and economic policies which shaped Portugal after the late 1980s, having already being advanced in other European countries since the 1970s. The matrix was the reduction of the intervention of the state in economic matters; the emphasis was on deregulation and privatization. Further, the emphasis on the free market also brought with it what Keith Hart ironically named 'the middle-class package', that is 'cities, education, science, technology, the rule of law, democracy and, of course, capitalist enterprise personified as a type, the entrepreneur' (Hart 2001: 96).

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[13] Nevertheless, one of the reasons why the unemployment rate did not go up after the petrol shocks (in 1973/4 and then again 1979) as happened in other countries, was the increased size of the informal sector of the economy in activities such as family-based agriculture (trabalho agrícola familiar) and seasonal rural work (trabalho sazonal). See (Cabral 1983).

While the Carnation revolution had previously emphasized the role of the nation-state as a guarantor of social security rights (minimum wage, unemployment allowance, social pension) close to the Keynesian model of the welfare state, since the 1980s there has been a change in the Portuguese social security system. According to Pedro Hespanha (2000) this change was shaped by an emphasis on the demise of the nation-state in terms of its obligations to assure citizens' basic social protection rights as exemplified in the claims for the transfer of social protection from the state to the private sector.

According to Confraria (1999), Portuguese economic structure changed between 1986 and 1993. Part of this change was the growth of the service sector:

> During this period (1986-1993), economic structure changed. From the 1930s to the late 1960s, industrialization and rapid growth of services provided the main impetus to economic growth: the share of manufacturing in employment increased to 26% in 1970 and the share of services from 25% to 33%. Since then, growth of services and the decline of agricultural production have been the main features of structural change in production. The share of services in employment increased to more than 50% in 1990, the share of manufacturing remained roughly stable and agriculture accounted for 10% of employment (271)

The reasons for the growth of the Portuguese service sector is usually connected to three factors favouring growth in the private and public sectors. These were firstly, the expansion of demand for services that was much faster than demand in other sectors, for both direct consumption and intermediary uses. Secondly, the level of productivity that was faster in the service sector than in industry, due to the latter's lack of mechanization and thirdly a great number of industrial enterprises began to externalize (outsource and subcontract) some of their services to other companies, e.g. cleaning, clothing and transportation, thus increasing the number of jobs in the sector (Rodrigues 1988). Recently, an official report commissioned by the Portuguese Ministry of Labour emphasized the importance of growth in the service sector. Between 1976 and 2005 the proportion of people working in services increased from 35 per cent to 57.5 per cent of the total of the population employed (AAVV 2006: 47).

As Rodrigues (1988) argues when Portugal joined the EU the country was in the midst of a 'hegemony crisis' which had been going on since 1974. This 'hegemony crisis' has consequences in the labour system, namely the coexistence of different discourses such as 'the transition to socialism', 'the construction of a welfare state' and

‘the neoliberal turn’ (Rodrigues 1988: 91). In terms of the evolution of the employment relationship Rodrigues emphasizes two aspects: casualisation and ‘externalization’.

In 1974 there was an attempt to codify in law a new kind of status for employees which prioritized workers’ rights including stability and security in employment – a law produced from the socialist tendency which shaped the revolutionary process. At the same time, as I have previously shown, new forms of employment began to expand, such as the *contrato a prazo* (short-term contract of work). This form of contract soon established its dominance and in 1988 ‘atypical forms of employment’ were responsible for the great majority of employment. The status of stable and permanent paid work codified in law after the Carnation revolution was never assimilated by the economic system. The best evidence available strongly supports the argument that this was due to new international competition after entering the EU. Because of the precarious nature of the Portuguese system of production any increase in capital could only be achieved by using ‘atypical forms of contracting’ and stimulating the devaluation of the labour force (Rodrigues 1988: 228).

The growth of the call centre sector since the late 1990s is causally linked to the changes referred to above – externalization and casualisation. First, certain sectors of economic activity (particularly banking, telecommunications and insurance) began a process of externalizing part of their services to other companies. Following the flexibility paradigm firms concentrated on their core activities and reduced labour costs by outsourcing or sub-contracting the services considered peripheral, such as customer service. This has provided the main work for call centres. Furthermore, call centres do not involve great investment in technological infrastructure and, due to the particularity of these being designed for a Portuguese speaking market, most could not have been relocated to other countries (as happens, for instance, with call centres for the English speaking market being relocated to India). Nor did call centres need to look abroad for cheap labour. That is, the traditional devaluation of labour in Portugal throughout the 20th century proved to be the *sine qua non* for the rapid growth of the call centre sector in Portugal. This is confirmed by the growth of the call centre sector being parallel to the increase of ‘atypical forms of employment’, particularly temporary employment, which I discuss in the next section.

2.4. Employment transitions: ‘atypical forms of employment’ and temporary agency work

My aim in this section is to examine the relationship of temporary agency work to call centre labour. To do that I first briefly describe how the notion of ‘atypical forms of employment’ arose in Portugal and elsewhere with special reference to temporary agency work (TAW). I wish to stress that in Portugal the special affinity between TAW and call centre employment is as much an outgrowth of recent Portuguese economic history as it is the result of global neoliberal processes leading to the increasing fragmentation of the employment relationship.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s several studies were published in Portugal by agencies attached to the Ministry of Labour which were specifically devoted to map the shape and location of ‘atypical forms of employment’ and refine its definition (Cristóvam, et al. 1996; Vaz 1997; Cerdeira 2000; Rosa 2003). In the first study referred to above (Cristóvam, et al. 1996) the authors thought they lacked the experience to collect the data they needed but there was also a lack of centralized information of this type about small-firms and enterprises. The fieldwork for this study involved interviews with the departments of human resources of 45 firms distributed in seven districts. The authors of the study start with an assumption of a binary opposition between ‘typical’ and ‘atypical’ forms of employment without defining either one of them. The only concepts used are the several forms of hiring workers which were at the time of the study codified in Portuguese law. The set of ‘atypical forms of employment’ are largely defined for what they are not, that is, stable employment. The conclusions of the study point to some trends which would be a constant feature of later research carried out on ‘atypical forms of employment’. That is, a) the likely growth of ‘atypical forms of employment’ and a decrease of workers’ rights in terms of pay, length of employment contract, etc; b) the fact that the these new forms of employment are in the majority of the situations not voluntary from the point of view of workers, and c) the institutionalization of unstable and insecure forms of employment as the ‘normal form’ of integrating younger people in the labour market.

The second study I refer to (Vaz 1997) suggests a straight relation between the increase of ‘atypical forms of employment’ and the propagation of neoliberal theory

connected to flexibility since the beginning of the 1990s, which generated a segmented workforce. Among the mechanisms of flexibility Vaz mentions the increase among firms of either downsizing or outsourcing. The study does not provide a critique of the notion of flexibility itself, and how it is related to a discourse of normalization of 'atypical forms of employment'.

I have previously mentioned how, since the April revolution, the worker/employer relationship was shaped by two opposite trends: an emphasis on workers' rights to stability at work and also the appearance of the *contrato a prazo* (short-term contract of work) and its rapid spread as the main form of hiring workers. Building on that trend since the late 1980s has been the increasingly prominence of agencies for temporary work. The great majority of call centre operators are temps. That is, they are hired by an agency for temporary work to execute tasks in another firm. Below, I summarize the development of this sector in the international context, and then I specify the characteristics of temporary work in Portugal.

2.4.1. Temporary agency work: 'the right worker in the right job at the right time'

In a statement made in 1996 the president of the International Confederation of Temporary Work Agencies emphasized the following:

> The economic role that the staffing industry plays is becoming more important every day as the world becomes increasingly interdependent and the process of globalization affects the economies of all countries. Globalization means competition, and competition means productivity, and productivity means *using labour as efficiently as possible – the right worker in the right job at the right time*. (Statement from the ex-president of the International Confederation of Private Employment Agencies – CIETT – quoted by Coe et al. 2006: 3)

The International Confederation of Temporary Work Agencies (CIETT) was founded in Paris in 1967. Its members are national associations of agencies described by Storrie as 'enterprises which supply workers for temporary assignments at clients' premises' (2002: 1). TAW follows a general movement towards the externalization of labour, in which a form of employment combines elements of both commercial and employment contracts and brings a third party – the agency – into what was previously a relationship between employer and employee (Storrie 2002: 1). The economic rationale for the use of TAW is partly explained by the demand of firms for this type of labour. First, it

allows user firms to achieve the organization of an 'insecurity and risks transfer-chain', in which the business risks are transferred from the client company to the provider organization (risk diversification). Second, productivity increases by lowering the costs of labour adjustments, allowing firms to use labour services only when needed (flexibility).

The agency worker is usually defined among European countries as 'an employee of a TAW but working under managerial authority of the user company' (EUROFOND 2006: 18). This raises several issues, the most important being how to avoid different treatment between the temporary and permanent staff. The principle of non-discrimination between temps and permanent workers hired by the user firms has long been an issue making difficulties in reaching an agreement between different social partners in the EU (EC 2002). Among the several differences detected in working conditions, payment was the most striking. A national report concerning Austria showed that in some cases agency workers earned 30 per cent less than the salary of those covered by a collective agreement. In Germany, research found that agency workers earned between 20 and 40 per cent less than the average wage received by other employees (EC 2002: 6).

Contrary to the ILO Convention of 1997 (C181)[14] on private employment agencies, of which the main concern was to ensure the equal treatment of temporary workers, the draft proposal for a directive promoted by the European Commission in 2002 was more concerned with assuring that temporary workers have 'social acceptance' (it added that this acceptance would not create 'further costs' for TAWs). As written in the proposal:

> From the point of view of temporary work agencies, the main potential costs involved in the proposed Directive concern possible wage increases resulting from the principle of non-discrimination between agency workers and comparable workers in user enterprises (…) Establishing a general principle of non-discrimination between agency workers and other workers in user

[14] It should also be noted that this convention was a revision of an earlier convention in 1949 (C96). Temporary work agencies were designated at the time as 'fee-charging employment agencies'; defined as: 'employment agencies conducted with a view to profit, that is to say, any person, company, institution, agency or other organization which acts as an intermediary for the purpose of procuring employment for a worker or supplying a worker for an employer with a view to deriving either directly or indirectly any pecuniary or other material advantage from either employer or worker'. The convention of 1949 should lead to the 'progressive abolition of fee-charging employment agencies conducted with a view to profit'. The ILO was trying to assure the maintenance of a free public service available to all categories of workers. The convention of 1997 although a concession towards the 'need for flexibility' in industrial relations nevertheless insisted on the protection of workers' bargaining rights and working conditions.

> enterprises will go a long way towards improving the social acceptance of agency work (EC 2002: 35).

In all countries belonging to the OECD temporary employment has been growing rapidly in the last two decades (OECD 2002; Storrie 2002; EUROFOND 2006). As Donald Storrie (2002) reminds us temporary employment has existed in Europe since at least the 18th century. However, its recent growth and global expansion in the context of a deregulated labour market (Coe, Johns and Ward 2006; Peck, Theodore and Ward 2005) makes it a very useful illustration of the expansion of 'atypical forms of employment'.

Although there are serious difficulties in harmonizing quantitative data concerning TAWs in all countries belonging to the EU it is still possible to provide estimates of numbers on its growth and expansion. In 2005 TAWs in the context of the EU15 accounted for one to two per cent of employment, which means 2.5 to 3 million employees in around 20,000 firms (EUROFOND 2006). TAW has expanded particularly since the 1990s. In Portugal there was an increase of more than 50 per cent in the number of temporary workers between 1997 and 2002; in Finland TAW doubled between 2001 and 2004; in Austria in 1996 there were 593 agencies supplying 14,548 workers and in 2005 the number of user companies had increased to 14,341 companies. In Luxembourg the number of TA workers doubled between 1998 and 2003, in Germany 138,451 persons were employed in TAW in 1994 and by 2000 it had increased to 339,022 persons.

In terms of the sector location of the user firms the distribution of TAW might be assembled in three different groups: manufacturing (Austria, France, Portugal and the Netherlands), service (Spain, Sweden and the UK) and mixed profile (Belgium, Denmark, Italy and Finland). In terms of placement of the workers by occupation and skill characteristics there appears to be a significant proportion of TAW located in lower-skilled work in the service and manufacturing sectors and in clerical and administrative occupations. The duration of TAW placements varies from countries in which short assignments is the most common practice (France, Spain, Finland, Norway, Luxembourg, Italy and Germany); and countries with a significant proportion of prolonged assignments (Ireland, Belgium, Portugal, UK, Austria).

Research carried out at the University of Manchester (Coe, et al. 2006) provides important insights into the processes through which the sector's geographical expansion

has been related with the geography of neoliberal labour market deregulation at both national and regional levels. The temporary staffing industry, as it is designated by the authors, began its international expansion in the mid 1980s. Before that it was only visible in the US and a few European countries such as the UK, France and the Netherlands. Nowadays, at a global level the industry is very concentrated with four of the main 20 transnational companies in the world accounting for 39 per cent of the global market all agencies for temporary workers. For instance, the US-based Manpower, the second largest agency in the world[15], increased its foreign revenues from 57 to 84 per cent of its total income between 1995 and 2005.

North America, Europe and Australasia are the key investment destinations for the leading transnational agencies. But in the period from 1998 to 2005 the geographical presence of these agencies expanded from 64 to 85 countries (Coe, et al. 2006: 13). The expansion of temporary agency work 'from its humble origins in the Midwest 1920's' (Peck, et al. 2006: 3) seems to have achieved a new status since the 1970s, contributing to the erosion of the standard employment relationship as well as shaping new labour market practices and norms. This was to a great extent achieved with the concession given by the ILO 1997 convention, the promotion of more flexibility in employment practices promoted by institutions such as the EU and national states, and the way temporary work agencies portray themselves as contributing to the decrease of unemployment by being 'an agent of labour market inclusion' (Peck, et al. 2006: 8). Such global tendencies, however, should also take into account the historically and geographically contingent processes which produce different outcomes in different countries. In the next section I focus particularly on temporary agency work in Portugal and how it has evolved since the 1960s.

2.4.2. Temporary employment in Portugal

The concept of temporary employment has two different meanings in Portuguese: work of limited duration and work provided through the intermediary of an agency for temporary work. It presupposes a relationship between three agents (worker, a company which uses the worker's labour power [user firm] and the agency providing the worker). These relationships are based on two kinds of contract: a work contract

[15] According to the authors there are 'six big' agencies in this industry: Adecco, Manpower, Vedior, Ramstad, United Services Group and Kelly (Coe et al. 2006: 10).

between the worker and the agency (its only peculiarity being that it implies that the worker will provide his services to a third party) and a contract for the provision of services between a firm which intends to use temporary work (i.e. the user firm) and a TAW which supplies it.

Temporary agency work was first established in Portugal in 1960 when a franchise of the North-American company Manpower was set up. After two years of negotiations between Manpower and the Portuguese government temporary agency work was legally authorized in 1962. The branch of Manpower in Portugal initially hired mainly female workers as the great majority of men were being mobilized for colonial war. During the year of the revolution there seem to have been four temporary work agencies which opened and closed in the same year, but afterwards Manpower remained the only temporary agency work active in Portugal until 1979 (Santana and Centeno 2001: 75).

From 1979 onwards other temporary agencies appeared but due to the absence of a stipulated legal framework their activity remained ‘marginal’, although a legal definition for temporary work already existed as *contrato de cessão de mão-de-obra* (contract of labour force concession). According to Santana and Centeno (2001) in 1979 the then Council of the European Communities approved a resolution which made an appeal to all member states to establish measures which would assure the social protection of temporary workers. Only in 1985 did the Portuguese government begin discussing this issue by presenting for public discussion a project for a regulatory legal statute. For the next four years no consensus was achieved in terms of the establishment of a legal framework for the regulation of temporary agency work. This only became possible in 1989, when the first law regarding TAW was promulgated. In 1988 the Portuguese Association of Temporary Agencies Work (*Associação Portuguesa de Empresas de Trabalho Temporário*) was founded and in 1989 the first collective agreement for the sector was established with the signature of the General Union of Workers (UGT - *União Geral de Trabalhadores*).

One of the first attempts to conduct a sociological analysis of temporary employment in Portugal was carried out by José Carlos da Silva Pereira (1988). The author presents the evolution and development of temporary employment in the context of a growth of casualised labour. Although the ambition of the author was to ensure a greater knowledge of this reality in Portugal he faced immense difficulties especially when trying to access documents and data from both temporary work agencies and user

firms[16]. Nevertheless, the author does provide a characterization of temporary work agencies according to the profile of the workers, the reasons for the use of temporary work agencies from the point of view of the user firms, and the kind of professional occupations in which temporary agencies are most used.

According to Pereira, TA workers fall into one of the following four categories: workers who become suddenly unemployed, young people looking for the first job, retired individuals who wish to have complementary sources of income, and women who 'prefer this regime of work' (Pereira 1988: 28,9). He highlights as the reasons which lead companies to resort to TAW: absenteeism by permanent workers, absence of workers due to sickness or holidays, supplying a temporary need of workers for the promotion and sale of new products during a limited period of time. The kind of temporary professional occupations are described as being 'low-demanding tasks with no need for training' such as secretarial and administrative work.

An analysis of 'case-studies' provided Pereira with the basis for his research because, as I mentioned earlier, it was difficult to access the data needed in order to characterize TAW in Portugal (he would have liked data from the temporary work agencies regarding the number of individuals employed, with information sorted by payment, age and sex;, the kind of economic sectors which use TAW as the main method of hiring workers; the main features of the contracts established between the agency and the user firm). Pereira sees TAW as being directly related with the casualisation of employment conditions in new modes of business organization potentially leading to structural changes in the dominant model of employment relations. Nevertheless, the analysis provided by the author proves insufficient not only due to the absence of quantitative data but also due to the lack of contextualization within wider economic and political problems outside the sphere of the Portuguese nation-state. More recently comparative quantitative data from different countries became more easily available, although this is not entirely satisfactory either.

According to Birindelli and Rustichelli 'there has been a substantial increase in temporary employment in the EU 15 over the period analysed (1997-2005). As a proportion of overall employment growth, this is especially large in Germany, Portugal and some other countries (…)' (2007: 5). As the table below show in the EU 15,

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[16] This difficulty is significant in the sense that it is not singular or isolated. Recent researches undertaken, and which directly or indirectly tackle the subject of temporary work, face the same kind of obstacles. For the absence of institutional data or the silence from both temporary work agencies and user firms see, for instance, Rosa (2003) and Casaca (2005).

between 1997 and 2005 the number of people employed by TAW increased from 15,221 thousand to 20,091 thousand (Birindelli and Rustichelli 2007: 58).

Table 1: Recent trends in employment, EU-15 1997-2005

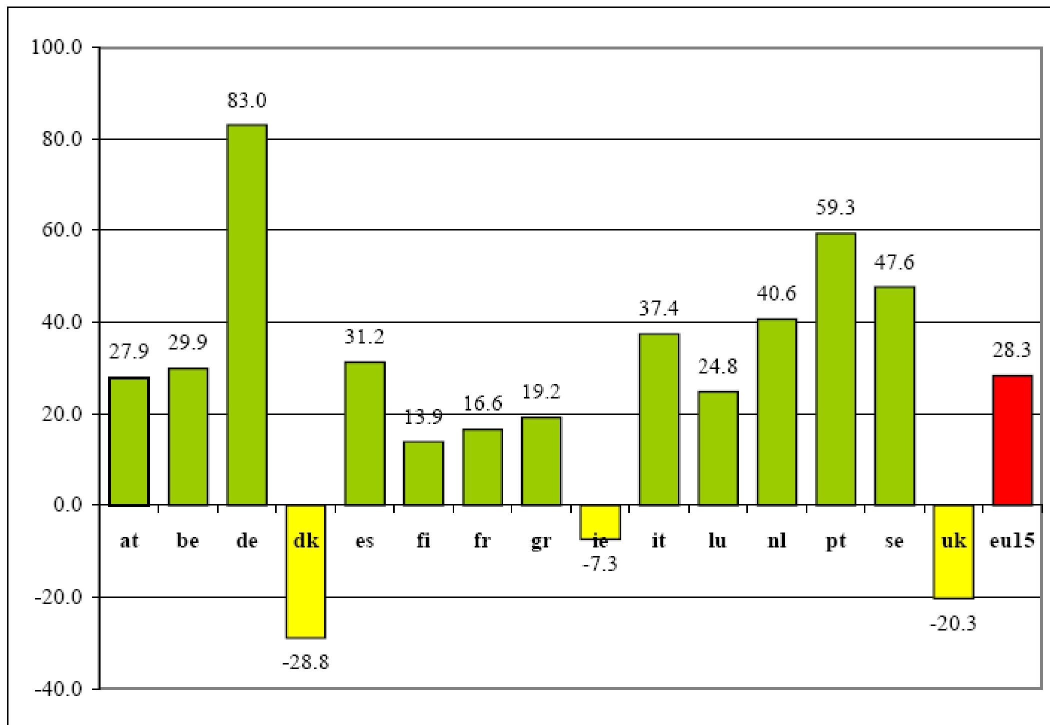
Table 2.1 Recent trends in employment, EU-15 1997-2005

	All in employment				Employees				Temporary			
	1997	2005	Diff.	% growth	1997	2005	Diff.	% growth	1997	2005	Diff.	% growth
AT	3609	3824	*216*	6.0	3109	3317	*208*	6.7	241	302	*60*	24.9
BE	3838	4235	*398*	10.4	3177	3590	*413*	13.0	199	318	*119*	59.6
DE	35299	36354	*1055*	3.0	31448	31859	*411*	1.3	3652	4527	*876*	24.0
DK	2675	2752	*77*	2.9	2423	2507	*85*	3.5	269	246	*-22*	-8.3
ES	13276	18973	*5698*	42.9	10114	15502	*5388*	53.3	3391	5169	*1778*	52.4
FI	2120	2401	*281*	13.2	1792	2097	*305*	17.0	306	345	*39*	12.7
FR	21958	24579	*2621*	11.9	19114	21906	*2792*	14.6	2473	2908	*435*	17.6
GR	3853	4369	*516*	13.4	2111	2779	*667*	31.6	230	329	*99*	43.1
IE	1373	1952	*579*	42.2	1088	1619	*532*	48.9	102	59	*-42*	-41.6
IT	20184	22563	*2379*	11.8	14365	16534	*2169*	15.1	1137	2026	*890*	78.3
LU	169	194	*25*	14.6	153	178	*25*	16.0	3	9	*6*	184.8
NL	7186	8111	*925*	12.9	6296	7105	*809*	12.8	717	1093	*376*	52.4
PT	4523	5123	*599*	13.2	3239	3814	*575*	17.7	388	743	*356*	91.7
SE	3917	4347	*430*	11.0	3457	3887	*430*	12.4	415	619	*205*	49.4
UK	26744	28187	*1443*	5.4	23216	24467	*1251*	5.4	1689	1396	*-292*	-17.3
EU-15	150724	167964	*17240*	11.4	125100	141160	*16060*	12.8	15211	20091	*4880*	32.1

Source: Eurostat

As the table above shows, in Portugal the number of temporary workers increased by 91.7 per cent in the nine years covered, a trend which is emphasized given that the figure below also shows that Portugal is one of the countries in which TAW has most contributed to the overall creation of employment.

Figure 1: Contribution of temporary work to overall employment growth in EU-15, 1997-2005



Source: Eurostat

Portugal is the country in the EU 15 where TAW as a proportion of overall employment is highest after Germany but has increased the most, 7.5 per cent, in the nine year period (see table below).

Table 2: Temporary employment as percentage of total employees, EU-15, 1997-2005

Table 2.2 Temporary employment as percentage of total employees, EU-15 1997-2005

	1997	2005	Diff.
AT	7.8	9.1	1.4
BE	6.3	8.9	2.6
DE	11.6	14.2	2.6
DK	11.1	9.8	-1.3
ES	33.5	33.3	-0.2
FI	17.1	16.5	-0.6
FR	12.9	13.3	0.3
GR	10.9	11.8	0.9
IE	9.4	3.6	-5.7
IT	7.9	12.3	4.3
LU	2.0	5.1	3.1
NL	11.4	15.4	4.0
PT	12.0	19.5	7.5
SE	12.0	15.9	3.9
UK	7.3	5.7	-1.6
EU-15	12.2	14.2	2.1

Source: Eurostat

There seems to be no doubt regarding the continuous growth of temporary agency work in Portugal. The reason why I am emphasizing this particular ‘atypical form of employment’ is due to its prominence in the call centre sector. The emergence of this sector in Portugal and its successful growth is both related to historically contingent processes – rigid suppression of labour, low salaries - and with global tendencies associated with the deregulation of labour terms of employment particularly after Portugal’s accession to the EU. Further, as will be clearer in the next chapter, the call centre sector in Portugal benefited from a large supply of labour, which could be easily and rapidly absorbed by call centres given that this work does not demand specific skills, training or professional development.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter I first began by briefly reviewing the main themes of research within the context of anthropological research in Europe, particularly southern Europe. I emphasized how the 1990s and early 2000s were shaped by an increasing openness of anthropologists towards themes and settings which deviate from the traditional topics of

research in the Mediterranean area. I also assert that the emphasis on grounding ethnographic data in history is decisive in order to understand the different scales of time and space in a particular context.

The archaic relation between agriculture and industry is explained as a consequence of a dictatorship which ruled Portugal from 1933 to 1974. *Corporativismo* and *condicionamento industrial* in the *Estado Novo* enforced a model of subordination of labour to capital. Cheap labour, repressive conditions of work and a state policy of low salaries assured a paternalistic consensus between capital and labour. The Carnation revolution of 1974 changed this situation and opened the way towards the configuration of a new model of employment relationship (although with specificities attached to Portuguese economic and industrial history): full employment and basic social rights assured by the state. However, accession to the EU in 1986 intensified trends towards the 'externalization and casualisation' of employment which previously had been parallel to the ideal of Ford's 'job for life'. This change was shaped by the discourse of neoliberal ideas of the 'free market', privatizations of key sectors of the economy and the reduction of state intervention in social affairs.

Since the late 1980s 'atypical forms of employment' become a category in Portuguese institutional policy research - which also happened internationally (Rodgers and Rodgers 1989). Research associated with the Ministry of Labour developed studies seeking to map the diffusion and extension of the phenomenon in Portugal. The theme under research faces considerable difficulties, not only due to the absence of centralized quantitative information, but also due to lack of cooperation from firms and companies using non-permanent regimes of employment contracts. Among the 'atypical forms of employment' I focused particularly on temporary agency work given that this is the most common form of hiring workers for the call centre sector. I then portray this sector of activity internationally and in Portugal, specifying when it became a common form of labour recruitment accompanied by recent quantitative data placing the amount of temporary work in Portugal within a comparative perspective of EU countries.

I highlight three particular aspects of recent economic and industrial Portuguese history. The first aspect has to do with the fragility of the productive system, which is partly why capital valorisation was achieved in different historical moments through the devaluation of labour. The second aspect is tied to the specificities of the diffusion of the Fordist regime of accumulation in Portugal. When the majority of advanced capitalist societies had already assimilated this model of capital/labour relations

alongside mass consumption, Portugal was coming out of forty years of dictatorship. Furthermore, since the legal codification of the *contrato a prazo* right after the revolution, casualisation began to shape workers' term and conditions. This was further reinforced with Portugal's accession to the EU and a party in government for ten years which pursued political change using neoliberal rhetoric as a guarantor of progress and freedom.

The next chapter will follow up from the last section of this chapter regarding the advent of the category of 'atypical forms of employment'. In Portugal (as well as in other countries) this category was contemporaneous with the appearance of the categories of *trabalho precário* (precarious labour), *precariedade laboral* (labour precariousness/precarity) and the *precariado* (precariat). I provide a summary of the emergence of these terms in general and particularly their emergence in Portugal where the call centre sector became their main symbol.

CHAPTER 3

Precarious labour and call centres in Portugal

In the last decade in Portugal the categories of *trabalho precário* (precarious labour), *precariedade laboral* (labour precariousness/precarity) and the *precariado* (precariat) have entered everyday language. The terms are used by politicians, journalists and social movements and citizens protesting against the growing insecurity of formal wage employment and the rising prominence of 'atypical forms of employment', such as temporary agency work, as discussed in the previous chapter. In this chapter I begin by providing a brief summary of the emergence of the categories mentioned above within southern Europe, emphasizing in particular how they were mobilized as a terminology of social emancipation and critique among anti-globalization social activists. The purpose of this summary is to provide the reader with a general view of the phenomenon of precarious work and its particular form of development in Portugal. In the remainder of the chapter I concentrate on showing how the call centre sector became the symbol *par excellence* of insecure employment in Portugal, taking into account recent economic and political developments. The lack of consensus within trade unions concerning the causes of the rapid growth of call centres and the obstacles which precarious forms of employment raise for unions are also addressed.

3.1. A brief chronicle: the EuroMayday movement, the 'precariat' and 'San Precario'

The categories to which I refer above are also widely used in France (*travail précaire, travailleur précaire, précarité*), in Italy (*lavoro precário, lavorate precario, precarietá del lavoro*) and in Spain (*trabajo precario, trabajador precario, precariedad*)[17]. These categories are not only meant to describe 'atypical forms of employment'; they also represent an emancipatory terminology used by political activists as a critical way of addressing the neoliberal conditions of labour (de)regulation, born within the context of European anti-capitalist/globalization social

[17] For the French case there is considerable published research, see for instance Billiard, Debordeaux et al. (2000); for Italy see Mole (2010); and for Spain see Polavieja (2003).

movements since 2000[18]. The slogan 'Stop Précarité' (Stop precarity) first made its appearance in 2000 when a group of part-time workers in French McDonald's restaurants initiated a campaign on working conditions[19]. In 2001 before the anti-G8 summit in Genoa the Italian-based activist group Chainworkers (www.chainworkers.org) was the central protagonist in the organization of the first 'Mayday Parade' in which 500 peoples participated. Again, their main slogan was 'Stop al Precariato' (Raunig 2007). Since then the EuroMayday movement has spread beyond Italian borders to other cities in Europe such as Berlin, Lisbon (which joined the movement in 2007), Malaga, Geneva, Zurich; and also outside Europe, in Toronto and Tokyo. In an interview given in 2004, Alex Foti, a Chainworker member and one of the main organizers of the Mayday Parade expressed his notion of precarity as follows:

> [Precariousness is] the condition of being unable to predict one's fate or having some degree of predictability on which to build social relations and feelings of affection. The diffusion of intermittent work and the attacks on the welfare state have resulted in a widespread increase of existential precarity across Europe - affecting increasing numbers of the population even in the wealthy countries like Holland. (…) This is precarity: being unable to plan one's time, being a worker on call where your life and time is determined by external forces. And, of course, if you have a sub-standard contract you do not have a full social citizenship. That is what Mayday is all about: claiming social rights for an emergent subject that is crucial to neoliberal production. Neoliberal production is post-industrial - it's service, information, and knowledge based and we want to get into that. This is at the heart of the accumulation process that is taking place today in Europe and in all advanced capitalist countries. So, wherever there are neoliberal chains of production in the five continents, there is going to be precarity – peripheral in terms of rights, but central in terms of the financial web of the creative value produced (Foti 2004)

This explicit critique of neoliberal labour policies sees precariousness as intrinsic to labour conditions and not to the inherent precariousness of the human condition. Foti also argues, in the same interview, that the generation which is present at the

[18] The set of texts, manifestos and propaganda produced by such social movements is immense, the large majority of which is available on the internet. Some of the main websites are: www.chainworkers.org (Italy); www.generation-precaire.org (France); http://www.precariosinflexiveis.org/ (Portugal); www.precarios.org (Spain); http://fartosdestesrecibosverdes.blogspot.com/ (Portugal). http://www.ac.eu.org/(France); http://www.sindominio.net/karakola/antigua_casa/precarias.htm (Precárias a la deriva, Spain). Specific publications devoted to the precariat and precarity can be found at: the multilingual issue devoted to the precariat in the journal Transversal (http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704); the collection of articles published by Mute Magazine in 2004/2005 (http://www.metamute.org/en/Precarious-Reader); the set of texts available in http://www.republicart.net/.

[19] See Mabrouki (2004) for a description of these events from the point of view of a union representative who had been working in the McDonald's restaurant since 1993.

EuroMayday parade and in campaigning actions against precariousness, does not want to regain what he refers to as the 'old model of the job for a life'. That is, those who work on precarious terms accept flexibility as an inevitability associated with what is called 'the computer-based mode of production', but, says Foti, 'we want to disassociate from the precariousness that is implicit in this forced (Faustian) bargain'. Furthermore, it is also argued that the 'precariat' is the new political subject produced by neoliberalism and potentially the new revolutionary subject. This is illustrated when Foti states that:

> If young people stop working in Amsterdam, Amsterdam shuts down. No bars can operate; no tourist hotel can operate; no fucking newspaper can be ever produced; no theatre play can run. Amsterdam is a factory shut for business. This is what Amsterdam says to the world, its image brand and sociability, which occurs through bodies and minds of thousands of young temps, precarious freelancers coming from all over the world. This is what precarity is - it's both a condition of exploitation and an opportunity (Foti 2004)

As Gerald Raunig (2007) argues, there is a subtle difference of discourse between the first demonstrations in the French McDonald's restaurants and the emancipation discourse proclaimed by Foti. In 2000 the aim was to protest against precarious labour conditions, in later discourses the 'precariat' claims visibility for itself. '"Precariat" changed from something bad to be prevented to a self-designation'. This claim for 'self-designation' takes place not only in the 1st of May parade but also through heterodox forms of propaganda and activist action. Since February 2004 the rallies, demonstrations and interventions associated with the EuroMayday movement have added another icon of propaganda: the saint protector of precarious workers, 'San Precario', represented in the picture below.

Figure 2: The saint protector of precarious workers, San Precario

Source: http://www.sanprecario.info/

The icon of the movement, a precarious worker on his knees praying to god.

Like other saints within the Catholic tradition of urban processions, the statue of San Precario is carried to several Italian cities where there is a concentration of precarious workers. The cult has a rite of a specific prayer (see figure below) and its main goal is to function as a rhetorical device to express criticism of increasing casualisation of employment. 'San Precario' has a sanctuary on the beach of Lido di Venezia and his own celebration day on the 29th of February (a date which in itself is a symbol of intermittence given that February only has 29 days every four years).

Figure 3: San Precario prayer

Oh San Precarious, Protector of us all, precarious of the earth give us paid maternity leave. Protect chain store workers, call centres angels, and all flexible employees hanging by a thread. Give us paid leave and pension contribution, income and free services keep them from being fired. San Precarious, defend us from the bottom of the network, pray for us temporary and cognitive workers. Extend to all the other saints our humble supplication. Remember those souls whose contract is coming to an end. Tortured by the pagan divinities: the Free Market and the Flexibility, those wandering uncertain, without a future nor a home with no pension nor dignity Grant hope to the undocumented workers and bestow upon them joy and glory Until the end of time MAYDAY

Source: http://www.sanprecario.info/

According to Tari (2005):

> The first apparition of San Precario, scheduled in a supermarket COOP (a supermarket chain in North Italy) was meant to draw attention to the erosion of time for living, and to the transformation and normalisation of holidays like May Day and Sundays into working days. This normalisation, it was argued, also leads to the deterioration of social relationships and of the social fabric. Organised by the Chainworkers, performed and narrated by about twenty other groups, collectives and communities, the first apparition of San Precario was deployed according to the rules of religious processions. A statue was carried in the streets, preceded by assorted clergy including a cardinal reciting prayers over a loudspeaker, and followed by pious people. This particular procession started at the social centre Reload, home of the Chainworkers, and involved a fake friar, a priest, a nun, a cardinal, and a sound system. It traversed the streets of Milan's periphery until it reached the supermarket COOP, where it continued through the aisles. Every now and then it would stop for collective prayers and collection of offerings. Devotees meanwhile distributed San Precario saint cards to shoppers, or used the cards to replace price tags

Like other saints within the Catholic tradition ‘San Precario’ also has a short biography which is narrated as follows:

> The story tells of a young man born in a rich family who, after studying "creative finance" and in search of an answer, goes to visit a man, Silviodoro (Goldensilvio) who through divine intervention had received enough money to found three television channels. On the way back he meets a group of people protesting against the closure of the farm where they worked. The sacked workers tell him they plan to migrate, as the only jobs available in the area are on short contracts and cannot guarantee a decent life. The story continues, with Precario wanting to test the truth of such an affirmation by working in a fast food tavern, then being refused a mortgage to buy a television, and finally converting to the precarious workers' cause. (…) San Precario, in his first apparition, was represented wearing the uniform of supermarket employees. The statue had several arms, indicating the multiplicity of casual contracts and jobs, but also the necessary ability of the casual worker to develop multi-skilling and to juggle several jobs. The references to martyrdom are held in each hand, listing obliquely an array of typically precarious jobs: the job advertisements sections of newspapers, a bag of McDonald's chips, a telephone from a call centre.

San Precario' is intended to be the protector saint of the class which is said to have replaced the proletariat in post-industrial societies. Some authors have argued that the precariat has at least the potential of acquiring the status of a revolutionary political subject (Hardt and Negri 2005: 294), while other authors have raised important critiques from the point of view of class mobilization and gender (Mitropoulos 2006; Federici 2008; Ross 2008, 2009; Wacquant 2008; Wacquant 2009). I shall not discuss here the extent to which the *precariat* has, or has not, replaced the proletariat because this question is not related to the main goal of this chapter - which is to specify the political and historical connection in Portugal between the emergence of the call centre sector and of the category of precarious labour. I will only point out two perspectives which allow a different understanding of the meaning of precarious labour, in both empirical and structural terms.

The discipline of anthropology is particularly well equipped to provide a significant critique of the apparent novelty of labour precariousness in both structural and empirical terms. The anthropological research on work and labour was shaped by a special interest in the forms of labour which are not subsumed under the heading of formal wage employment, such as domestic labour, and their role within the capitalist mode of production (Wallman 1979; Meillassoux 1981; Redclift and Mingione 1985; Pahl 1988; Collins and Giménez 1990). Therefore, the debate over precarious work[20] (in

[20] Particularly among sociologists this debate was glossed as the 'end of work' debate, see for instance Rifkin (1995) and Méda (1995). For a critique see Procoli (2004a) and Caffentzis (2003).

Europe) was paralleled by discussions within anthropology regarding the informal economy (on the periphery). The concept of the informal economy was introduced by Keith Hart in the early 1970s, based on urban research conducted in Ghana (1973), to refer to sources of income outside the formal sphere of economic transactions both in the illegitimate (i.e. smuggling) and the legitimate realms (i.e. borrowing). This debate led to discussions regarding the nature of the informal sector within capitalist relations of production which are similar to the readings of precarious work as emancipatory activity. For instance, Connolly (1985) argues that while some authors emphasize the revolutionary potential of the informal sector as a form of resisting the tyranny of capitalist production, others like Anibal Quijano (who criticize the marginalization theory advanced in the 1960s) consider that the analysis of the informal sector tends to reinforce the dichotomy between modern progress – formal sector, and traditional backwardness and poverty – informal sector. According to Connolly:

> In essence, the informal sector concept does not substantially modify the economic philosophy which inspired Joan Robinson to write in 1990: 'As we see nowadays in South-East Asia or the Caribbean, the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all'(...) This was reproduced in marginality theory, ten years later: 'The problem of 'los marginados' is not that they are exploited, but rather, that they are not even exploited (65)

In historical reality, unregulated forms of employment (therefore casual, precarious, uncertain and vulnerable) are a political and economic process integral to capitalist development as Castells and Portes (1989) have emphasized. Their view is largely derived from Marx's account of the role played by the 'industrial reserve army of labour' in capitalist accumulation. According to Marx:

> It is capitalism accumulation itself that constantly produces, and produces indeed in direct relation with its own energy and extent, a relatively redundant working population, i.e. a population which is superfluous to capital's average requirements for its own valorization, and is therefore a surplus population (…) The working population therefore produces both the accumulation of capital and the means by which it is itself made relatively superfluous; and it does this to an extent which is always increasing. This is a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production; and in fact every particular historical mode of production has its own special laws of population, which are historically valid within that particular sphere. (…) but *if a surplus population of workers is a necessary product of accumulation or of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis, this surplus population also becomes, conversely, the lever of*

> *capitalist accumulation, indeed it becomes a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production*. It forms a disposable industrial reserve army, which belongs to capital just as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost. Independently of the limits of the actual increase of population, it creates a mass of human material always ready for exploitation by capital in the interests of capital's own changing valorization requirements (Marx [1867] 1990: 783-4)

As Marx further observed, the permanent existence of a surplus supply of labour has a set of consequences which are beneficial to capital accumulation. The most important of these effects and which finds resonance in contemporary societies is the constant threat of unemployment which has a disciplining effect over not only casual workers but also those in regular employment, forcing the latter to intensify their labour efforts. Again, according to Marx:

> If the means of production, as they increase in extent and effective power, become to a lesser extent means for employing workers, this relation is itself in turn modified by the fact that in proportion as the productivity of labour increases, capital increases its supply of labour more quickly than its demand for workers. The over-work of the employed part of the working class swells the ranks of its reverse (…) The condemnation of one part of the working class to enforced idleness by the over-work of the other part, and vice versa, becomes a means of enriching the individual capitalists, and accelerates at the same time the production of the industrial reserve army on a scale corresponding with the progress of social accumulation ([1867] 1990: 789-90)

David Harvey (2005), whose work closely follows Marx, has argued that the neoliberal offensive against labour since the 1970s was derived from the fact that labour had attained a degree of organization which was not beneficial for capitalist accumulation. In some European countries (and in the USA) labour had strong unions, with a degree of influence in society. The (variable) consolidation of welfare states ensured a higher degree of provision of health, education and social security and a large part of the population was able to access prolonged permanent employment, which allowed them to develop certain skills and competencies. According to Harvey following the compromise between labour and capital established during Keynesianism the ruling classes and elites felt there was an economic threat to their power (Ibid.: 15). The reading provided by Harvey concerning the (de)regulation of labour and employment relations since the 1970s - and how specific state policies served as an instrument for the implementation of class interests – underlines the continuities of the

general laws of capital accumulation rather than the irruption of a new revolutionary subject.

It is not my intention to provide an exhaustive treatment of the different views I have mentioned. Rather, I wish to point out how the factors in this discussion have affected the relation between precarious labour and call centres in Portugal. From my point of view, it is as simplistic to affirm that precariousness is an entirely new phenomenon of post-industrial societies, as it is to affirm that precariousness is the normal rule of work for the great majority of the world population in either developing or developed economies. Both perspectives lack the ability to provide an explanation of the specific realities which occur within specific historical and economic situations.

In the next sections I emphasize particular aspects of the relation between casual labour and call centres in Portugal. I look at how the media increasingly depicted call centre work as a defining feature of the young workers who comprise the *geração dos 500 euros* (500 euros generation), overqualified stuck in low-wage employment. Then I analyse how call centre labour became a focus of politicization. On the one hand, the call centre sector has been hailed by the government and employers' associations as an 'important source of employment', and on the other hand, social movements against casualisation, left-wing parties and trade unions targeted call centre employment as the main symbol of the restructuring of labour and employment relations in Portugal. Finally, I discuss how trade unions from different work sectors understand the rapid growth of the call centre sector and its consequences on work relations and union dynamics inside the workplaces.

3.2. Media representations of call centres: the precarious '500 euros generation'

As I mentioned earlier the great majority of call centres in Portugal provide services to a national public. Also, nearly all call centre work is outsourced to temporary work agencies, companies which have in the last 10 to 15 years specialized in 'contact centre services'. According to the Benchmarking Report of the Portuguese Association of Contact Centres (APCC), in 2008 59 per cent of the companies which responded to the survey had their call centre services outsourced to temporary work agencies (APCC 2008: 97). In 2006 the six major companies providing call centre services in Portugal

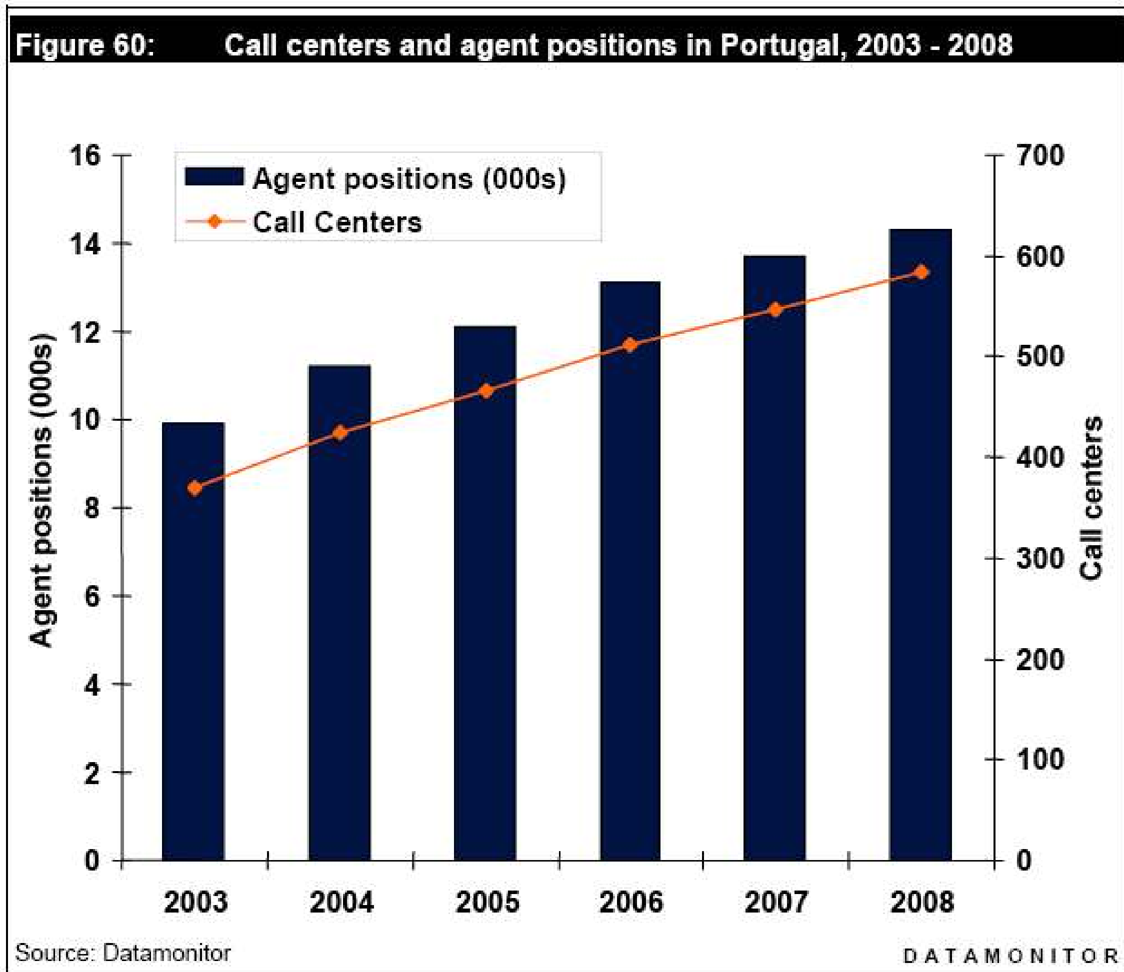
were *PT Contact*, *Grupo CRH*, *Teleperformance*, *Contact* e *3C-Costumer Contact Center*. These six companies together comprised 70 per cent of the market share (Paz 2007). The majority of call centres is still localized in Lisboa and Porto, although the installation of call centres is rapidly being decentralized to areas in the interior of the country, to which I refer ahead.

Figure 4: Selected information about four of the six major companies in the call centre sector

Teleperformance Portugal (http://www.teleperformance.pt/1738/historia.htm) was founded in 2000, it has 1470 answering positions in 4 major contact centers (2 in Lisboa – Estefania and Infante Santo - , Setúbal, Covilhã).
PT Contact (http://www.ptcontact.pt/ptcontact.htm) was founded in 1970, but only began to operate telemarketing services in 1987 along with the North American company Teleconsultants International. In 2002 has 3 contact centres with a total of 1342 answering positions. In 2004 opens one contact centre in Cape Verde. In 2005 one in the city of Bragança, and in 2006 one in the city of Castelo Branco.
Contact (http://www.contact-act.eu/index.php?m=0) has two call centres (Lisboa and Caldas da Rainha) with a total of 1100 answering positions.
3C-Costumer Contact Center (http://www.contactcenter.pt/)was founded in 2000. (2 call centres in Lisboa)

It is undeniable that the call centre sector is growing in Portugal as the graph below shows.

Figure 5: Call centres and agent positions in Portugal, 2003-2005



Source: Cunha, Cardodo et al. (2007)

It is estimated that the sector has been growing at the rate of eight per cent a year since 2003 (Cunha, et al. 2007: 24). In 2004 a special dossier on call centres was published in *Diário Económico*, a well known economic journal in Portugal (12-04-2004). The aspects emphasized in this special dossier were: 1, the predictions of growth for the sector; 2, the introduction of call centres in the public sector; 3, the growth of outsourcing in the sector; 4, the lack of career possibilities for operators. Overall, however, the picture of the call centre sector was one of an industry in prosperous growth. Since roughly 2004/2005[21] media representations of work in call centres has

[21] Since 2000 I have been collecting articles from the press which are related directly or indirectly to call centres. I also choose this date because, according to the Instituto Nacional de Estatística (National Institute of Statistics) unemployment and precarious forms of work have increased particularly since

changed and its image has become more and more connected to *precariedade laboral* (precarity) and the *geração dos 500 euros* (the 500 euros generation). This happened in both the print media (journals, magazines, newspapers) and television. Call centres were rapidly transformed into the main symbol of precarious work. This connection reached its peak during 2007 and 2008 due to several political and economic processes in Portugal which I discuss in the next section. First, however, I describe three examples taken from the Portuguese media during 2008 because they illustrate views of call centres which, to a certain degree, are consensual in Portuguese public opinion.

In 2007 *Expresso*, a well-known weekly Portuguese newspaper, published an eight-page report entitled 'A Malta dos Call Centers'[22] (Pereira 20-01-2007). The report begins by describing a seminarian aged 31 who decided to quit his studies in theology and apply for a job in a temporary work agency. He ends up accepting a job as a call centre operator, where, according to the journalist, he is praised for two particular qualities: 'a pleasant tone of voice' and a good command of the Portuguese language. The journalist further adds that after 11 months this worker was able to sign a contract with the user firm and that now he is committed to making progress inside the company and beginning an undergraduate course in economics (the call centre in question was attached to an insurance company). The journalist then suggests that call centres could be 'a new land of opportunities for the young generation'.

The *Expresso* report cites other cases as examples of a successful trajectory inside the call centre world, although it also points out that no data about the sector is available from official sources (i.e. the National Institute of Statistics and the Institute of Employment and Professional Training). Set against its stories of success, it also mentions that union protection is almost entirely absent and that wages have been declining dramatically in the sector. In 1998 a full-time call centre operator earned 750

2005. In 2002 the unemployment rate was 5 percent, during 2003 and 2004 it stabilized at 6.3 percent and 6.7 percent respectively. In 2005 the unemployment rate rose to 7.6 percent, and in 2009 9.5 percent. In terms of the rise of precarious forms of recruiting workers, from 2002 to 2009 the number of 'trabalhadores por conta de outrem' with 'contratos a termo' (that is, workers with short-term contracts of work) increased from 5,968,000 to 6,943,000 (INE 2009). It should also be noted that as early as January 2004 a small article appeared on a regional newspaper from central Portugal (*Ribatejo*) entitled 'A Geração Call Center' (The Call Centre Generation). The author described call centre work as follows: 'Trabalham em salas segmentadas em cubículos como colmeias, diante de um computador que os liga aos clientes e lhes apresenta o script do que têm a dizer e como argumentar' (They work in segmented cells as though they were inside a beehive. They face a computer which connects them to the clients and introduces to them a script they have to follow) (Tomé 28-10-2004). Nevertheless, in newspapers from the main urban cities (Lisboa and Porto) in 2004 the references to call centre work were not as recurrent as they have become since 2005.

[22] The expression 'malta' is used in colloquial Portuguese. In the majority of situations it is used with a negative connotation closest to the English expressions 'mob' and 'rabble'.

to 800 euros per month. By 2007 this had fallen to around 400 euros. The great majority of workers are women university students, particularly from the social sciences and humanities. The journalist ends the report by telling the story of a 16-year-old boy who is still at high school. He started working part-time during the summer doing telemarketing campaigns for Portugal Telecom and then decided to keep the part-time job trying to reconcile it with his studies. The journalist writes:

> He only has one day off per week and the targets to be achieved are very demanding: if the operator does 30 sales per month he does not earn more than 170 euros. But, contrary to the union logic of older generations Alexandre smiles and says: *I like very much what I do*.

In July 2007 the front page of *Diário de Notícias* (a daily newspaper) carried the headline: *Moda dos call centers já emprega 50 mil jovens* (The fashion of call centres already employs 50 thousand youngsters). The report occupied the two first pages of the newspaper, with another headline *Geração 500 euros refém dos call centers* (The 500 euros generation hostage of call centres) (Aguiar 9-07-2007). This is a clear change of tone and content from the reportage previously quoted. This second example emphasizes the precarious contractual links between workers and temporary work agencies as well as the difference in wages between temporary and permanent workers with the same function. The *Diário de Notícias* article states that a call centre operator working for Portugal Telecom receives 613 euros per month, while a temporary worker in the same company doing the same job earns 447 euros per month. The article reports the case of a student in the age band of 25-30 years who has just graduated from university as a typical example of the '500 euros generation':

> Fábia Alves personifies the ideal-type of the 'geração 500 euros'. At the start of 2006, right after finishing her degree, she decided that she would have to find a job. The available options in her academic area (media and communications) were not very encouraging, which meant that it did not take her long to decide to follow the path that other colleagues of hers had already followed: call centres.

During 2008, media references to call centre work and labour precariousness increased. In November 2008 a regular column in *Diário de Notícias* headlined *Na Pele de…* (In the skin of…) was devoted to 'being a call centre operator' (Ferreira 16-11-2008). This column appears regularly and the journalist usually takes a job in a particular industry for a period of five to seven days, and then describes its main characteristics..

Occupying two whole pages of the newspaper the *Na Pele de* journalist devoted most of the article to a description of the high level of vigilance in call centre work; and the rule of procedures for every action, the call centre is a *'*society where everyone plays their role without questioning authority*'* she concluded. Again, she says that call centres are seen as *the* 'symbol of temporary and precarious work'.

Media representations of call centre work contributed greatly to the public dissemination of a negative portrait of the sector, despite the expansionist ambitions of the sector in Portugal. The extensive attention given by newspapers, journals and magazines to call centre employment led both government and employers' associations to deploy a rhetoric which stressed the role played by call centres sector in the creation of employment. I discuss this in the next section.

3.3. The politicization of the call centre sector

In 2008 important changes affecting call centres were taking place in Portugal, namely the government's proposal for the reform of labour law, the impact of the financial crisis, the rapid diffusion of call centres to interior regions of the country and the growing public visibility of social movements against precarious working conditions. The government's proposal for a reform of the labour law was presented to the unions and employers' associations on March 22 2008. Negotiations over the reform took place under the aegis of the Standing Council for Social Concertation until June 4[23]. The labour law reform was approved in the Portuguese parliament in November 2008. Before any public discussion about it took place there were several public demonstrations protesting against the deregulation of labour relations and the rising rates of unemployment in the country.

On October 18 2007 the *Informal European Summit* took place in Lisbon. Its goal was to discuss the Treaty of Lisbon which was to be officially signed by the heads European member states on 13 December 2007. On that same day a demonstration was organized by CGTP, one of the main Portuguese trade union confederations opposing the neoliberal rules contained in the *Lisbon Treaty* regarding labour and employment

[23] In Portugal, collective bargaining emerged only after the Carnation revolution. The first legislation regulating collective bargaining dates from 1979. In 1984 a national body for tripartite negotiation, the *Conselho Permanente de Concertação Social* (Standing Council for Social Concertation) not only to monitor labour disputes but also to consult the social partners about economic and social policy. This Council does not have decision-making power but can be highly influential. In 2004, for the first time in Portugal's history a Labour Code was approved.

relationships. According to union sources two hundred thousand persons were present at the demonstration which took place in the eastern part of the city, close to the telecommunications buildings near the river which are mostly occupied by call centres.

On June 5 2008 another demonstration took place in the centre of Lisbon, this time against the reform of Portuguese labour law. Portuguese specialists in labour law denounced the proposed new law as containing unconstitutional elements, the most important being the disguised attempt to change the constitution. They were particularly concerned to protect the principle of favourable treatment of workers (*Favor laboris*), formerly enshrined in the labour law, and to challenge the stipulation that collective agreements will expire if one of the signatories refuses to renew them.

It is important to note that the proposed new labour law was largely designed to address the alleged Portuguese 'rigidity of employment protection' as the main cause of the rising unemployment (Centeno 2006)[24]. Since the early 1990s several legal changes had been introduced in Portugal with the goal of achieving 'greater flexibility'. Some of these legal changes made it easier for employers to impose redundancies (Law nº64-A/89) and work time flexibility (Law nº103/99). Moreover, the labour code which was approved in 2004 (Law nº 99/2003, 27-08) had already introduced several forms of flexibility into the worker/employer relationship, particularly in terms of the types of employment contract (Rebelo 2006). The new labour code of 2004 introduced four main forms of contracting which illustrate the degree of flexibility which became available to employers (*contrato de trabalho a termo certo* [short-term contract of employment]*; contrato de trabalho temporário* [temporary contract of employment]*; contrato de trabalho a tempo parcial* [part-time contract of employment]*; contrato de teletrabalho* [telework contract of employment]). For instance, the *contrato de trabalho a termo certo* (short-term contract of employment) which was introduced after the revolution (and which could only be used in specific circumstances) was until 2004 restricted to a duration of 36 months (with a limit of two renewals). After 2004, with the new labour code, the legal duration of such a contract was extended to six years (with a limit of three renewals). Also, the range of legal authorized reasons for this form of contract was enlarged.

In 2006 the EU published a green paper urging member states to 'modernize labour law in order to accomplish the goals set out in the Lisbon strategy' (EC 2006).

[24] In 2004 a report published by the OECD judged that Portugal had the strongest legal employment protection among 27 countries, see OECD (2004).

Although the member states have a certain degree of autonomy they are obliged to follow common directions. In accord with this the Portuguese Ministry of Labour published in November 2007 the *Livro Branco das Relações Laborais* (The White Book of Labour Relations) in which flexibility is the suggested path for the reform of the labour law scheduled for 2008 (AAVV 2007).

The new labour code which was approved in parliament in November 2008 (Law nº 7/2009, 12-02) was highly contested as I mentioned earlier. One of the points which had to be discussed again in parliament was the change from three to six months of the *período experimental* (probationary period) of each worker. This was approved in November 2008 but was then considered unconstitutional by the *Tribunal Constitucional* (The Constitutional Court). The most controversial aspects of the new labour code were the creation of a *banco de horas* (a bank of hours) and the role of unions. The *banco de horas* was a means of 'banking' an employee's hours worked overtime rather than paying the workers overtime wages. The 'banked' hours can then be allotted to the worker, i.e. time off in lieu, on another workday. This has particular importance for Portuguese workers given the low costs of labour. A great number of Portuguese workers used overtime pay as a means of increasing their monthly income. Therefore, by annulling the possibility of overtime pay the new labour code not only stimulated time flexibility but also wage flexibility, thereby reducing the costs the production.

In terms of collective agreements, the new labour code established that collective agreements between unions and employers expire after five years (instead of ten). It also allowed workers to join a sectoral collective agreement of their own choice without being a union member. This change clearly weakened the role of the unions at the level of the workplace and in society at large.

In August 2008 in the midst of rising unemployment and social tensions the Portuguese prime minister – José Sócrates – marked his political *rentrée* by publicly announcing the creation of 1200 more jobs during the year 2009. These jobs would be created by the establishment of a new call centre for Portugal Telecom in Santo Tirso, a city in the northern interior with one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country, and run in partnership with temporary work agencies and the Institute of Employment and Professional Training (IEFP - *Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional*). The call centre was to have 600 teleoperations positions and would be

dedicated to the provision of technical support to several of the companies which belong to the Portugal Telecom group.

The public announcement of the creation of call centres outside the main cities is one example of the general movement of decentralization occurring within the Portuguese call centre sector. During 2008 alone the creation of other call centres was announced:

- April 2008 – *Teleperformance Portugal* announces a partnership with Vodafone and the municipality of Covilhã for the construction of a call centre in the city
- August 2008 – The daily newspaper *Público* announces the creation of a protocol between *CHR*, the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, and the IEFP for the creation of two call centres in Guimarães
- September 2008 – the public television station broadcasts a report about the creation of a social security call centre in the municipality of Castelo Branco. In an interview for the broadcast, the president of the municipality comments that:

> What matters is that there is employment, there is not a job for life any more, that's the reality globalization brings about, there is simply no job for life. What matters is that young people have a place to work and have their own income.

The call centre announced for Santo Tirso was later the target of a campaign carried out by *Precários Infléxiveis* (social movement against casualisation) contesting the fact that workers would be hired through a temporary work agency in what should be considered a permanent public service. This example, besides demonstrating the growing inclusion of call centre services in the public sector and the mobility of the service sector, also points to one prominent tendency in the geography of the sector in Portugal. The general strategy of decentralizing call centres to impoverished areas of the country with high rates of unemployment among the young appears to be successful for the companies, given that in these areas the stigma attached to call centre work is less pronounced. Also, as noted by Richardson and Belt (2001) while some decades ago service work could not be mobile given the demand for face-to-face contact between producer and consumer, the impact of information and communication technologies has changed this. According to the authors:

> By increasing the tradability across space of service activities, thus permitting the separation of production from consumption, ICTs are allowing a growing number of service firms to search for new sources of cheap labour, much in the way that the manufacturing sector has historically done, and thus to '(re) discover' the basic principles of national and international divisions of labour (Richardson and Belt 2001: 69)

The growth of call centre labour is justified by employers' associations on the grounds that the call centre sector is a 'source of employability'. The discourse of the employers' association regarding the importance of the call centre industry in Portugal is mirrored by that of temporary work agencies, chronicles and investigative articles published in management magazines and economic journals. First, they emphasise the importance of call centres in the creation of employment, often portraying them as 'schools of work' for 'integrating young people in the world of work'. Second, they argue that young people will benefit tremendously from training sessions where they will develop important commercial skills for their future careers. In one pamphlet of the call centre association APCC one can read the following: 'A new generation of talents for varied kinds of industry is being formed at the call centre industry and that must be a reason of pride and joy'.

Political parties of the left (*Bloco de Esquerda* and *Partido Comunista Português*) and trade unions criticized the public announcement of a call centre in Santo Tirso on the grounds that what was being created was not more employment but more precarious labour for the *geração 500 euros*[25]. Against this background of social debate on the government's proposal and the reform of labour law the *Bloco de Esquerda* (Left Bloc) announced that it would hold a *Marcha contra a Precariedade* (March against Precarity) between September 12 and 21 2008. The march began in the eastern part of Lisboa (Parque das Nações) where some of the telecommunications call centres are sited. The march was led by a procession similar to those of the *San Precario*

[25] The notion of the 'geração 500 euros' is the Portuguese equivalent to a term first coined by the Spanish daily newspaper *El Pais* (Barca 23-10-2005) which published a report headlined *La Generación de Los Mil Euros* (The Generation of One Thousand Euros) concerning overqualified young people aged around 30 years and with insecure jobs. Implicit in the report was the idea that a new social class was emerging designated the *mileuristas* (thousand Euro-ers). In April 2008 the daily Portuguese newspaper *Público* published a similar report but dubbed this growing population of young people with precarious jobs 'the new *precariat'* (Almeida 15-04-2008). According to the report the Portuguese *precariat* constitutes around 28 percent of the active population. This demographic group is characterized as having mostly temporary jobs in service work and not showing any kind of recognition of the traditional forms of workers' organizations such as trade unions and political parties. Recently in Spain a new label started to appear in newspapers as a substitute for the term *La Generacion de Los Mil Euros*, that is the *Generacion Ni-Ni* (the neither-nor generation). The *Generacion Ni-Ni* encompasses young people between 18 and 34 years old who are neither studying nor working.

movement. In this case the demonstrators took the statue of *São Vitalino* alluding to Vitalino Canas, member of the Socialist party and chairman of a committee on temporary work agencies. The demonstrators were carrying a poster which proclaimed *Sou precário, em que posso ser útil?* (I am a precarious worker, how may I help you?) alluding directly to call centre workers, as the image below shows.

Figure 6: Snapshot from the demonstration Marcha Contra a Precariedade, Lisboa, 12-09-2008

Source: http://www.esquerda.net/

The same marchers also went to Porto, in the northern part of the country, where they visited the main call centres of the city.

As I have shown in this section, call centres in Portugal have been in recent years the most politicized sector of economic activity. Opposing political discourses have appropriated the call centre sector either to proclaim it as the main source of employment creation, or to demonize it as the main locus for the growth of precarious employment. In the next section I analyse the point of view of the unions, whose

presence in the call centre sector faces considerable difficulties. It is not entirely inaccurate to say that trade unions in Portugal are rapidly 'ageing'. That is, the majority of union representatives are between 40 and 50 years old. These are workers who have important knowledge regarding the changes brought about by the inclusion of call centres in different sectors of activity and the consequences for the production process and for workers' skills.

3.4. The point of view of trade unions

During fieldwork, interviews were conducted with the most important unions which organize in the call centre sector. As mentioned earlier, in Portugal there are two major trade union confederations – *Intersindical, Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses,* (CGTP-IN, the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers) and *União Geral de Trabalhadores* (UGT, The General Worker's Union). Interviews were conducted with officials and representatives of the two confederations and of constituent individual unions. From CGTP I interviewed Dr. Augusto Praca (from the National Council); two union representatives from *SNTCT-Sindicato Nacional dos Trabalhadores dos Correios e Telecomunicações* (National Union of Postal and Telecommunications Workers) and one union representative from *SINTTAV-Sindicato Nacional dos Trabalhadores das Telecomunicações e Audiovisual* (National Union of Telecommunications and Audiovisual Workers). From the UGT I interviewed Manuel da Silva the president of *SINDETELCO-Sindicato Democrático dos Trabalhadores das Comunicações e dos Media* (Democratic Union of Communications and Media Workers); as well as the president of *SINAPSA-Sindicato Nacional dos Profissionais de Seguros e Afins* (National Union of Insurance Professionals) and four union representatives in call centre workplaces. The main purpose of these interviews was to understand the extent of union activity in the call centre sector and understand how union activity was altered by the particular regime of labour of the call centre sector. I was also interested in what understanding trade unions have of casualisation and precarious labour. In this section I address some of the most pronounced findings from these contacts and interviews. There are differences of understanding among unions involved in call centres concerning the appearance and rapid growth of call centres in Portugal as well as how these are related to the rise of precarious forms of employment.

In this section I also discuss the most pronounced differences as well as the convergence of themes and issues.

The lack of consensus on the development of call centres in several spheres of economic activity (i.e. insurance, banking, and telecommunications) was manifest in my analysis of interviews with trade unions. Augusto Fidalgo, a union representative from SINAPSA, connected the appearance of call centres with the fragmentation of the organization of the production process as well as the rapid technological developments in computing and software applications leading to the deskilling of workers in the insurance sector. Referring specifically to the insurance activity – he worked for 40 years in an insurance company (*Império Bonança*) which was nationalized after the revolution and privatized in the early 1990s – he described to me how the craft of an insurance consultant had changed in the last ten years. When he began working the tasks of an insurance consultant were to persuade people to become clients of the company by preparing unique insurance proposals for them. Nowadays, Augusto Fidalgo emphasizes there are general ready-made policies, so insurance coverage is no longer tailored to the needs of each customer. For Augusto Fidalgo this change had two main consequences: it allowed the fragmentation and externalization of the tasks which used to belong to only one worker (the insurance consultant) and also contributed to the deskilling of these same workers. Augusto Fidalgo comments metaphorically that nowadays call centre operators working in insurance companies only have to decide in which 'drawer' (insurance package and the respective software application) they put each customer in. In his own words:

> Before, I was the one who used to decide what to put in each drawer. Now, all I need to know is 'was it wood or iron?' If it was iron it goes to drawer number three. The insurance profession does not have a specific technique anymore.

To Augusto Fidalgo the precariousness generated by the outsourcing of activities to which the new generation is exposed is not the same as that which was experienced by seasonal insurance workers (for instance, during the time of harvests insurance companies used to hire a number of workers on temporary contracts of work in order to sell agricultural insurance policies). Workers were then hired because they had the skills the company wanted. Nowadays, according to Augusto Fidalgo, workers are exclusively hired according to, in his words, the 'profit motive'. Workers hired through temporary

work agencies for call centres are 'cheap', they allow the company to reduce dramatically their labour costs.

This has damaging consequences for the workers but also for union activity inside the companies. Augusto Fidalgo considers that in less than ten years union organisation of insurance workers has changed dramatically, without there being the necessary time for the 'generational transition'. By 'generational transition' he means the passing of knowledge, skills and experience from one generation to the other. To Augusto Fidalgo the rapid advance in technology impeded a transition that had taken place between previous generations. From this it follows that the new generations 'lack an historical and class consciousness' connected with a given craft and activity. According to Augusto:

> In the old labour movement the generations were connected, they did not have the experience of abrupt technological changes. The same worker worked with the forge and with the furnace during his lifetime. The evolution of the machine was slow, and workers also evolved with the machine

For Augusto Fidalgo this has implications in terms of the degree of 'class solidarity' both among the temporary workers and also between the 'new precarious workers' and the 'old stable workers'. As Augusto explains:

> There are many colleagues from my generation (and also from the one before mine) who blame younger workers, they do not understand… and that sometimes generates… Look Patricia, it generates something terrible which is older workers not helping the younger ones… Because sometimes people forget that they were also young, and they don't remember how they were at that age. We [in the union] try to sensitize workers, but my generation finds it very difficult to understand. You have to understand that it is a generation [his own] which achieved a lot in terms of labour rights and suddenly begins to see a serious regression of what they had achieved. Then there is another aspect which has to do with our lack of means. Because when we have the means we have the possibility of getting into the companies, and the younger ones want to become part of the union.

Although union representatives do try to make an effort to contribute to the development of 'class consciousness' among the group of precarious workers Augusto Fidalfo emphasizes that the conditions under which labour is organized and the constant threat of unemployment do not favour union activity. Much to the contrary. In most

cases workers have different shifts of work, in which only two persons are allowed to be on break at the same time. These are generally the moments when union representatives take the opportunity to talk to workers and distribute pamphlets. Although union representatives are legally entitled to pursue union activity inside the company's buildings, the entrance is nowadays much more complicated given the security on modern buildings and the fact that call centres in particular are usually hidden as well as secured. In addition, there is 'an atmosphere of fear' among workers inside the workplace. That is:

> (…) and then we have the feeling, not always, but in the majority of the situations, that we go inside a company to talk to workers, and we have the clear feeling that people are talking with us out of respect, they become nervous, scared… when that is the case we just walk by, leave a note and go away, there is no time to talk

The constant fear over losing the only job possibility available comes, for Augusto Fidalgo, in part from the lack of 'class consciousness'. That is, for him class consciousness is not only the recognition that others share the same material and living conditions it is also an anchor of security against the daily and petty symbolic humiliations experienced in the everyday practices of work. For Augusto 'class consciousness' was always a 'form of bearing the pressure and waste experienced in the workplace'.

Rui Vieira, a union representative from SINTTAV also stressed the difficulty of pursuing union activity particularly within call centres given the specific mode of work organization. As he explained:

> Companies set out strategies in order to avoid having union representatives talking with workers. For instance, at PT (Portuguese Telecom) there is freedom to walk inside the places of work. But then there are other strategies which are deployed to prevent union activity. We are told that workers cannot talk while they are working because they are answering phone calls, and because they have a daily target of answered calls per day to achieve. And then imagine that a operator finishes a phone call and he puts down his headset, and starts talking with us, and while he's doing this another calls goes to his 'consola' [phone] and he does not notice that. Then they blackmail the worker by saying 'if you put your headset down and you don't answer a call because of that, that time period will be disallowed in your wages'. There is a clear and systematic attempt at blackmailing the worker on these terms, and to prevent union activity.

In the face of this, union representatives feel impotent in their efforts to recruit new workers for the union. This was also emphasized by Manuel da Silva, the president of SINDETELCO. Yet, his understanding of the appearance of call centres in Portugal is quite different from the one outlined by Augusto Fidalgo. Although Manuel da Silva has a vision of bringing call centres into the telecommunications sector, his views on this subject are not only different because of this. His explanation is different both in form and kind. For him call centres are the result 'of workers' abuse of social rights achieved' in the past:

> Call centres are the result of a long sucession of errors regarding workers' social rights which were achieved with a lot of work from the unions. There was a clear abuse of the level of absenteeism in the 'old call centres' where the telephonists used to work. And those abuses, they had around 20 per cent of absenteeism, stimulated the employers to find new forms of controlling that. Absenteeism was then controlled in several ways, one of these ways was to externalize the workforce, workers were receiving less and had to produce more.

Absenteeism, however, had a specific gender in Manuel da Silva's explanation, given that more than 70 per cent of the telephonists were women. As he explained:

> In any company today workers are entitled to the legal days of paid holidays and nothing more. Besides this we used to have [in the state-based company 'Telefones de Lisboa e Porto', TLP; which maintained this name until 1994] six holiday days extra which we could use in whatever way we wanted. And this generated several kinds of problems. We also achieved other kinds of privileges. At the time of the English ownership [APT – The Anglo-Portuguese Telephone Company as it was named until 1968] women telephonists were not allowed to marry, and when the company become public we changed this. Then also payments which used to be made 'à boca do cofre' [in money] changed to bank checks. Unions were able to reclaim three days that each worker could use to go to the bank and get his wages. And so what happened? It happened that workers started to abuse all these rights. And also other kind of problems. For instance, in the company there were around 300 workers who were married, that is, both men and women working in the same company. When they started analysing the 'nojo' days [a period of days which is legally considered a paid holiday in the situations of the death of someone in the close family] they detected that men use almost no days and women had long days of absence from work. If they were married the number of days used by each of them should be the same. *But no, it was always the women who used the fault in the system*. And this created an anomaly in the system to the extent that companies began externalizing their services to other companies. And then these other companies [temporary work agencies] started to built up their own call centres which are not covered by the working collective agreement, which means that they pay less, the work is much

> more controlled and monitored. But all of this has a history behind as to the reasons why it happened.

His views on the causes of the appearance of call centres are quite different from those of Augusto Fidalgo (for whom change in the organization of the production process, technological development and workers' deskilling were the main causes). For Manuel da Silva workers began to abuse their rights from the moment they won social benefits after the revolution, leading to an increase of absenteeism. Furthermore, this was particularly acute, in his view, in the case of women telephone receptionists. As he remarked, *it was always women who used the fault in the system*. The interpretation given by Manuel da Silva is pervaded by an andocentric subtext which obscures the fact that women were the ones with the social obligation of taking care of family affairs in the case of a death in the family. That is, the male breadwinner ideal-type was dependent on the exploitation of women's labour in the realms of both production and reproduction. Manuel da Silva also mentions that companies had to find ways of combating this lack of productivity stemming from the workers' failings. The solution was to externalize parts of its activity, thereby reducing labour costs and increasing labour control.

Manuel da Silva is in accord with the opinion expressed by Augusto Fidalgo on the lack of class consciousness when he states that:

> Call centre workers do not feel themselves as one sector of economic activity, and the sector also does not dignify them. A given sector can only be dignified if they understand that they need to have a different relationship from the one they have now, both with unions and workers.

Perhaps there is greater consensus among unions when viewing call centre workers as the main representatives of the 'geração 500 euros' and also on the form by which labour is extracted within the call centre regime, and its consequences.

In my first meeting with The General Confederation of Portuguese Workers I was introduced to Dr. Augusto Praça. His view on the call centre industry and temporary work agencies was that 'we are witnessing a new Atlantic slave trade!'. His explanation for why the Portuguese labour market had arrived at such conditions was related to both the neoliberal de-regulation of labour relations and 'the superimposing of the commercial code over the labour code, that is what happens in workplaces like that!'. According to Dr. Augusto Praça, reducing labour costs was the main goal of such

companies, an act which he considers will have terrible consequences for workers' health and existential stability. He further added that the bad working conditions which workers experience at call centres would only change, not as a consequence of new labour legislation, but with the increase of complaints from clients regarding bad 'customer service'. When referring specifically to what workers share with him in his union activity he did not hesitate:

> I know persons which are in that situation, they are the *geração dos 500 euros*. And when we look at them, people with the same age as me [he is in forties], an age at which they were supposed to have some joy in their eyes, but no they are the ones who suffer more, they are not at ease with themselves and with those around them and with the world, they don't know what security in work is (…) These people from the *geração dos 500 euros* are the ones who cannot have the simple joy of knowing that the next day they will have work. These persons normally know that they can receive a letter the next day saying 'tomorrow you are not coming to work any more'. This is what they know. The lives of these persons… these persons cannot smile, their world is a bitter one… this is the problem.

His take on aspects of call centre labour which impose serious assaults on human dignity was recounted in one episode he came to know:

> Patrícia, I am only going to tell you one story. It was the first time I had to deal with this subject [hygiene and safety at work] because of one situation which happened in a call centre… One operator was working in a call centre, and usually all of them are in line, all seated down. This means that if one is in a corner, in order to get up that person has to squeeze through all the others. I don't think that even in 'Modern Times' from Chaplin we saw anything like this happening. Well, this worker had been sick with diarrhoea for the last few days and he felt the need to go to the bathroom, and asked to get up. The coordinator answered 'you will only get up when I authorize you to', and the worker replied 'well in that case bring me a chamber-pot and I will do what I have to do right here'. He was fired because of this sentence. What we have in these kind of situations is that there are no rules regarding hygiene and safety at work… They do not respect anything… not even the right to personal integrity. For instance, when someone says 'now I am going to listen to your calls' they do it because the right to do that has been anticipated in the contracts of work! And if the worker refuses to sign the contract he is out of a job again. But who controls what they are listening to? And further, who assures that the rights of the client are protected if he doesn't know that the call is being monitored? That is, this a web of relations which are all linked, the problem is that these are crimes which are hard to prove… We are in a situation right now in which both the rights of the workers and the rights of the clients are at stake!

This same aspect was stressed by Luis Miranda, 34 years old, at present a union representative for SINAPSA while working at the call centre of an insurance company. After he achieved a permanent job position he joined the union. He began with a one-year contract which was renewed for another year, and then was offered a permanent contract of work. This is how he recalls his first year, when he did strictly call centre work:

> I had been working there for one year; in the summer when work reaches a peak I began to have a strange feeling… I was not going crazy, or having a nervous depression or anything like that, but I was starting to feel in a permanent state of euphoria which was escaping my ability to manage, and that scared me. I was starting to laugh in all kind of situations… it was not normal. When I became aware of that I said to myself 'it's over', I need to take it slow otherwise I will tear apart my brain with this, just take it easy!

At the beginning of our interview he mentioned how there was constant pressure from supervisors to answer a huge number of calls due to the particular quantitative targets imposed in call centre work. Speaking as a call centre operator for an insurance company he said clients call the line when they need technical assistance in case of accidents, for instance, car accident or health incidents. Operators have not only to deal with the emotions of the client but also to manage the pressure from team leaders and coordinators. Luís Miranda also mentioned the waste caused by the repetition attached to the job, the sense of 'being transformed into a machine'. During the interview he referred several times to the 'impersonality' of call centre work, as thought the inherent disembodied communication of the work promotes the dehumanization of both operators and clients.

> If I go to a PT shop, imagine that I am in the shop talking face-to-face with a person, and I tell her what is the problem I want to solve. And that person will tell me what can or can't be done. But I am talking, and there is a human factor involved, that is, I am talking to someone. It is quite another matter to call the service help-line, you are calling a phone, you don't know who is going to answer, you know nothing about it. And in the majority of the situations the person who is going to answer your phone call is not even in the same city as you, they can even be in Cabo Verde. And all these things generate in the caller ideas such as 'I am calling a number, the person who is going to answer me is not a number, but is close to it… it's not going to be a human being. I can put on pressure, I can be rude, I can say whatever I want to say!'.

The subjective experience of call centre work was described by João, his themes – exploitation of operators through pressure on answering several calls at the same time, the daily humiliations experienced by operators when called by diminutives of their names, the isolation and impersonality of the workplace, the dehumanization of both operators and clients – were very pronounced in all the interviews undertaken with union representatives from different sectors.

3.5. Conclusion

I began this chapter by discussing how the categories of *trabalho precário* (precarious labour), *precariedade laboral* (labour precariousness/precarity) and the *precariado* (precariat) were initially mobilized by social activists as a form of criticizing neoliberal changes in labour terms and conditions and employment relations. Although I do not provide an exhaustive discussion of the discourse on the *precariat*, I briefly refer to empirical and theoretical contributions which allow a better understanding of the historical and structural continuities of a surplus labour supply for the capitalist mode of production. On the one hand, by referring to the notion of the informal economy introduced by anthropologists I mean to stress that the newness attributed to casual employment in advanced capitalist societies is tempered by the widespread existence of unregulated forms of work in the periphery (developing economies) previously documented. On the other hand, in abstract terms, as shown by Marx, the permanent existence of a supply of surplus labour is structurally endemic to capitalist accumulation. I have also stressed that neither of these two approaches is completely satisfactory as a full account of contingent and historical antecedents of contemporary labour precariousness; which in different countries produce different outcomes. That is, I agree with Peck and Tickell (2002) when they argue that:

> Like globalization neoliberalization should be understood as a process, not an end-state. By the same token, it is also contradictory, it tends to provoke countertendencies, and it exists in historically and geographically contingent forms. (…) It also follows that analyses of neoliberalization must be sensitive to its contingent nature—hence the nontrivial differences, both theoretically and politically, between the actually existing neoliberalisms of, say, Blair's Britain, Fox's Mexico, or Bush's America. While processes of neoliberalization are clearly at work in all these diverse situations, we should not expect this to lead to a simple convergence of outcomes, a neoliberalized end of history and geography (38)

I then discuss how the call centre sector was recently transformed into the main symbol of *trabalho precário* and *precariedade laboral* in Portugal, thereby becoming a source of political agency for the media, employers' associations, left-wing political parties, social movements against insecure labour and trade unions. The Portuguese media portrays call centre labour as comprising the members of the 'geração dos 500 euros'. It tends to emphasize the high levels of vigilance involved in work tasks and the persistent low wages. Employers' associations and the Portuguese government romanticize the call centre sector as an important 'source of employability' for the younger population entering the labour market (particularly in impoverished areas of the country). Against this, left-wing political parties and trade unions use call centre labour as material for criticizing the consequences of neoliberal deregulation on labour conditions and employment relationships.

The trade unions operating within the call centre sector do not have a consensual view as to the main reasons which led to the development of call centres, which is an impediment for strategic organized action among unions in different sectors of the economy. Furthermore, trade unions do not discuss (with the exception of Augusto Fidalgo) one of the main issues of contention for unions: the relations between permanent and precarious workers. Or better, how the language of precarious labour not only guarantees the adherence of precarious workers to the rules imposed by the new 'Workfare' (Wacquant 2008: 254) but also assures the complicity of permanent workers (an aspect I address in the next chapter). Nevertheless, union representatives point to some important issues, particularly those related to union activities in the field of precarious labour, the (lack of) social citizenship of casual workers and workplaces practices in the call centre regime of labour.

Overall what I have tried to show is that the political and ideological discourse in which the categories of precarious labour, precarity and the precariat are embedded can be both a source of emancipation and stigma (the effects of such stigma are addressed in chapter 8). In the Portuguese call centre sector this is most pronounced when analysing media representations and the official discourse from employers' associations, left- wing political parties and trade unions. The media portrays call centres as the 'reduto da geração dos 500 euros', a label which stigmatizes a certain parcel of the working population. The government and employers' associations on the other hand promote call centre labour as a form of reducing the high rates of

unemployment particularly outside the main urban centres of the country. It is clear how the same rhetoric which promotes the devaluation of labour power also promotes solutions for its containment. In Portugal, call centre labour, more than any other form of work, has played that role.

What remains hidden by the discourse on precarity (casual and insecure work) is what the main characteristics of the call centre regime of labour are, characteristics which not only reproduce existing power relations (along lines of class, gender and age) but also point to new forms of labour exploitation. The next chapters will analyse these dimensions by focusing on the call centre labour process and the workers' narratives concerning their sense of dispossession, stigma and relegation.

CHAPTER 4

Learning to be a call centre operator: from recruitment to the workplace

(…) In the first call I had to answer I was very nervous, I was completely shaking… it was the first time I was answering a call in a call centre (…) There is always a nervous feeling in the first call you answer, and it is worse when the client 'comes on the line' in a 'killing mode'… it was so complicated, I was really nervous, but then I was able to pull myself together.
Manuel, call centre operator

[How was your first call? Were you nervous?]
It was horrible, I was very nervous. It was my first job, it was my first call, what was the client going to ask? I am not going to be able to do it, I thought…
[But why do you think you were so nervous..?]
I don't know, everything was new to me. I was talking with a person that I had never met; she is going to ask me things that I don't know how to answer. I just kept thinking to myself, 'I don't know how to do anything'… very strange…
Sara, call centre operator

The institutional process through which someone becomes a call centre operator has a distinct stage comparable to a rite of passage: answering the first call. New candidates talk among themselves about how they will be able to speak to the first client. More experienced call centre operators remember how it was when they answered their first call. Some remember being so nervous that their legs were shaking, others that they had perspired so much that afterwards they had gone outside to take some air and dry out or smoke a cigarette. There were several cases of people on the verge of tears because they thought they would never be able to do the job properly. Why do operators attribute such importance to this first task? Why is it so common to share the understandings and experiences concerning this 'rite'? What happens before answering the first call?

To answer these questions I explore in this chapter how call centres present their hiring, recruitment, training and job allocation practices to those seeking employment with them. I first look at the process of recruitment which expounds the desirable skills for the job and how these are interpreted by both employers and future workers and then the process of training and integrating someone into the call centre. I then describe the main consequences of management interventions in the transactions between call centre operators, team leaders and clients. Last, I demonstrate how the division of the

workforce inside the call centre – between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ workers – is built on another division, that between the client and the company. This and the next four chapters draw upon field data gathered between August 2007 and January 2009 in a technical call centre belonging to a private sector telecommunications company in Lisbon.

4.1. Recruitment

In Portugal, the recruitment process in the telecommunications call centre sector is carried out by both the temporary work agency (TWA) and the user firm. The former performs psychometric and personality tests and the latter carries out individual interviews with candidates. Both stages demonstrate, from the point of view of employers, the ideal characteristics that candidates should possess in order to be eligible for the post.

The TWA carries out the first stage of selecting a recruit. This consists of two formal tests. The first is a psychometric test which is supposed to ensure that the candidate can reason mathematically and logically. This may include a personality test which is supposed to evaluate the capacity of the candidate for dealing with stressful situations. A further test checks the typing speed of each candidate. Candidates repeatedly describe this test ironically as they consider it ‘too basic’; what is being asked is so simple, they say, that it could be executed by almost everyone.

The individual interviews are carried out by the user firm. User firms are especially interested in hiring college/university students or candidates with a college degree who are looking for a part-time job. The expectation of the user firm is that such candidates will have useful skills for the job such as the ability to speak foreign languages, extensive knowledge of IT technologies and an ability to converse in a clear and informed manner. These interviews take place in the company building where the call centre is located. The questions posed to candidates are meant to ensure two qualities, general technical competence in computing and, most importantly, the sort of personality which management regards as indispensable for the post of call centre operator. The following section details a typical session of interviews carried out by the team coordinator of the user firm.

4.1.1. Skills and docility

The two candidates were both originally from Lisbon, aged between 20 and 25 years old. Both were looking for part-time jobs which could be carried out while studying at university. The questions in both interviews included ‘do you have any kind of previous experience in call centre work?’, ‘do you know how to work with application X and Y?’, ‘could you please tell me three aspects about your personality which you like and dislike?’. The first candidate was thinking about going to university to do a course in management studies and was responsible for a branch of a charity which provides social support to vulnerable populations in Portuguese rural areas. He had previous working experience in call centres at another company.

The team coordinator tried to understand what kind of experience he had at the other call centre; as well as how work was organized at this other call centre. The typical questions were: ‘I was informed that in X company when the average call-time is too high the team leaders end the calls, is that right? How did you react to that?’, ‘How would you react if someone made a very strong and rude criticism of you at a highly stressful moment?’, ‘Were there situations when very angry customers began talking with you on the phone in a very harsh way, how did you react to that?’, ‘What do you think is more important, to solve the problem posed by the client or to control the average call-time?’.

The candidate went on answering the questions but for the team coordinator the most significant question was that one about the ‘normal’ attitudes of team leaders at the other company when the average call-time was too high for the usual standard. In such situations, said the candidate, the team leader will listen in on the client and the operator. The operator then has to listen to both team leader and client. The candidate did not show any disapproval of this practice, although he remarked that sometimes ‘it was very confusing to be listening to two persons at the same time’. To the question posed by the team coordinator regarding which is more important, the quality of the solution for the client’s problem or the average call-time, the answer given by the candidate was that he considered both important. First of all because he understood the client’s impatience for solving the problem due to the fact that ‘I am also a client myself.’ As for the average call-time, he stated that he understood companies have their

internal procedures and that they usually give workers the necessary tools at the workplace in order to achieve the desired targets.

The second candidate was studying computer engineering at the university and did not have any previous working experience in the call centre sector. Again the team coordinator asked the question ‘which aspect of your personality do you like and dislike most?’. He replied that that his best quality consisted of his propensity to help family and friends in solving computing problems. The aspect about himself that he disliked most was in one word: stubbornness. The team coordinator proceeded with questions aimed at finding out the candidate’s opinion of call centre work. ‘Do you like speaking on the phone?’, ‘do you imagine yourself spending 5 hours speaking on the phone?’, ‘do you have friends or family who have any experience of working in a call centre, what did they tell you about their work?’. This candidate was more evasive when answering the questions, making an effort to control any information about himself which his opinions might reveal. He was trying to neutralize himself as if to emphasize his skills in terms of flexibility, adaptability and team-working. Both the questions and answers given revealed more of the kind of self and personality demanded by the user firm, than they did about learned or acquired skills for a specific craft. That is, the company wants a person who is emotionally disciplined (as displayed in reactions to harshness and rudeness from the clients), accountable and infused by the market logic in which the call centre is embedded (which do you think is more important, to resolve the problem posed by the client or to control the average call-time).

These two typical examples of recruitment interviews to be a call centre operator demonstrate that the requirements for the post are not formal skills gained through specific channels (i.e. schools, training courses, etc). Rather, the main requirement for the post is to be willing to exercise self-discipline, something which is indispensable for the profitable maintenance of the call centre business (and which I clarify with more detail in the next two chapters).

In the interviews described above both candidates showed a docility in temperament and attitude which pleased the team coordinator very much, as he later commented while we were having coffee. Besides the docility, other aspects he emphasised as being positive for a good performance as a ‘call centre assistant’ were flexibility in relation to clients and hierarchical leaders, ability for fast adaptation to new circumstances and ability to work in a stressful environment. All the characteristics the team coordinator discussed in our conversation contributed to the user firms’ principal

goals: achieving a *docile workforce* in Michel Foucault's sense (1977), which could be disciplined according to the company's need, but also a workforce which would use their own selves as tools of the labour process through exercising autonomy in decision-making, calculation and improvising solutions. In sum, an 'enterprising self', that is 'a calculating self, a self that calculates about itself and that works upon itself in order to better itself' (Rose 1992: 146).

4.2. The training process

The complete training process which TWAs provide for future call centre operators usually takes from one to two weeks. During the training process the user firm gives new recruits a brief introduction to their business and to the software applications which will be their main tools of work and informs them of the details of their contractual conditions of employment. During the training week candidates also get acquainted with their future colleagues, some of whom might have previous experience of working at call centres. The exchange of experiences among recruits is important because it is also through such informal interaction that they learn how to be 'a good call centre operator'. The next section details one typical training week.

4.2.1. Getting into the 'group spirit'

The room where the training session takes place was roughly 30 square metres with, the tables in college style, positioned in a circle in the centre and around which the trainer could walk and talk to the audience. I introduced myself to the trainer who had been warned about my presence and again I had summarize the reasons for my presence. The first thing the trainer mentioned was that the area coordinator was really a 'nice guy'. He thought this because the area coordinator (whose firm had not hired the trainer) regarded him as having a lot of 'group/team spirit'. I had previously been instructed about the importance of this 'team spirit' without knowing that it would be a recurrent theme throughout work at the call centre. The trainer, Luís, added that at EVA[26] there was great cooperation and help among people, something which was essential to carrying out good work. Luís had been working at EVA for three years. He

[26] Pseudonym for a telecom firm, see section 1.6.

began as a call centre operator and then was invited to join the training team of the TWA.

Luís began the first day of training by asking if everyone already knew one another. In order for the new group of trainees to get acquainted a game was played. This game consisted of the following: Luís distributed a set of 'provérbios populares' (popular sayings) which had been adapted to the vocabulary of new technologies. Each sentence was divided in two parts. Each candidate chose one of the parts and had to find the colleague who held the second part, at which point each had to introduce the other to the group. This game was played by everyone with humour and was used as a way of dissipating shyness and apprehension among the group. Using games as a strategy to create the sense of a cohort among new recruits was also identified by Bear (2007) in her ethnography of international call centre operators in India. The 'manufacturing of friendship' serves several purposes both during and after the training period. First, it establishes paternalistic control of the workforce, manifest in the atmosphere of infantilization to which operators are exposed. Second, it creates the illusion of authentic 'team spirit' based on ties of friendship which are not limited to the workplace. As I show in the next chapter 'team spirit' is absolutely central to management in order to achieve competition among peers and maximize the exploitation of labour. That is, the friendship relationship established between workers under the umbrella of 'team spirit' is actually one of the forms which contributes to the productive output of each team, even though the relationship may be fraught.

The game was followed by a session of questions and answers. Luís asked the group if there were doubts or questions the candidates would like to ask. Although the majority of the persons present at the training session had already signed their training contracts the doubts were unexpectedly related to wages, work shifts, leave days and the possibility of career progress. That is, the possibility of becoming directly hired by the user firm instead of the TWA. These questions were left unanswered by Luís who explained that an administrative member of the TWA was coming to provide a clarification session on one of the training days.

4.2.2. Uncertainty and powerlessness

On the third day of training an administrative member from the TWA came in to clarify the previous doubts which were raised concerning wages and career prospects. She began by informing the recruits what wages were offered for the full-time (eight hours a day, 40 hours a week) post of call centre operator. The basic salary was 415 euros per month[27], with a daily food allowance of 4.7 euros plus a bonus of 115 euros which was dependent on the number of delays and absences at work. One unjustified absence from work or having more than 30 minutes of delays during the month would immediately annul the possibility of achieving this bonus. After deducting the obligatory contributions for social security each call centre worker would earn around 600 euros per month. Three months after being engaged as a call centre operator, workers would be eligible for a productivity prize (50 euros) which was dependent on factors such as average call-time, number of calls answered per day and monthly quality evaluations. During fieldwork it became clear that from the point of view of operators the targets set out for each of these items made it very difficult to earn the prize.

Given that some of the present recruits were also students at the university the TWA officer explained how to obtain the status of 'trabalhador-estudante' (working-student). 'Trabalhadores-estudantes' are legally entitled to be absent from work during the day of each exam and the day before. The TWA deals with the problem of high absences due to exams by paying double to any 'trabalhador-estudante' who comes to work on exam days and the day before. Her explanation of how the monthly payments were made aroused discussion in the group. Each worker would have to hand in at the end of every two weeks the 'folha de horas'[28]. The salary each worker would receive at the end of the month was made up of payment for the first two weeks of the current month and the last two weeks of the previous month. Given that the group was beginning its training in the second week of January, at the end of the month the new

[27] This clarification session took place in January 2008. Since the 1st of January of the same year the official minimum wage was fixed at 426 euros, which means that the salary being offered was below the official minimum wage. The TWA legally justifies this wage difference as a lower payment for a form of 'internal career progression' in the post of call centre operator. For the first year the worker is considered an 'estagiário', after which his passage to 'junior' status is recommended. This progression depends on the agreement of the user firm. Only after 18 months as a junior call centre operator is the possibility of becoming 'senior' discussed. It should be noted that this progression carries much more symbolic meaning that any real effects in terms of wages or social benefits.

[28] A sheet of paper on which each operator records the number of hours worked each day.

operators would receive only the training period payment[29]. From the point of view of the trainees this would mean that they were going to receive their first full salary only after two months of work. One of the trainees, feeling completely helpless and outraged by such a method of payment, could not help saying: 'But how do you expect me to pay my bills if I am only going to receive money at the end of two months? How am I going to pay for my bus pass? How am I going to pay my car insurance?'. All of his colleagues, either by speaking or through silent body language showed their agreement and considered that this system of payment was unfair and arbitrary. At the same time they also emphasized their powerlessness when confronting the TWA. As one of the candidates remarked 'tens que comer e engolir senão o teu nome fica queimado junto da X e nunca mais te dão trabalho!' (You have to eat and swallow this because otherwise your name gets burned and they will never give you work again!).

Trainees also raised the question of the type of employment contract made by the TWA with workers. 'What kind of contract are we going to have?' was repeated often and the answer was very clear: 'Look, X is a temporary work agency which means we only do temporary contracts of employment'. Someone insisted on asking if there were circumstances where permanent contracts of work might be offered, and the answer did not leave any space for doubts, 'My dears, employment for life is a myth, it does not exist anymore!'. This sentence was followed by a passionate defence of flexible labour relations as good for both employer and employees. She linked her defence to visions of a greater sense of freedom and the possibility of experimenting with new career options. Someone asked ironically, 'Well, in that case can you explain to me why the majority of people still prefer to have a permanent contract of work to a temporary one? Do you mean to say that there aren't social advantages in having a permanent contract of work?'. This question was left unanswered, the TWA officer offering only the paternalist remark: 'Don't worry about that (temporary contracts of employment). If we understand that you are devoted and professional workers we are not going to let you go. There are persons who have been working with us for more than five years!'. This sentence, among many others, confirmed the fear of being a

[29] Recruits signed a training contract which stipulated the payment of 1,45 euros per day of training. The contract also stipulated that if the recruit and future worker decides to quit working at the call centre in the first year he/she has to give back to the TWA the amount which was paid for the training week.

‘permanent temporary worker’, a fear which was repeated many times either in informal talks or interviews concerning future prospects of work and life[30].

4.2.3. Being a ‘professional assistant’ and automatism

The clarification session which I described in the previous section involved tension and suspicion among the group of trainees, something which was always present during the rest of the training week. This also involved brief reviews of the history of the expansion of the firm for which they were going to work, the products and services provided by the business, and the software applications which would be their daily working tools. The trainees were also warned persistently about what could and could not be said to clients during a phone call.

When the trainer described the products, services and tools of work some terms were in English (‘call on hold’, ‘script’ or ‘CTI’ which means computer telephony integration). He emphasized the connection between these words and the complex technological devices they were meant to describe. In the training sessions Luís always emphasized the technical aspect of the job as a way to distinguish it from a regular commercial helpline. In her research conducted in Barbados into the growing high-tech service industry called ‘offshore informatics’ Carla Freeman (1998) describes how supporters of the industry ‘emphasize its clean and clerical, professional white-collar setting, and take pains to disassociate it from traditional factory work’ (247). Also, the author points out that the computer is understood as an icon of modernity which ‘feeds into a long tradition privileging education as the source of upward mobility, and heightens this ethic with the hyperbolic sense of technological advancement’ (Ibid.: 258). Moreover, the computer is a sign of progress and a future for the workers researched by Freeman. As ‘clean’ white-collar office work it is distinct from agriculture and manufacturing. The same symbolism is attached to the computer and the

[30] The temporal dimensions of work and the experience of dispossession will be explored in chapter 8. At this point however I would like to emphasize that the uncertainty and powerlessness associated with the precarious condition of employment is constantly deployed by management as a technique of labour control and as a form of discipline, which is a constant feature of the everyday life at the call centre. In the last section of this chapter I discuss one of the main forms through which this discipline is inculcated, that is, through the division of the workforce between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ workers. This technique of control, intended to inculcate a particular personal disposition, constitutes a mode of exploitation which is defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1998) as ‘flexpoitation’, that is a mode of domination of a new kind, based on the creation of a generalized and permanent state of insecurity which forces workers into submission, and an acceptance of exploitation (85).

technical language of informatics to which call centre operators are exposed both during the training period and later within the setting of the workplace.

Trainees were informed that they would have to manage eleven distinct software applications in order to do their work. Being a call centre which provides technical support to telephone and internet services means that the information needed to ascertain the causes of any problems and how to correct them had to be checked with several sources. The high number of applications to be used during one phone call raised the issue of the difficulty of talking with the client while at the same time searching the pages on screen for relevant information. Concerns aroused among trainees as to how to achieve the desirable synchrony between speech and hand movement, given the warning that after three months of working they would have to reach quantitative targets. By quantitative targets it was meant a specific average call-time, a specific average time for leaving the client on hold, a specific average number of answered calls per day, etc. Regarding the candidates' concerns about how to coordinate their speech and movements the trainer commented, 'You don't need to worry, after a while it becomes automatic'.

A summary of the function of each application and how to use it was provided. For instance, one of the applications has to be filled with data on each call answered. Operators have to describe the problem posed by the client and the solution found. The same application measures the times of the operator's work shift and breaks. This information aroused several questions: 'how much time per day can we use as break?' 'How can we manage our break?' The answer was that operators working full-time may have 30 minutes of pause and those ones in part-time work, 15 minutes.

In an environment similar to that found in primary schools the training proceeded in the form of work groups. The trainer explained that once working as an 'assistant' they would have access to an intranet that contained all necessary information about products and services provided by the firm. Trainees were then divided into pairs. Each pair had to choose one service or product and present it to the entire group role-playing the call centre operators explaining services and products to clients. Amid a mix of shyness and humour the session revealed to the future 'assistants' that within a very short period of time they would have to learn a great amount of information.

4.2.4. The client and 'keeping a low-profile'

During the training week the 'client' was always present in the background. The 'client' was the invisible and abstract entity to which operators should devote themselves in order to deliver a 'good service', in order to be a 'good operator'. From the point of view of the trainer this philosophy of 'customer satisfaction' was the justification for not sharing a certain kind of information with clients. Management had previously selected certain topics about which 'for their own sake it's better that clients stay in ignorance'. During the training week operators did not question this 'secrecy of the business' but instead accepted it as a way of retaining power over the client.

On the last day of the training week, as in the days before, lunchtime presented an opportunity to talk about personal subjects, such as where they lived, their previous working experiences, their family relations, their partners. On this day, given the imminence of starting training inside the call centre, everyone was speculating about the kinds of behaviour and conduct expected in a call centre. Some of the recruits already had previous experiences in call centres. Consensus was achieved as to the rule of having a 'low-profile' inside the workplace. According to the words of one recruit, 'do not waste time in conversations with colleagues' and 'go in, do one's work and return home'. 'Keeping a low-profile' is the most prominent strategy of self ritualization among call centre operators. As Goffman (1956b) so clearly remarked, organizational spaces have their own institutional rules of conduct regarding interpersonal exchanges in everyday face-to-face relationships. Rules of conduct are institutionalized because they define the 'rules of the game' which participants must follow in order for each individual to be 'able to project a viable, a sacred self and stay in the game on a proper ritual basis' (Ibid.: 497). Maintaining a 'low-profile' means adhering to a set of rules of conduct which are expressed, for instance, in publicly demonstrating the expected deference towards the client, or the use of a specific vocabulary regarding computers, phones and software applications, which seem to contain the promise of technological progress.

Furthermore, the 'principles of organization which govern events and our subjective involvement in them' - such as rules of conduct - simultaneously limit and enable social action (Goffman [1974] 1975: 11). In call centres keeping a 'low-profile'

is enabling when deployed as a dominant form of cooperation among workers as I show in the next section.

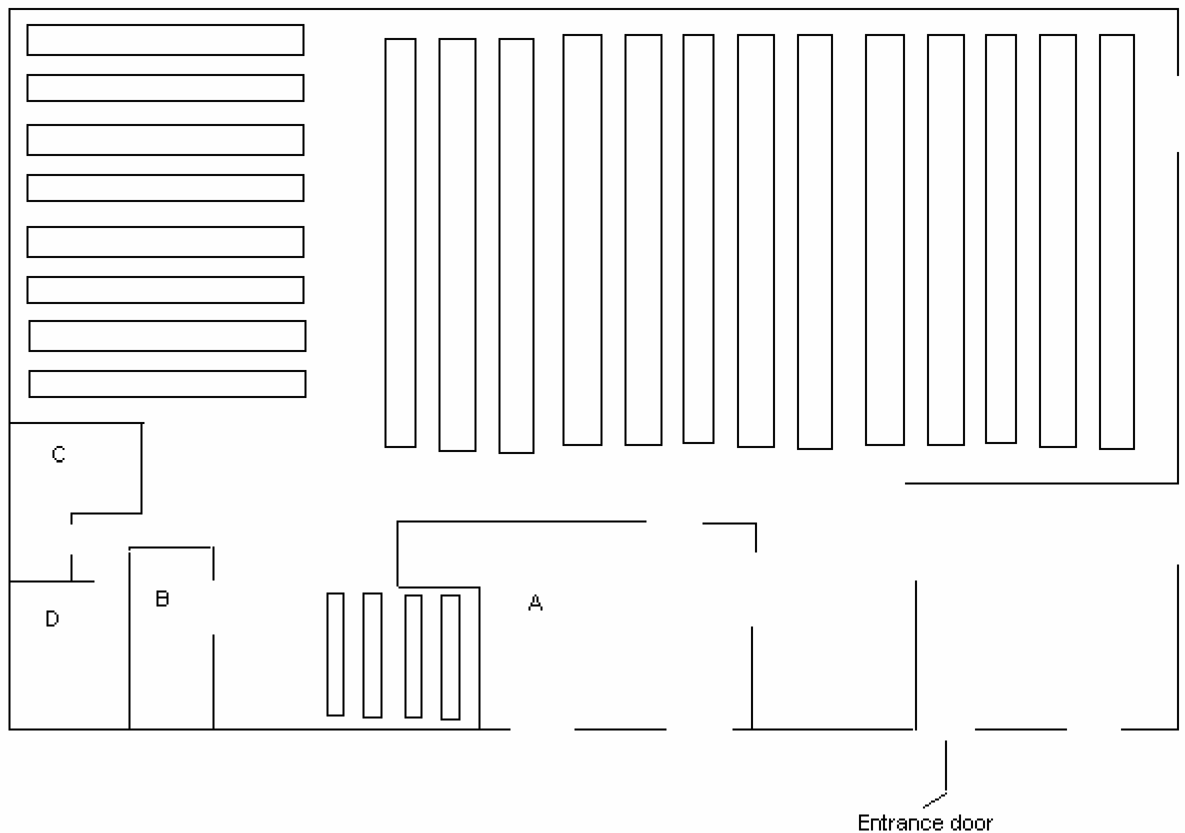
4.3. Being 'integrated' as a new 'assistant' and learning with co-workers

Once the trainees finish the part of training which takes place outside the call centre they do an 'integration' week inside the work space. Thus is the first contact the future 'assistants' have with the call centre environment, the particular team of which they will become a part of and how work is organized. During this week, co-workers, especially more experienced operators, play a decisive role in reproducing the 'assistant' role. This is done not only by demonstrating the role of submissive worker as demanded by management, but also by displaying important strategies for taking 'control of the call' as explained later.

One paradox of the call centre is that it is simultaneously pervaded by a kind of noise and a kind of silence. When entering inside any call centre for the first time one is exposed to the constant noise above everyone's head. The room is filled with geometrically delineated rows of separate cabinets, each occupied by a human presence, a computer and a telephone. At the same time there is a persistent silence between operators because each of them is talking with clients. The cabinets which act like a barrier of silence between workers. What one sees when looking at the spatial arrangement of the call centre is not noise but silence. Furthermore the spatial architecture of the call centre also disciplines modes of conduct and behaviour by establishing visible limits for movement and social interaction. For instance, the rows of cabinets are positioned so that operators sit with their backs to each other, facing a computer screen which prevents them from seeing the colleague in the opposite row. Below is a graphic image of the call centre where fieldwork was conducted[31] showing the prominence of the geometrical arrangement of the workplace.

[31] Permission was not given to take pictures either inside or outside the building.

Figure 7: Geometrical representation of the call centre at EVA



KEY

A – Eating room

B – Meetings and training room

C – Technical infrastructure of the call centre

D – Toilets

New assistants encountering the call centre landscape for the first time do not immediately notice this paradox of sound for two reasons. Many people seeking employment in call centres have previous working experience in the sector so they are 'naturally familiar' with the kind of environment. That is, the failure to see the paradoxical aspect of the call centre environment stems from having internalized the arbitrariness of the workspace as 'natural and taken for granted' (Bourdieu [1972] 1990: 164). Thus, workers do not get attached to their work space as a 'space of their own'. There aren't traces of individualized spaces at call centres, such as pictures or personal

objects in desks. Workers do not have a permanent desk; usually workers occupy whatever cabinet is available after a colleague has finished his work shift. To this extent workers contribute to the reproduction of the call centre landscape as an alien environment which subordinates the human presence and its traces.

Once inside the call centre future workers are informed about the structure of the team and how work is organized. Every call centre unit is divided into two groups, one designated as ‘front-office’ and the other ‘back-office’. Workers’ main function in ‘front-office’ work is to answer calls. ‘Back-office’ work involves processing client’s complaints, sending on complaints to the appropriate department and contacting clients whenever further information is needed. Technically speaking call centres usually allocate the great majority of the workforce to deal with incoming calls (calls initiated by the client) and the smaller part to outgoing calls (calls initiated by the firm to the client) although some specific units deal with only one type of call.

The work of team leaders is to provide assistance to operators, compile monthly reports on team productivity and monthly qualitative evaluations of operators and to ensure ‘good behaviour and conduct’ among assistants. During the ‘integration’ week team leaders also have the responsibility of providing additional training to future ‘assistants’ in the commercial services provided by the company and in technical and ‘behavioural’ matters.

Team leaders emphasize that ‘assistants’ should show that they are ‘professionals’ in their work by mastering technical competencies so showing that they know more of the subject than the clients do. ‘Assistants’ should also be capable of doing a ‘visual reconstruction’, despite the telephone barrier, of what is physically happening on the other end of the line. ‘Assistants’ should show politeness towards the clients. Although on technical helplines there is not usually a strict script for answering calls, paying compliments at the beginning and end of each call is obligatory. Team leaders insist that operators must be ready to listen to a lot of angry customers during their shifts but they should not forget the importance of ‘being polite’ and ‘showing a smile in their voices’. As one team leader remarked ‘angry customers are not discontented with you they are discontented with the company’, and added ‘you should not take it personally’.

This demand for depersonalization was also found by Arlie Hochschild (1983) among flight attendants and was one of the main sources of frustration and distress. That is, in order for the worker to sound real while pretending not to take personally

such personal matters as being insulted by a client, the worker has to develop forms of self-discipline. Among such forms of self-discipline there is, as I mentioned earlier, the trainer's suggestion: 'become automatic', which again resembles the expression found by Hochschild of 'go into robot'. Not all call centre operators adhere to this technique, in the same way as the flight attendants studied by Hochschild, but this does not change the fact that a part of their selves has to be disciplined according to management prescriptions. According to Hochschild (1983):

> Workers who refuse to perform emotional labour are said to 'go into robot'. They withhold deep acting and retreat to surface acting. They pretend to be showing feeling. Some who take this stance openly protest the need to conduct themselves in this way. 'I'm not a robot', they say, meaning 'I'll pretend, but I won't try to hide the fact that I am pretending (129)

The 'model of integration' is further brought into effect by involving the new assistants with their co-workers. Being integrated into the team and getting to know future co-workers is a two-fold process designated by user firms as 'side-by-side' and 'on-the-job' training. 'Side-by-side' means that the candidate answers the calls by himself/herself and registers all the information, and the senior operator gives support with technical details and advises about necessary corrections. 'On-the-job' training means that the candidate stays for the whole period of his future shift with a senior operator listening to calls. These devices of integrating new call centre operators into their teams and rhythms of work are typical in call centres. The following description reveals how workers both reproduce the role of submissive worker as demanded by management and also develop strategies to cope with it.

4.3.1. Getting rid of emotions

At EVA's call centre most of the calls are complaints because, as it is a technical support helpline, most clients only call when they are experiencing a problem with their services[32]. When giving 'on-the-job' training most senior operators suggest to the new trainees that it is advisable that they 'get rid of emotions' in order to protect themselves. While listening to calls while one of the new trainees was having 'on-the-job' training

[32] On commercial helplines, for instance, there is a great number of calls which do not involve any kind of complaint. Clients may call to ask for information about specific products or services; or request the activation or deactivation of a given service.

with a senior operator, a revealing episode occurred which portrays how and why call centre operators reproduce the mechanism of 'going into robot'.

Maria was a two-year veteran of the call centre, and was considered by the majority of her male colleagues as having become a very good operator in the sense of being able to 'controlar a chamada' (control the call)[33] well. One of the calls answered by Maria - on the day the new recruit was having on-the-job training with her - was from a client complaining about a breakdown in the internet service for the last three days. This was a corporate client, whose levels of complaint are usually very intense. These 'angry customers' usually complain about the negative impact the internet service fault is having on their business. Being obliged to follow the usual procedures Maria had to ask the client to run some tests while on the phone with her. The client had already called the line more than six times before, which meant that Maria was asking him to repeat with her the same procedures (due to the compulsory troubleshooting script operators have to follow). The client replied that he did not want to do the same tests and for twenty minutes Maria insisted the tests had to be done and that she was obliged to do them. After this twenty minutes Maria pressed the 'mute' button on the telephone and said: 'This week I was having such a good average call-time … now this call will ruin everything!!!'. The client's comment was: 'I don't think you quite understand what I am saying to you! You must have your words all memorized… Did you ever have a Linksys[34] on your hands? I know more about routers than you will ever know!!'.

When the client finally agreed to run the tests Maria informed him that it would be necessary to wait for ten minutes while the connection was being restored and added 'Mr. X, if you don't have any more questions we can terminate the call now', to which the client replied, 'If it is going to take ten minutes to solve the problem you will stay with me on line and I will stay with you!'. After ten minutes of silence Maria was able to finalize the call and I asked her opinion about the clients who are not willing to perform the tests necessary to resolve their problems. She replied, 'You know, when clients call us they are more emotional than rational, they explain that to us in a psychological training session… To protect yourself you need to be a machine! In the

[33] To 'controlar a chamada' is a common expression used by operators and it is part of the 'special mastery' of operators. From the point of view of operators 'controlling the call' means having the ability to deal with insults and humiliations. It means not letting the client understand that although the operators may seem to act in a subservient manner towards them he is nevertheless still in 'control of the call'.
[34] Linksys is the brand of a common router used to establish a wireless internet connection.

beginning I was very emotional but with time you learn that it works better if you just don't reply'.

4.3.2. How to domesticate clients

The new assistant who was having on-the-job training with Maria was not able to disguise the fact that he was nervous although it was not he who had just talked with the client. In the next call Maria tried to show that assistants may also sometimes have a certain margin of autonomy in order to 'domesticate' the clients' conduct towards them. This can be done, for instance, by leaving the client on hold for longer than necessary. During the time the client is waiting he *'calms down'* – an expression used by Maria – and the operator can rest for a while. Nevertheless, being a technical support line means that complaints are frequently routine and commonly after an angry attack a client may finish by saying 'I know it's not your fault, I know that you are only an assistant, you only say what you are told to say…'.

Even this recurrently humiliating sentence is used by operators in order to 'domesticate*'* the client's behaviour towards them. That is, more experienced operators use the excuse of 'being only an assistant' in order not to facilitate the clients' access to certain data especially when they are rude towards operators. While following the on-the-job training of another candidate a senior operator explained this in the following terms:

> A few days ago during some weekend there was a client to whom I was not authorized to give the confidential data on the phone. He said 'you are all a bunch of motherfuckers!' Usually during the weekends we ease up a bit and are a bit more helpful, because I have to be honest, it's not the client's fault that during the weekend there is no one here to take care of the matter. It's not the clients fault. But in situations like this, when they are really arrogant with me, I am going to be even more arrogant. And he is not going to get anything more from me. After all I am only an assistant who is following rules…

In this case the operator informed the client that he was 'only an assistant' and was not authorized by the company, for the client's own security, to reveal this data on the phone. He also added that he was obliged to follow the procedure established by the company. These coping strategies reflect individual operators' responses to problems arising with customers, but the techniques are also built into the procedures outlined in the scripts provided by the employers, an issue taken up in the following section.

4.4. The process of work, bureaucracy and dysfunctions

The summary of every operator's work on a technical helpline is 'to provide technical support for clients'. Beyond that simple description, however, are structures of negotiation involving not just workers and the clients, but interventions by bureaucratic interests that are sometimes overt, often covert. After going through the week of integration these are the first aspects of the call centre work process to which new 'assistants' gain acquaintance with.

In this section I explore some of the effects of rationalization and standardization on the call centre work process. To do this I show how the organizational structure in which EVA's call centre is situated is legitimated by the 'client paradigm' and how this in turn shifts authority from the company to the client. The authority and control exerted over call centre operators is expressed through a set of procedures that have to be followed during the course of work. These set of procedures also indicate the dysfunctions to which both operators and clients are systematically exposed in the call centre work organization.

4.4.1. The sovereign client, the 'face of the company' and the militarization of call centre work

The designation of the user firm's department in which the call centre is located is that of 'customer department'[35]. The 'customer department' is divided into three units: 'contact unit', 'development unit' and 'operations unit'. The first one is composed of the call centres. Call centre operators have no contact with other units; their knowledge of the company is restricted to the functions they perform at the call centre. Each unit is allotted specific functions and tasks and contacts between units are mainly through email. According to the team coordinator the division of areas in the 'customer department' is modelled on the client's departmental organization. That is, from the first moment a client activates a given service the 'contact unit' should ensure the support

[35] The user firm is the company in which the call centre is located, that is, EVA (a pseudonym). As mentioned in chapter two (section 2.4.2) user firm is the legal designation given to companies which contract services from temporary work agencies (TWAs). In this thesis I do not provide a pseudonym for the TWA which is why it is always refered by its acronym. As mentioned in chapter one (section 1.6.) EVA hires its call centre operators and team leaders through the TWA but directly hires its team and area coordinators.

necessary for the client's satisfaction and fidelity. The client then becomes involved with EVA's company culture and its other services (the 'development units' should ensure the necessary training quality to 'collaborators', write up what products and services the company is offering on the intranet and manage contracts with the associated outsourcing companies (that is, the TWAs). By this time, it should be a faithful customer (the 'operations unit' should ensure that billing complaints are clarified, analyzed and dealt with).

According to the team coordinator, call centres are extremely important because they are the 'face of the company'. The team coordinator also reiterated that the stipulated procedures are highly important in order to ensure that clients are satisfied with the service provided. These procedures encompass all the actions taken in the course of work in order to answer the client complaints or requests for information. That is, there is a procedure which establishes what to do in terms of troubleshooting for each service anomaly presented by clients; there is a procedure for how to write an email requesting information from other departments, etc.

Then there is also a set of informal procedures. These are not laid down in a written form, but informally instigated in various ways. So often the implementation of a new procedure is met with some resistance from workers. For instance, soon after the beginning of my fieldwork operators were informed (by email) that they were not allowed to get up from their seats when they needed to consult the team leader about something. They should instead phone one of the team leaders and, without moving from their seats, raise their question or doubt about the problem.

The area-coordinator informed the operators that this new procedure had been planned by the 'operations unit' and was absolutely necessary given the great number of persons working in the same space and the necessity of organization in order not to disrupt a colleague's work. From the point of view of operators, getting up from their seats and walking toward a team leader was not justified in terms of ensuring 'client satisfaction'. Rather, it presented an opportunity to get up, stretch one's the legs, take advantage of a short walk to chat with colleagues, and on arriving at the team leader's desk take the time to discuss some other issue besides the client's problem. Actually in most of the situations these encounters presented themselves as opportunities for humour, gossip and small talk. After which the client's problem was handled.

The justification given by the area coordinator for this new procedure in fact, hid one of its practical objectives: efficient control of the bodies which occupy the space of

the call centre. This paramilitary organization of the work process resonates with the 'iron cage' described by Max Weber ([1930] 1978: 181) as well as the processes of disciplining the body described by Michel Foucault (1977). However, unlike some workers who have undergone such discipline, temporary workers who work within this regime now do so without any expectation of the reward of a lifetime's career in the organization. They might be portrayed as what Richard Sennett (2006) described as 'uncaged' workers, that is, workers who have to show dedication and devotion to the 'sovereign client' as if they were an integral and permanent part of the company to which they give not only voice but 'a face'. At the same time they have to adjust to short-term and uncertain plans of work and life. The following sections are typical illustrations of what is involved in the implementation of new procedures in call centre work.

4.4.2. Procedures, authority and dysfunctions

The imposition of standardized and routine procedures is not restricted to the transactions between operators and clients but can also be used to ensure authority over the operators. When operators arrive at the workplace they must log in to a software application which will register their time of arrival. They use the same program to register when they take a break or lunch and to log out from the shift. During fieldwork a new procedure was implemented.

Besides registering on the program operators also had to start signing their names along with their times of log. A team leader questioned the need for another procedure 'if the machine has already captured this information'. The answer given by the TWA coordinator was that it was necessary 'andar sempre em cima deles…' (to be always on top of them). After operators signed the form the team leader had then to confirm that each bit of information on paper was in accord with the information provided by the software application ('the machine'). This task took the team leader around two hours a day.

Having a procedure for every action taken during the course of work extracts both the worker and his labour from every context, every circumstance, every task and every interaction, and can sometimes lead to dysfunctional results in the course of providing a solution to the client's problem. These dysfunctional results are most evident when workers face the omission of any procedure to follow. As an example,

during a call one of the operators was faced with a situation which was not covered by the information on the intranet. He then called the team leader to ask for advice. Not knowing what to do the team leader sent an email to a superior asking for advice. He suggested the operator tell the client that he should call back in an hour. An hour later the client called and asked to speak to the same operator. The operator who answered this second call was talking with another client and tried in vain to transfer it to the first operator. A couple of hours later the client called again and asked again to speak with the first operator. He was informed that the operator had finished his shift for that day. This second operator tried to contact the team leader to find out if there was anything he could do, but the team leader had also finished his shift for the day and had sent an email to the first operator saying what the client should do. The client was then advised to call again the next day. He would be without an internet service until then. The next day the client called again and at his request the call was transferred to the first operator. The first operator had in fact received an email saying that the client was advised to call another line because the problem was not technical. The reason why the client was without internet services was because of a missing payment. The operator could not tell the client how much the debt was because technical operators are not authorized to access the billing databases.

Both the operator and the client can be seen as entities who have been cut off from a process which embeds them in procedures which have to be followed when the answer to a specific situation is not pre-determined. The labyrinthine event described above is a recurrent feature in the job of a call centre operator. It is also a portrait of how the disembodied interaction (as opposed to face-to-face encounters) between operators, management and clients in call centre transactions have specific alienating regulations which contradict the most propagandised slogan, 'we communicate with our customers'. Both the call centre client and the call centre operator are trapped in a shared virtual space; 'they are both helpless when it comes to changing the rules of the encounter' (Huws 2009: 2).

Such alienating regulations are also inscribed in one other recurrent situation. The ultimate threat made by an 'angry client' to an operator is, 'let me speak to your supervisor'. This is usually accompanied by the question, 'what's your name again?', during which the operator usually listens in the background to the sound of a pen scribbling something on a bit of paper. Team leaders usually avoid speaking to clients not only to reaffirm their status as team leaders, but also because the problems referred

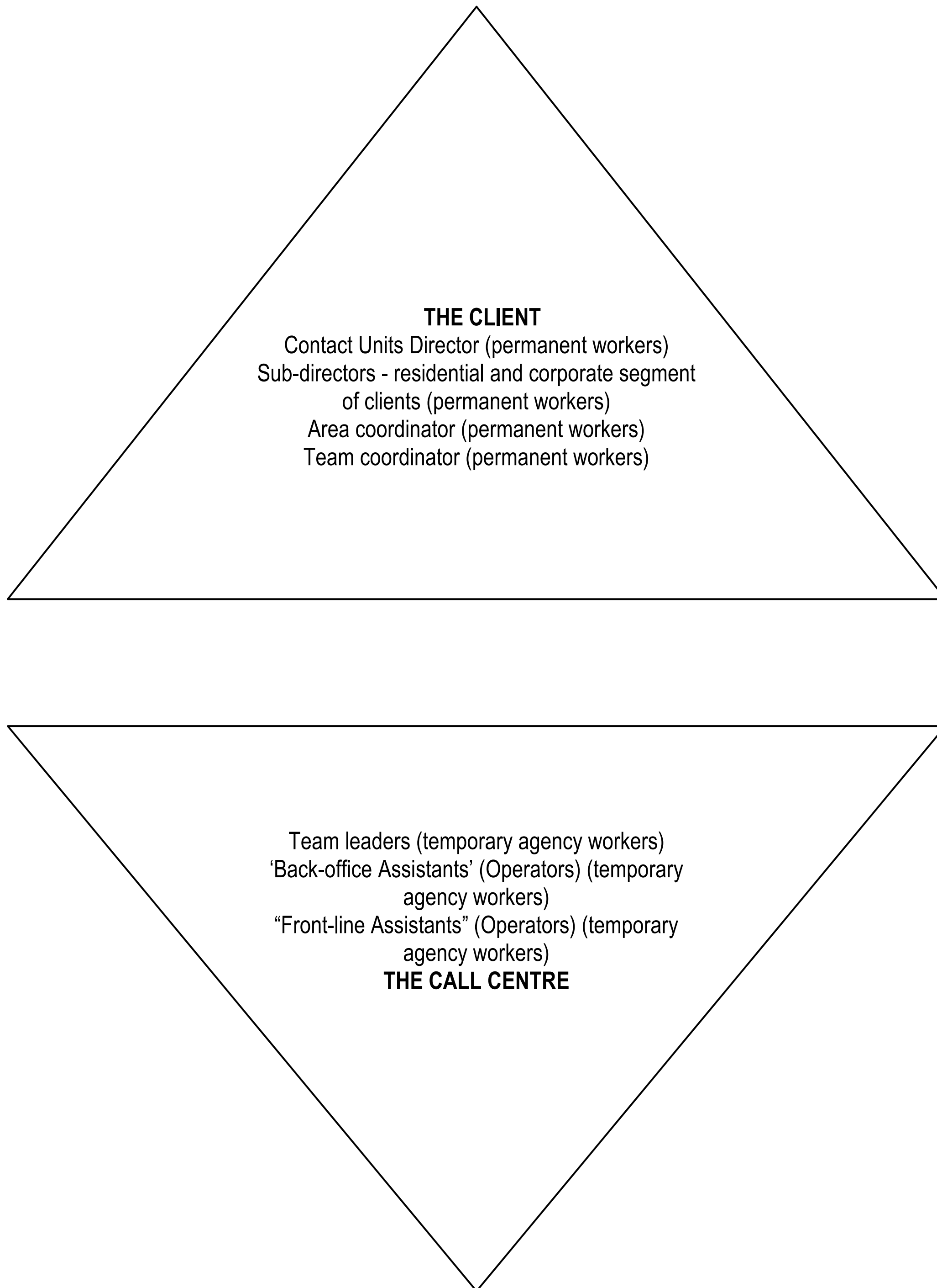
to them entail highly time-consuming calls, especially when the team leader does not have the tools to solve the problem. When a supervisor is requested the operator gets up and goes directly to the team leader to ask for his help. Junior operators are faced with the question from the team leader 'Are you not aware of what is the procedure for this situation?, adding immediately, 'You should take note of the contact details of the client and tell him that the team leader will contact him in due time'.

The pedagogical questions of the team leader were faced with distress by the operator who had to return to his place and improvise some kind of answer. This operator, as well as others, was not yet aware of the 'procedures' which he would get to know during the course of his work.

4.5. Internal politics and hierarchy: 'internal' vs 'external' workers

Earlier I described how the 'customer department' of the user firm is internally modelled on the departmental organization of the client. That is, as mentioned, the 'customer department' is divided into three main areas ('contact units', 'operations units' and 'development units') which are supposed to ensure the 'client's fidelity' to the firm. In other words, the three main areas of the 'customer department' are meant to ensure that the client does not go to another firm for the provision of services. On the shop floor of the call centre, hierarchy and authority are exercised through the specialization of functions of each of the areas of the 'customer department'. Authority is also exercised by the division between 'internal' and 'external' workers, a division into which the tasks of the call centre operator and interpersonal contacts inside the workplace, as well as the transactions established with the client on the phone, are fitted. This categorization is used among workers and management to distinguish the permanent from the temporary workers. This distinction is further anchored on the barrier between 'the client' and 'the call centre'. This emblematic distinction is graphically represented in the image below.

Figure 8: Graphic representation of 'the client' and 'the call centre' at EVA



The dichotomy between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ workers makes a distinction/barrier between two kinds of workers in the same workplace. These two sets of workers have different obligations, different benefits, and different status inside the call centre (which are expressed, for instance, in leisure activities promoted by the user company to which only internal workers are invited or special training sessions to develop skills among the group of permanent workers which are not open to temporary workers). Although management deploys several strategies[36] in order to mystify this difference and secure consent from ‘external’ workers, it reinforces the division at the same time to ensure subordination from the two groups of workers. That is, the distinction between an internal or external worker is not presented as an immutable condition. Rather, the status of internal worker is held up as a position which has to be attained and defended through ‘investment’ in work activities, ‘professionalism’, ‘dedication’ and ‘fidelity’ to the values of the company.

At EVA’s call centre, in conversations carried out with both the team coordinator and the area coordinator, this was most pronounced. They both emphasized the obstacles of having to manage and organize a group of workers to which legally they cannot talk directly. For instance, the area coordinator several times highlighted the fact that legally he cannot directly order operators to perform a certain task, he has to talk first with the team leader and ask him to approach a given operator. The insistence on this point was not because he does not agree with the use of temporary work by the user firm. It was mainly because the user firm transfers the responsibility of dealing with the temporary workforce to him without giving him the formal means he needs to do it. It is informally that both the team coordinator and the area coordinator *manage to manage*, while formally behaving according to the ‘internal’ vs ‘external’ division.

Either in circumstances attached to the process of work or in moments in between (meal hour, breaks, and small talk during cigarettes) both permanent and temporary workers, when in the presence of senior directors, display the expected qualities of ‘professionalism’, ‘dedication’ and ‘fidelity’. When directors or members from other departments visit the call centre, operators are instructed to sit straight in their chairs, to avoid getting up and talking to colleagues and to ‘keep their composure’. In the same vein permanent workers alter the usual informal tone with which they approach operators and team leaders. Thus, ‘impression management’ in the call centre

[36] These strategies are discussed in the next chapter.

implies a ritualization of the self which is not only limited to the regulation and control of the information which is provided through speech or the body language of gestures, movements, tone of voice (Goffman [1959] 1969).

In informal gatherings, the separation between external and internal workers is also visible. Inside the building there are specific places to have meals, coffee, cold drinks or tea. The spaces are intended to be shared among internal and external workers. They are, however, mostly occupied by 'external' workers as most operators and team leaders carry their meals with them to the workplace as their wages do not allow them to have lunch outside the workplace. A part-time operator doing the shift from 9.00am to 3.00pm, has no meal break. The thirty minute break he is entitled to per day is utilized as lunch time. Going from the call centre to the mess hall takes about five minutes. As there are only three microwaves there is usually a queue to heat food, which takes around ten minutes. This leaves the operator ten minutes to eat, given that he will need at least five minutes to return to the call centre. Thus the great majority of internal workers do not use the mess hall, but the restaurants and coffee shops available outside the building.

The second reason for separation between external and internal workers is that people tend to 'know their place', 'where they belong' in public interaction and encounters[37]. Smoking is not permitted inside the building. Workers gather near the entrance doors in front of the building to talk, smoke and take some fresh air during breaks. There aren't usually mixed groups of 'internal' and 'external' workers. They are clearly separated in space and in the conviviality attached to shared space. Operators, 'knowing their place' in the informal structure of conviviality turn this to their advantage. The moments of smoking, when not in the presence of a superior, are moments of criticism, humour and the sharing of experiences in dealing with the 'client' which have proven to be successful in the past.

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[37] Bourdieu refers to the bodily knowledge acquired by social agents through practice and social interaction as leading to the internalization of a 'sense of one's place', an expression which he borrows from Goffman ([1997] 2006: 184). Accordingly, this 'sense of placement' in relation to our present and potential position in a given space is physically expressed for instance in the 'form of emotions (the unease of someone who is out of place, or the ease that comes from being in one's place), and it is expressed in behaviours such as avoidance or unconscious adjustments such as the correction of one's accent (in the presence of a person of higher rank) or, in situations of bilingualism, the choice of the language appropriate to the situation' (Bourdieu [1997] 2006: 184). This 'sense of one's place' can also be read as a form of symbolic violence to the extent that by abiding in it agents are reproducing the *doxa*, that is, unequal conditions of social existence which are perceived as natural, 'taken for granted' - even if in the immediacy of practice social agents might interpret certain moments of resistance as gains (which I evoke ahead).

The distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ workers not only promotes a division among the workforce, it also presupposes another division, that between ‘the client’ and ‘the call centre’ although this might seem to be in contradiction with the idea of the call centre, which is supposed to be geared to the ‘satisfaction of the client’. That is, the most common critique made by operators regarding other departments of the user firm (that is, EVA) is that other areas tend to regard the call centre as the ‘bastard son of the family’. The call centre is perceived as being at the bottom of the hierarchy. This was manifested many times by operators when they said that their ‘work is not understood’, that they do not have direct contact with other departments; or when qualifying their own work as ‘trabalho de macaco’ (monkey work) as opposed to more creative work performed by other departments. In the midst of exchanging emails regarding some process related to a client’s situation it was common to listen to operators and team leaders complaining that other departments tend to be less considerate when writing to ‘external’ workers.

The user firm takes advantage of this internal division because creating a barrier between the client and the company might ultimately be beneficial. I shall illustrate this idea with a representative example. While accompanying operators through their work and listening to calls it was common for clients to ask if there was a store to which they could go for advice rather than waiting online or complaining that it took them five minutes in order to be able to talk to a person after being asked to make several choices by pressing buttons in a menu of numbered options[38]. When operators are not certain where the retail outlets of the company are located, they ask the team leader for advice. When asked why the company (EVA) does not have stores, the typical reply was that the company could save the costs it would have incurred by establishing stores and also reduce costs by externalizing call centre services to temporary work agencies.

This means that operators face a double subordination. They are subordinated to the user firm (which is formally and informally designated as ‘the client’; legally speaking the user firm it is the client of the TWA) and to ‘the client’ which is mystified as a higher entity to which subservience and deference should be demonstrated.

[38] The technical infrastructure which allows this kind of operation is called IVR (*Interactive Voice Response*). The same name is used among workers at the call centre.

4.6. Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to emphasize some of the processes that are involved in 'learning to be a call centre operator' from the moment the individual to apply for the job until going inside the call centre. These processes are anchored in specific procedures which establish specific modes of conduct and behaviour through which subjectivities are organized and disciplined in the early stages of learning how to be a call centre operator. The processes which the trainees (and later workers) go through reveal how emotions, bureaucracy and hierarchy are framed within the call centre organization of work. The organization of hiring and job allocation manipulates the uncertainty and vulnerability attached to employment conditions in order to demand 'investment' and 'dedication' from the workers. This demand for 'professionalism' is in the extreme a paradoxical request which simultaneously asks for automatism and 'showing a smile in your voice' from the worker. Furthermore it demands young and docile workers who can easily follow the procedures and learn how to cope with them within the context of an internal hierarchical division which positions call centre workers at the bottom of the pyramid. The call centre organization of work is pervaded by the bureaucratic myths of standardization, efficiency and regulation which are justified in the 'name of the client'. From the point of view of the operators this fact, together with the internal division between internal and external workers, constitutes a source of violence and double subordination, best described by a worker who designated his work 'trabalho de macaco' (monkey work). The 'fear of answering the first call' which was described at the beginning of this chapter is an expression of a form of learning which is emotionally and bodily violent, and which sums up the previous processes the worker had to go through after recruitment, training and learning 'his place' in the internal hierarchy of the call centre.

In the next chapter I develop the theme of the manufacture of client sovereignty. The client is the central figure in call centre management propaganda and in the organization of work. Through a rhetoric imbued in the 'cult of the client' management continuously reasserts control over the labour process, and over labour itself. As noted, operators have to display normative feelings of friendliness ('having a smile in your voice') and comprehension, while at the same suppressing negative emotions in order to meet qualitative targets of 'customer satisfaction'. My aim is to show how the 'cult of

the client' shapes the nature of the operator-client relationship and how it contributes to the overall specificity of the call centre regime of labour as a *regime of disciplined agency*. This will be done by analysing the place of the client in the management's marketing rhetoric; and how the client is represented and combated on the shop floor among operators, team leaders and co-ordinators.

CHAPTER 5

The ‘transcendent client’

When the customer is king, unequal exchanges are normal, and from the beginning customer and client assume different rights to feeling and display. The ledger is supposedly evened by a wage.
(Hochschild 1983: 86)

In this chapter I elaborate on the idea of ‘the customer as king’, a construction congruent with a statement put to me by a call centre operator: ‘without clients there would be no call centres’. Within the call centre sector the client is the central entity in management discourse and practice and is also the *leitmotif* by which work organization and work relations are defined. As implied in the previous chapter, the economic maintenance and viability of the call centre business demands the imposition of a certain kind of objective relationship between the operator and the subject of the work (the client). Thus, in this chapter I describe and examine how the imposition of this relationship is established but I also point out the concomitant inefficiencies and contradictions taking place on the call centre shop floor. Therefore, my aim is to identify what the role of the client is, as an ideological construct, shaping the form through which labour as service is mobilized within the call centre sector.

By ideological construct I mean understanding the client as a fetish. The notion of commodity fetishism developed by Marx postulated that a commodity is a ‘mysterious thing’ due to the fact that ‘the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers’ ([1867] 1990: 164-5). That is, the products of the social relations among men assume the form of relations between things. Commodity fetishism therefore might be defined as the core ideological distortion which pervades the capitalist mode of production. An ideology in which men and their relations ‘appear upside-down as in a camera obscura’ (Marx and Engels [1932] 1998: 42).

Furthermore, fetishes acquire transcendental powers independent of men which act upon them as if they were ‘natural’ entities whose power results from their intrinsic qualities and not from the attributes gained through social relations. In call centres the

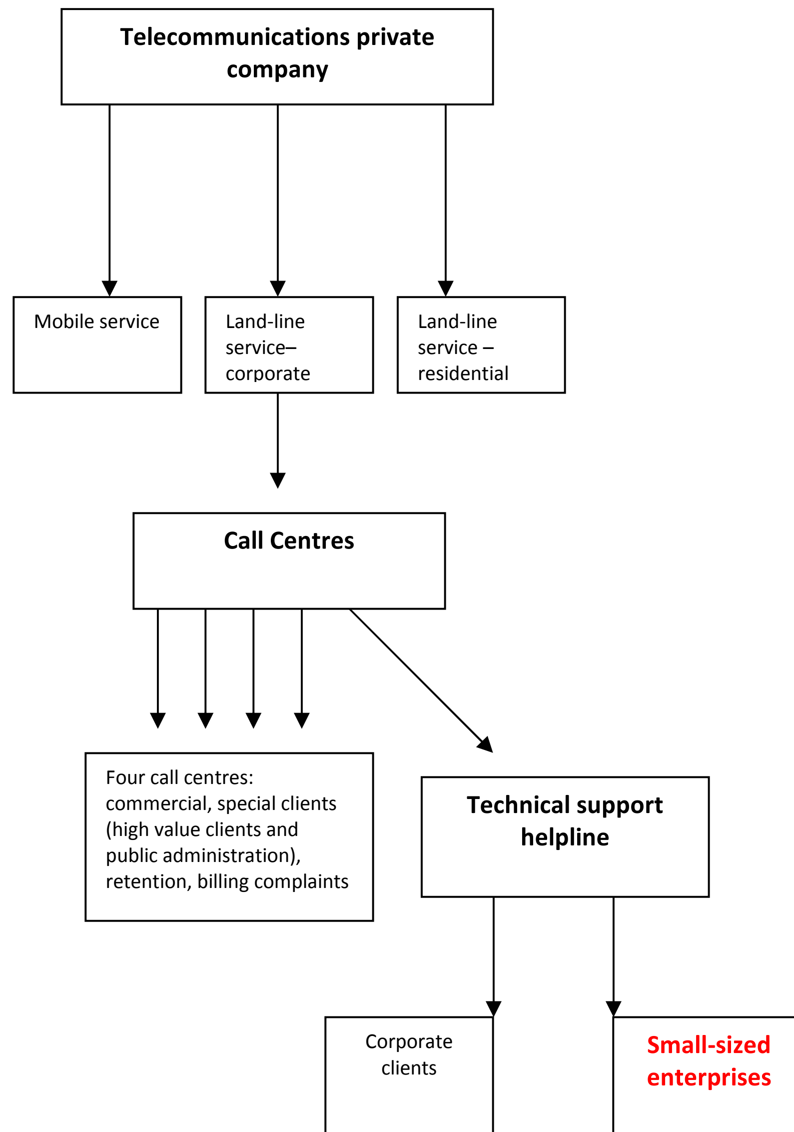
everyday elaboration of the sovereignty of the client involves disciplining workers so that they may meet the requirements of creating ‘customer satisfaction’. To achieve this, workers are carefully indoctrinated as to *what* the client means and represents in the overall structure of the firm to which the call centre is attached; and *how* emotions towards the client should be managed and displayed (as was partly enunciated in the previous chapter and which is further explored in chapter six).

I begin by briefly stressing how the segmentation of clients and workers represents two parallel processes in a call centre. Afterwards I explore how marketing operations and ritualized collective gatherings serve the purpose not only of mystifying these segmentations but also of manufacturing the ‘transcendent client’. In the everyday life of the call centre this entity becomes a cult object, particularly through management insistence on the importance of ‘team work’ and ‘team values’. In the remaining sections of this chapter I concentrate on exploring how the client is represented on the call centre shop floor among operators, team leaders and management. On the shop floor the management’s deification of the ‘transcendent client’ becomes the target of mockery. Operators and team leaders in particular engage in various ways in the ‘stupidification of the client’. Such contestation, however, has one important unintended consequence which is to reinforce an ‘operational consensus’ (Goffman [1959] 1969: 9) vis-à-vis the role of the client in the call centre regime of labour.

5.1. The segmentation of clients and workers

As already mentioned, EVA is a large private telecommunications company which provides internet services by mobile and land-line telephones. It comprises several smaller companies one of which provides land-line services for residential customers, another land-line services for corporate customers. Both of these have several kinds of call centre attached, or ‘contact units’, as they are designated by the company. I followed a group of workers attached to a technical support helpline for the small-sized enterprise segment of clients of the land-line service. Below I provide a diagram with the call centre in which fieldwork was conducted highlighted in red.

Figure 9: Organigram of EVA showing in which call centre fieldwork was conducted



Historically, the segmentation of clients in the Portuguese call centre sector was parallel to the segmentation of workers. The segmentation of clients is not particular to call centre activities; instead, as Kalman Applbaum (2003) demonstrated it is one of the most important strategies of marketing. The three main strategies are segmentation (aimed at identifying and measuring the market), targeting (developing the attractions of a product for one particular segment of consumers through, for instance, advertising) and positioning (mechanisms of product differentiation in order to manage competition among firms) (Ibid.: 32-25). Implementing these strategies – and hereby increasing profit – is dependent on certain assumptions about consumer behaviour. One

assumption is that products (or services) pushed by marketing satisfy real human needs, contrary to the 'economist's methodological fetishism – that the needs of consumers are 'revealed' by their market behaviour' (Ibid.: 37). The segmentation of workers consists of outsourcing to temporary work agencies selected sectors of a company which do not constitute what is considered to be the core activity of the firm. As I examined in chapter two, the central aim of such a strategy is to achieve a greater control of labour costs.

In this section I provide evidence of the parallel process of the segmentation of clients and workers by discussing the representative case of EVA's call centre. The team coordinator – 29 years old at the time of the interview in 2008 – began working for the company in 2002. One year before that he was studying law at a state university where, through a friend, he was seduced by the idea of applying to work for the company on a part-time basis. He told me that initially he only intended to earn some extra money to gain financial independence from his parents. When I asked him if he had thought, when he applied, of making a career at the company he said that although the hiring conditions were very different then he never thought that after six years he would still be working there.

> No, not at all. When I came into this job I started out working part-time. I began by working six hours a day, it never even crossed my mind to think that I would still be here after eight years. Some of the big differences in terms of the call centre model that we have now, in comparison with what we used to have, are to do with a different structure but also with fewer privileges. What I mean is that when I started working here any assistant [operator] started out by signing a contract of one year with EVA not with the TAW. Although most of us did not think of building a career inside the call centre the fact is that we also knew that after two years on contract there were great chances of becoming a permanent employee of the company. Nowadays, with the outsourcing model, it's completely different.

In 2004, after two years working part-time in other departments of the company, he was invited to join the technical support helpline which was then being restructured. Before then the technical support helpline provided assistance for all the business clients. In 2004 the volume of both clients and service provision increased to a size which made it necessary to change the installations and to divide up the clients. When I asked him why he considered the segmentation of clients and helplines necessary he answered:

> It was for a greater availability [of the service], that is, in order to become available to the client for a longer period of hours. For example, a corporate client is the kind of client who has high expectations of the support service which is provided, and is much bigger than a residential client. (…) And in the past there were situations in which we were answering a residential client, helping him to do the internet installation on his computer, and at the same time a corporate client was waiting on line! Imagine that it was a banking institution or a government body with a large number of unconnected sites wanting to get their business online. So, in that time it was decided that it would be better to have a specific team of assistants for each kind of client.

Two technical support helplines were created, one for the small-sized enterprises and another for corporate clients (i.e. public administration). According to company documents, in 2003 the land-line service for the corporate clients had doubled its numbers of customers to more than 200,000. In 2004 when Paulo was invited to be team coordinator of the small-sized enterprises call centre a change of hiring practice was implemented. Management did not want to discuss this change with me, although both operators and team leaders mentioned the subject in conversations. Paulo also emphasized the change in the mode of hiring that was instituted after he started working at the company and continues to the present (2008).

All the call centres attached to the company were outsourced to agencies of temporary work (designated as 'partners' in everyday conversations in the call centre). According to Paulo the argument put forward by the company for the change in hiring policy the fact that the 'demand for calls' could change suddenly from one month to the other and therefore the company could not afford have in permanent employment enough workers to meet the peaks of demand.

> The demand for calls, which is the most pressing issue that we face in our daily work can vary. For instance, we can have an increase of 500 calls during the period of 8.00pm to 9.00pm just because a campaign was launched and people are seeing it on the television. And then there are unpredictable rises of calls. It would be impracticable for the company to hire permanently 100 persons to do call centre service and after two or three months with the service level already stabilized having to keep those 100 persons.

However, Paulo was ambivalent in the terms in which he defended the company's option of outsourcing call centre activities and the impact this had on the quality of the service being provided to the client. That is, while he recognized that the company gained economic advantages by outsourcing, he also emphasized that 'para

termos qualidade não podemos ter rotatividade dos assistentes' (to have quality we cannot have a high turnover of operators).

These changes in the segmentation of clients and of workers in the call centre where I did fieldwork result from decisions to which I had almost no access in terms of documents or formal interviews. That is, from the beginning such topics were established as involving the type of information that management did not want to share with me, although they were always present in some form or other in everyday life at the call centre. Such secrecy was meaningful in itself because management did not want to break the spell of the 'client-oriented' company by admitting that it actually differentiates between more and less important clients (and workers).

Paulo's discourse, because it is embedded in EVA's marketing rhetoric, reveals how both the segmentation of clients and workers is justified due to changes in consumer demand but also to what he referred as the 'expectations of clients'. The 'expectations of clients' are not an intrinsic and natural quality of clients but the result of the application of the three marketing strategies referred to at the beginning of this section. Through them companies are able to achieve higher profits because they are able to manufacture and better manage different kinds of customers (and their expectations) which itself is the main justification for new ways of managing the organization of paid work. As Paulo stressed he justified the outsourcing of call centres to TAWs because companies are not able to hire workers permanently due to their dependence on the demand for calls (by which he means the clients' demands) at any given moment. In the section below I explore how the client is manufactured as a 'transcendent' entity (fetish) to mystify both the reasons for and the forms into which clients and workers are segmented.

5.2. Manufacturing the 'transcendent client'

In the previous chapter I described how the programmes of recruitment and training people for work in a call centre make 'orientation towards the client' the central imperative. This imperative is not specific to the call centre sector and can be found in several other types of business. This flowed logically from, the historical advent of mass consumption in capitalist societies and the ideological constitution of the 'consumer society' depended on not only the manufacture of goods on a large scale but also the 'manufacture of customers' (Ewen [1976] 2001: 187). However, the call centre sector is

differentiated from other types of business in the degree and kind of role played by the 'transcendent client'.

First, there is a difference in degree. By this I mean the extent to which call centre work is much more dependent, for its rentable (profitable) maintenance, on imposing a certain relationship between operator and client, than are, for instance, supermarkets or clothing shops. Second, there is a difference in kind. Contrary to other economic activities which involve an encounter between client and worker, in call centres the client is not physically present at the moment of the transaction. This absence allows firms to have a much greater control not only over the work of the operator (as will be clearer in the next chapter) but also over the client itself. That is, the procedures which shape the transaction between client and firm constrain both operators and clients. For instance, many clients who contact call centres have to endure a long list of automatic choices before being able to talk with a human being. Such automatic answering lines are not a choice and in most circumstances they are installed precisely to postpone any encounter between client and operator or even to prevent its happening at all.

My goal in this section is to bring out how the 'transcendent client' is manufactured within the call centre sector particularly through marketing operations, although I also refer to other kinds of ritualistic gatherings. The ideological prescription of 'orientation towards the client' is further enhanced through rhetorical devices and ritualized meetings to which workers are exposed during the period they are working at the call centre. Marketing operations epitomize the most important elements in the making of the 'transcendent client'. These are the importance of deference (or what might be called the cult of the client), the normative effects of ritual, and the enactment of the belief in the 'group spirit'.

5.2.1. 'We need to take good care of our clients'

The marketing operation which I consider in this section consisted of a day-long special training session which all workers had to attend, and which took place in one of the most important cultural meeting centres in Lisboa. I arrived with the workers from the contact unit I had been following since the beginning of my fieldwork and followed them to the registration desk of for the conference. Each one of us had to state our name, function, and employer's name and collect a badge. At the registration desk we

were further informed that on the upper floor coffee and refreshments were available before the beginning of the opening conference given by the main director of the customer service support. We began to move to the floor where coffee was being served, while trying to identify who was present, who was absent, forming groups, the workers making small talk and joking that today they were getting a free lunch plus a day off work. Despite the jokes, movements were governed by formality and the groups replicated the internal hierarchy of the company itself. This was an event that takes place every year and is typical of the kind of instruction and indoctrination offered by the company to its workers.

The conference began shortly afterwards in a big auditorium. A member of the marketing department explained the activities of the day and that the workers were going to be divided into several groups which would each be allocated to a member of the training team in the afternoon. She then asked for applause for the training team and presented the main director – for whom applause was also asked – who would address the workers on the main reasons why the company was pursuing some changes in their philosophy of relating with clients.

The director began his address by stating that he was going to talk about two different subjects: the overall position of the company in the telecommunications sector, and the main slogan behind this marketing operation. After this he asked for a round of applause for all the workers who 'are in contact every day with our clients and are every day closer to them'. He was making special reference to call centre operators. Given they were the great majority of those present only a dozen persons applauded the 150 call centre operators. Later one operator lamented 'it's a shame that there weren't many persons to applaud us given that we are the face of the company'.

The director then presented the main idea behind this marketing operation which was going to 'change the face of the company'. The main idea was that, 'all the companies know how to recruit clients but not all of them know how to take care of the clients'; and he insisted 'we need to take good care of our clients'. The company was now going to enter a new cycle in which instead of being focused on itself it would redirect its attention 'towards the client'. The main slogan was 'we are different from our clients'. The director further added that all through his life his main inspiration had been the company Toyota which had accomplished, according to his own words, 'changing the direction of attention from the company's internal processes to the client's desires'.

The director had accomplished the communication of the marketing operation's strategy by the systematic repetition of its symbolic word: the client. He presented it as a general philosophy, 'we are different to our clients', a philosophy that would be enacted in a meta-organization replacing the limited business of telecommunications (the company itself). The enactment of such a belief would be carried out by the ones who 'are in contact every day with our clients and are every day closer to them' (the operators).

After several repetitions, some humour and lots of requested applause the presentation ended. After this each of us donned the badge we had been given. The badges came in three different colours with three different slogans: 'innovate', 'improve' and 'to make real', which told us which room to go to. With the badge 'to make real', I made my way to the appropriate room where the trainer had already begun the session with a power point presentation featuring a three-dimensional picture of a butterfly. She asked the audience what they were seeing in the picture. Some said a butterfly, others a painting with the shape of a butterfly. She then asked if everyone was already acquainted with the 'butterfly effect'. Some said they knew the main idea: the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil could set off a tornado in Texas.

The trainer's purpose with this butterfly metaphor was to emphasize that the individual attitude of each worker in the company could have important consequences in the global service being provided to the client. Each worker, she said, should invest attention and detail in his work in order to carry out the changes which were going to take place in the procedures for dealing with clients' complaints. There were going to be two main differences: 1) the way the complaint was going to be categorized in the program devoted to this purpose; and 2) the way the information was going to be transmitted to the client concerning the 'average time of resolution' of each problem.

Before now, operators would only categorize this sort of call under the heading 'complaint' in situations where the client was explicitly complaining about a certain service, operation or product (the main three motives for making a call are: information, request or complaint). The new procedure ruled that every call in which the client was implicitly as well as explicitly complaining the call should be classed as a complaint. The following example was given: 'If a client calls the line saying that he was not able to make calls during the morning and he asks if there is a general problem with the lines, how do you categorize this call?'. Everyone answered that the call should be categorized as 'information' because the client was not 'nervous' or 'screaming'. From

now on these calls should be registered as complaints. Those needing follow-up would be directed to another department.

There were also going to be changes in the information that call centre operators were supposed to give clients on the 'average time resolution' for the problem reported. In the new model, the complaints program would give the 'average time resolution' which they should report to the client. The maximum 'average time resolution' for any problem would be stipulated as four days. According to a representative of one of the TAWs subcontracted by EVA: 'This change is important because it allows the operator to diagnose the client's complaints on the basis of the causes and not the effects. The company, because it has a strategy of improving the quality of the service rendered to the client, is now focused on analysing the causes which lead so many clients to complain of their services'.

After the morning session, lunch was served to the participants. Groups were divided according to the 'contact unit' to which they belong and to their ranking in the internal hierarchy of the company. Temporary workers and permanent workers were however not visibly separated given the extensive profusion of symbols and slogans which appealed to the idea of 'collective endeavour'. Inside the rooms, in the outside spaces where smoking was allowed, on the badges that we all had to wear the slogan that resonated was 'new beginning': 'we are certain that with your individual contribution to this Mission, in the Team we are truly going to make a difference in customer service'.

Among the most quoted studies on the anthropology of ritualized behaviour (Gennep 1977; Turner 1995) the work of Maurice Bloch (1989; 1992) has particular significance due to his emphasis on analysing the conservative and mystifying aspects pertaining to ritualized action. That is, the marketing operation described is partly replicated in other workers' gatherings organized by the company. For instance, at Christmas there is usually a dinner organized for workers (both permanent and temporary) in which the main symbols used (such as badges, posters with slogans alluding to 'collective endeavour' or games and group activities which stress the importance of the 'group spirit') are the same, and the same rhetorical acclaim for the sovereignty of the client is enacted. These gatherings are therefore to a great extent ritualized and are aimed at reinforcing an ideology in which the client is the main 'transcendent entity'. Maurice Bloch (1989) said that 'symbols cannot be understand without taking into account the communication medium of ritual in which they are

embedded' (19). One of the characteristics usually pointed out as pertaining to rituals is the formalization of language. According to Bloch (1989), the reason why such formalization becomes a form of power or social control is related to what is involved in ritualized speech.

The first aspect he notes is that the formalization of language leads to its impoverishment. That is, 'a language where many of the options at all levels of language are abandoned so that choice of form, of style, of words and of syntax is less than in ordinary language' (Bloch 1989: 25). The second aspect he mentions is that formalized language not only limits the individual speaker but also others people's speech because in such circumstances there are socially defined forms of what is considered to be an appropriate response, and therefore the possibility of contradiction lessens. Thus, concludes Bloch, 'the effect of formalization and the impossibility of linguistic creativity means that ritual is a kind of tunnel into one plunges, and where, since there is no possibility of turning either to right or to left, the only thing to do is to follow' (Ibid.: 42). In the next section I further explore how the 'transcendent client' affects both processes of work but also relations among fellow workers and management.

5.3. The cult of the client

In the previous section I stressed the importance of ritualized behaviours in marketing operations and formal gatherings promoted by the company as a form of providing training for the workers but most importantly as a form of producing the desirable outcome, that is, the 'transcendent client'. In this section I concentrate on describing and analysing how the belief in the 'transcendent client' is enacted on the call centre shop floor.

Every telecommunications company has a marketing department, which together with the human resources department, elaborates, develops and implements a specific *strategy* of managing the client through a relationship. In the modern terminology this is called 'customer relationship management'. It entails establishing procedures for the interaction between the company and the client, monitoring the operations and evaluating the results. In this section I discuss how call centres (which are designated as part of the 'customer service and support department') are required to use a specific set

of rhetorical devices and rituals in order to enact the philosophy of the 'sovereign client'.

When I began my fieldwork at EVA's call centre, operators and team leaders frequently referred to the marketing department as the department primarily responsible for the elaboration of the procedures workers had to follow. This same department was responsible for a set of prescriptions which constituted the general orientation of the company towards the clients. This set of prescriptions was posted on the intranet to remind workers of the company's aims. In the table below the company's description of each of these items is given.

Vision: 'To become the telecommunications operator with the highest rate of recommendation from the clients' **Mission**: 'To represent each client and be effective in the resolution of client's questions' **Values**: 'Commitment: I accomplish my deadlines/ I solve all questions until its end' 'Attention: I listen/ I interpret/ I adapt my action to the client' 'Respect: I treat the client with dignity, respect and politeness/ I transform each client into my most important client' 'Empathy: I build a relation of trust with the client'

The full exposition of the company's aims was expressed in the following paragraph:

> Each contact with one of our clients is unique, and one in which the quality of our customer service and our capacity to answer is put to the test. It is in these moments that we should build a relation of trust with our clients. By investing in learning and continuous improvement, our teams which take care of the Client are our guide in the orientation of EVA towards the Client, transforming it into a solid and unbeatable advantage.

Adherence to and compliance with this mission is measured by indicators, which I discuss more extensively in the next chapter, such as the rate of good service[39]. This list of prescriptions governing relations with the client not only shapes the daily work of operators, but it also locates 'the client' at the epicentre of a rhetoric which characterizes itself as a form of 'metaphysic of customer service' which is intended to

[39] Calculated as the total number of calls answered in the first 30 seconds plus the total number of abandoned calls in the first 20 seconds, divided by the total number of calls received.

transcend each individual worker. That is, the 'values' which are described in the box should be followed individually, but they are only ratified through collective enterprise. The mystification necessary to develop this belief in the mission is the emphasis on the fact that this can only be achieved collectively, that is, each one has to adhere to the 'group spirit', has to 'work for the team'. Call centre operators are commonly divided into teams of around eight or ten persons each with a team leader. The expressions 'working for the team' and 'team values' are ritualized because they allow organizations to substitute loyalty to the organization for loyalty and fidelity to the 'team'. This transfer of the locus of fidelity has important consequences in the relationships between fellow workers and management as illustrated in the next section.

5.3.1. Working for the team, or teams without team-working

'Working for the team' comes up like a slogan in everyday conversations at the call centre, in talks undertaken during breaks and meal-times, as well as email exchanges between workers and management about tasks and work conduct. Management repeatedly uses the expression 'working for the team' and 'team values' to create the illusion that through the team a highly individualized labour process becomes collectivized. By securing the operators' compliance in the 'team' management mystifies the objective contractual division between the workforce, i.e. between temporary and permanent workers. When operators work for the 'sake of the team', they are working as if they were part of a system of mutual interdependent professional categories which work for the same common goal. From the point of view of the user firm investing in training sessions where the 'team values' are glorified, the rhetoric of team spirit is a means of achieving control over the labour process not by 'deskilling' workers, but by ensuring commitment to the team. By stimulating the importance of team work, management is able to maintain a high degree of control over the labour process (by normalizing and disciplining work behaviours), while at the same time extending control over interpersonal relationships operating at the level of many call centre sector transactions.

This was most pronounced in an episode involving an operator who had recently started working at the call centre. Pedro had no previous working experience in a call centre and was beginning a university degree. When he started work as an operator he was informed at a 'behaviour training session' that operators are obliged to ask

permission from team leaders every time they want to leave their work position to go to the toilet, have a break or go out for lunch. Pedro found this rule too intrusive and protested to the team coordinator that this kind of obligation should be stipulated in his employment contract. He insisted that he would only follow this rule if he was handed a written document from the temporary work agency stipulating these rules. The day after this incident Pedro was no longer working at the call centre. An operator remarked: 'Pedro was not following the rules of the team'. All operators, team leaders and management insisted such strict control was exercised over the operators 'for the sake of the team', and in order for the team to improve their 'service level'[40] in terms, for instance, of number of calls answered per day. Any behaviour which put at risk the 'team', like the demand made by Pedro, is criticized by fellow workers and by management as not abiding with the team's values.

What this episode demonstrates is the extent to which workers internalize the rhetoric of 'working for team' and how management uses the team as a form of exerting control over relations among workers and their behaviour. The management team is an instrument for the daily execution of the main aim of the company as stated on the intranet: 'Our teams which take care of the Client are our guide in the orientation of EVA towards the Client'. In the following sections I elaborate on the forms through which the idea of the 'transcendent client' is challenged by call centre operators – and the conservative unintended consequences of such contestation.

5.4. Challenging the client, internalizing discipline

The training session described earlier, in which I addressed how the client is manufactured as a transcendent entity to be served and cared for, is partly questioned on the call centre shop floor, by both operators and management. Rituals of subversion have been depicted by anthropologists studying the transition from the peasant to the capitalist mode of production as a form of contesting and resisting the de-humanizing features of industrial production (Taussig 1980; Ong 1987). Within the call centre sector contestation takes the form of a ritualized 'stupidification of the client' – whose role is

[40] The average service level is calculated according to the following formula: the total number of calls answered divided by the sum of 1) total number of calls answered plus 2) the total number of calls missed after 20 seconds waiting on queue.

considered to be the main source of exploitation among operators. This mockery is commonly expressed in humour and parallel conversation between calls.

In everyday life at call centres the most frequent theme of conversation is the client. Although workers have other topics of conversation and preoccupations which they share among themselves, they usually end-up being subsumed under conversations about clients, situations prompted by clients, comments made by clients, funny episodes which happened with clients, or simply a description of one of the many calls answered during a work shift. Call centre operators do not transform the labour process into a game as reported by Michael Burawoy (1979) but nevertheless the fact that management tacitly condones these conversations and jokes taking place inside the workspace is an aspect of the same process: the production of consent through compliance instead of coercion, as analysed by Harry Braverman (Mollona 2009b: xvii).

The essence of the capitalist labour process consists of simultaneously 'obscuring and securing the surplus value' (Burawoy 1979: 30). In the case of call centre labour it is important for management to obscure the causes of the damaging effects brought about by the emotionally charged form of labour which is demanded from workers. At the same time it must secure their compliance. In other words, from the point of view of workers engaging in rituals through which the client is 'stupidified' means being able to negate and contradict that which is considered to be the main source of exploitation (i.e. the client). From the point of view of management, allowing the freedom for these rituals to take place means securing control not only over the rules of activity and interpersonal relationships, but also control over the conditions where these activities take place. That is, the several forms through which the client is challenged and derided are also the means through which call centre operators internalize self-discipline in their performance towards the client.

In the next section I explore some of the most pronounced aspects which operators refer when talking about clients. Their views are particularly important because they reveal how operators collectively share a set of opinions which both affirms and denies the emotional bearing they have to display to the clients. They also reveal the nature of power-relations between operator and client. With the following descriptions I do not wish to portray operators either as puppets in a structure which encompasses them (reification) or as individuals capable of regaining control over the labour process through discursive devices (voluntarism). 'Beyond accommodation and

resistance' (Calagione, Francis and Nugent 1992) what I aim to show is that the ideological prescription of the client's sovereignty is both a constraint and an opportunity in the performative aspects of the job of call centre operator. By performative aspects I mean how operators justify certain attitudes and discourses from the client, how they collectively define it as real, how they justify their effects, and how they establish the best form to cope with it in the immediacy of working.

5.4.1. Operators talk about the clients

The functions of the operators who provide technical support for the corporate clients shape the transactions between client and operator as well as the terms in which operators talk about clients. The contact unit which I followed during fieldwork had specific functions in terms of client support. A list of these functions is given below.

Figure 10: Main duties of operators at EVA's call centre

- To screen for difficulties in voice services, Broadband, Voip, fax, eServices, domains and web hosting
- To verify the services' activation status provided by the company (voice, broadband and Voip)
- To provide help in the configuration of broadband equipment
- To provide assistance to outsource partners who are selling products to clients
- To provide the shipping of broadband equipment
- To create information and complaints tickets on the appropriate software application
- To provide the shipping of broadband activation documents
- To ensure commercial support to clients during the period from 00.00am to 08.00pm

As previously mentioned, a technical support helpline has a very high level of complaints. Ninety 90 per cent of calls from clients are to report a problem with one of the services supplied by the company. The high number of 'angry clients' is one of the reasons why operators providing technical support are exposed to a degree of emotional distress which is considerably less in commercial helplines. Furthermore, the activities related to remote configurations of services are felt as particularly difficult and demanding when done by phone. They require from the operator the act of 'imagining what is happening on the other end of the line' while at the same time articulating the necessary operations in the available software applications.

Operators often told me in conversations and interviews that they felt proud when able to help a client solve a problem. More than once I observed the investment made by operators in trying to solve a problem, even when they were deliberately putting their quantitative evaluation at risk (which can easily happen if the operator has a call which lasts for more than forty minutes). Nevertheless, even in situations which 'work against them' operators try to regain a sense of recognition (by 'doing a good job') which can be lost in the midst of abuse, insults and harshness. Pierre Bourdieu ([1997] 2006) rightly observed that the individual investment each individual puts into his work in order to retrieve from it some kind of reward irreducible to the wage is both a part of and a precondition for the 'misrecognition of the objective truth of labour as exploitation' (202).

Operators often said the insults and abuse were the hardest aspect of the job and the rudeness of clients strongly colours the language operators use to describe, interpret, and defy the clients. A typical description was: 'Clients are rude, offensive and arrogant; they do not show any kind of recognition for the work of a call centre operator'. Call centre operators have to manage daily insults from the clients according to the prescriptions for emotional performance which they are obliged to follow. Hence, they always refer to this central experience as a 'lack of recognition' of their work.

One operator commented on her feelings of being diminished by clients, and how she considers that this is also similar to face-to-face service work:

> They (the clients) treat me as if I was someone who does not know how to do anything. There was one client who told me 'you little young women, you are working there because you don't know how to do anything else'. (…) I met persons here in the call centre that started crying because people insulted them by the phone.

Another operator said how call centre operators are 'treated as a group of ignorant children':

> I think that Salazar is not here anymore, Salazar is dead, and I think its time to begin treating persons like persons. Do not treat call centre operators as objects; do not treat them as kids that are working just for the sake of some extra money, or to pay the college. Working in a call centre should be a profession; there are countries where that happen. (…) Because the idea that people have of call centres is that we are all a bunch of kids, students mostly, that only want some pin-money to buy a pair of jeans or to go to the club! So many times, clients told me things like 'I know you are all a bunch of kids', or 'I know you are all kids, you don't

even belong to the company'. One client once told me 'you are a group of ignorant kids…'. So many times I heard that, so many times…

And another operator said that the clients' lack of respect led to the direct insults made to the operators:

> They don't respect us, if they did I would not have had to hear what I have heard so far. People calling me names… I am not the one who cancels their services, it's not my fault. This morning one of the first clients that I answered started screaming saying that we had cancelled his broadband service, and all the time I was trying to explain to him that the service was not cancelled. The reason why he had no internet service was that the configuration had not been done yet. In order not to be rude to the client I had to hang up on the call. Then I had to say some words out loud to relax a bit…

Another operator, however, made the distinction between clients who are angry because they are entitled to be and clients who attack the worker personally.

> I remember a client, not very long ago, a very nice client for whom I did everything I could to solve her problem in the shortest period of time possible. After less than three hours I was able to solve the problem and I called her back to tell her. And then she started complaining that it had taken me a very long time to solve the problem, and she kept on complaining and saying that she would like to make a formal complaint against me. Every operator in these circumstances starts to think 'I did all that I could to help the client and this is what I get in return?'. Clients don't understand the amount of operations that we have to do in order to be able to solve the problem; they don't have the slightest idea of what is behind the line. They don't have any idea. When I call other companies, because I am also a client, I have a different sensibility when talking to the operator because I know they are not the ones to blame for the company's problems. I make a complaint if I have to, but I am not going to start screaming at the person who is listening to me because it is not her fault. There is no need to be rude or offensive. (..) But operators also have different ways of dealing with complaints. In my case, for instance, if a client begins to be offensive I warn once, twice and the third time they do it I end the call. Then you have clients who speak drivel (*asneiras*), they are impolite, but they are not attacking me, they are attacking the company, and in the end of the call they even say 'I am sorry Mr. X I know it's not your fault but you are the only one I can talk to…'. In that kind of situation we use patience and sometimes we know that clients have reasons to be upset. But when a client comes on the line screaming at me and attacking me personally, which has happened several times, then I end the call, and don't give them a chance.

What the testimony of this operator reveals is the extent to which the 'social engineering of emotions' is internalized by workers. In this case the worker draws a sharp distinction between what is expected from his functions as a call centre operator –

which is why he recognises that sometimes the 'client is right'; and which is also why clients sometimes apologise at the end of a call recognising that it is not the operator's fault – and what he considers to be personal attacks. It might be argued that this distinction is a consequence of the efforts of every individual, client or worker, to correct the 'social engineering of feeling' and to protect themselves against the force of commerce by preserving a 'real self' inaccessible to commodification (Hochschild 1983: 34). Nevertheless, within the call centre regime of labour this border is very difficult to establish, which is why senior operators recommend new recruits to 'get rid of emotions' (a theme addressed in the previous chapter). 'Getting rid of emotions' can be, in some circumstances, a form of protection. But in most cases it is an informal strategy tied to the prescription 'the client is always right'. This prescription constrains the operators into internalizing a self-discipline which demands passivity in the face of rudeness, insults and symbolic humiliation. It is reinforced by the tight system of vigilance to which the work process is submitted, and which is further analyzed in the next chapter.

The second most frequent comment on clients was that 'they don't understand how the work is done inside the call centre'. This lack of understanding permits the arrogance and disrespect from clients. It is also the main form through which operators discipline themselves according to the model of 'human IVR' (interactive voice response technology). One operator described clients' lack of comprehension:

> There were clients who turned to me and said 'look, I want you to give me the username and passwords by phone', to which I replied 'I am very sorry sir but I am not authorized to give this information by phone', and the client said 'look I am the one who is paying your wage, so you have to do what I am telling you to do.'. [*silence*] And then I usually reply 'I am sorry to say this but you are not the one who is paying my wage. I have to abide by certain procedures, and if I don't follow them I am putting my job in danger'. They are very arrogant with us… (…) And there are lots of clients like this one. [*I ask him why clients are so disrespectful to operators*] What happens is that it is not the operator's fault. For instance, that client I told you about, he had the broadband service already active for one week but he hadn't yet received the documentation with the username and passwords. We had already asked for this documentation to be sent to the client. And there was nothing else we could do. And the client was very upset. (…) No, clients don't respect what we do, and then they think that the operator is not worried about what is happening to them. And partly this is true. In the beginning I used to worry a lot about clients' problems, about what they were feeling, but now… I still worry but not as I used to.

Another operator emphasized the lack of autonomy of call centre operators:

> I don't think clients understand how a call centre works. OK, they understand that there is someone on the other end of the line who is registering what they say, but they don't know how this works. We do answer the calls but we are not solving the problems by ourselves. We are not the ones who will go to check the status of the landline cable. We answer the call, we speak to the client, we try to solve the problem on line, but if we are not able solve it we have to create a 'ticket' for the complaint and send it to another department. That other department will do remote tests. If that does not work someone else will have to go to check the client's installation to see what is happening. But I don't think clients understand this… The majority of the clients think that they call us and everything is solved.

And another operator summed up his opinion with the image previously mentioned of the human IVR:

> Clients don't understand how work is done inside the call centre. They don't have any idea. The majority of the clients think that we write something on a piece of paper and then we run to the central installations to connect whatever is missing, and them run back to the call centre to talk with them! They think that by being a technical support helpline we behave like the technicians who go to the places and fix something, but we don't. We only register information… we are a kind of human IVR, let's put it like that…

From the point of view of operators, by not understanding how 'work is done inside the call centre' clients also don't understand the lack of autonomy or means which operators have to deal with in the course of work. Although operators are implicitly criticizing the terms on which work is organized they also point to forms of self-discipline which entail deskilling and diminishment. That is, the management of the clients' miscomprehensions - some of which result in disrespectful commentaries – is done by not worrying too much ('In the beginning I used to worry a lot about client's problems, about what they were feeling, but now… I still worry but not as I used to'). Ultimately their anxious management is transmuted into the internalized model of the human IVR.

However, this disciplinary device by which workers try to protect themselves carries with it a dilemma create by the kind of labour which management seeks to extract from workers. That is, operators are instructed 'to care for the client' or 'to imagine what is happening on the other end of the line'. This implies the duty to act as

one operator does: 'I try to feel what the client is feeling'. This was vividly described by someone explaining to me why clients did not understand how a call centre functions.

> No, I don't think clients understand what we do, they don't have any idea, they don't know. I also did not know and I was always inside the world of technology. Right now when I call a call centre I know perfectly well how I will talk to that person. I even help her if I can. Because I know, contrary to what many people think, that it is a tough job… People think that we are seated in front of our screens and that's it. But it is not like that. In face-to-face work we have someone in front of us, we can try to explain with our face, with our gestures, the way we talk, we can try to calm down the client like that. Persons feel like they are being taken care of. In a telephone service clients do not feel that kind of support and then they get upset. And then we have to show with our voice that we are taking care of his problem, we have to 'spoil him', we have to make him feel that we are supporting him, do you understand? We have to assure him that we are doing all we can to solve the situation. And that is sometimes not as easy as it looks, because we may not be in the mood to do that given what the client has said to us. So we have to neutralize all the bad things that we have heard from the client and try to… And sometimes that annoys me very much because I put myself into the client's skin, and I try to think what the client's options are. I try to feel what the client is feeling and that is not easy. Of course that depends on the personality of each of us… (…) In my case I am always very stressed because I tend to put myself into the client's skin. And I absorb a bit of his stress too…

The cause of the distress expressed by this operator is the client, an opinion which is widely shared among operators. From this follows the most cynical appreciation of clients: 'Clients are stupid'. Call centre operators are obliged to put on a show of deference towards the clients, during which they are not entitled to 'the ordinary luxury of negative reciprocity' (Scott 1990: 23); if they did respond negatively they would risk losing their job. The 'hidden transcript' shared among operators which ritually portraits the client as stupid, incapable and even silly suspends temporarily the disciplined conduct demanded by management in order to provide 'customer satisfaction'. This was illustrated by one operator as he was explaining me why clients do not even try to read the instruction manual before calling the call centre:

> Sometimes we answer these kind of clients in their late forties, they are not used to certain kind of services, they don't have any culture about these kind of services, and then I think they think 'OK, so this is not working and it should be working', and they don't know why, and they don't care to know why, so they call us! User's manual, what is that??!!! The router, that little box over there, what is it??!!!! Of course, we are a technical support helpline so we are going to ask about that 'little box'. And they say 'I don't have the internet', and I ask 'OK, do you have your modem connected?', and they answer 'modem, what is that', and

> then we say 'look, is there a cable coming out of your computer, just follow the cable…'. In these situations we have to be a bit… We have to try to explain to the client and if he understands maybe he will not call another time asking for the same thing. But of course in these cases the first contact will not be eight minutes; it will have to be at least thirty minutes… (…) Of course that will depend on our mood, on our mood for instructing clients!

As indicated by this operator, viewing clients as incapable of understanding and managing modern computerized functions also pushes the worker into the deployment of creative techniques of pedagogy, which is why ultimately management allows for the continuous 'stupidification of the client'. Also, this ritualistic device assures a space for criticism at the same time as it contributes to a form of 'operational consensus' (Goffman [1959] 1969: 9) regarding the modes in which the triangular relationship between workers, management and clients is expressed in the 'public transcript'. Below I further explore three main strategies through which the 'stupidification of the client' is informally propagated and reproduced within the workplace.

5.5. The 'stupidification of the client'

On the call centre shop floor this cynical view vis-à-vis the client is disseminated, and maintained through three main techniques – gossip, humour and rumour. Although these techniques are aimed at reproducing the stereotype of the 'stupid client' - 'the one who cannot find the start menu on his computer' - they might also be used against other targets. These include the permanent staff of the user company, especially directors in the high ranks of the hierarchy; or workers from other technical departments inside the firm or managerial activities – such as the training session described at the beginning of this chapter. In the next sub-sections I provide a set of typical illustrations for each practice, gossip, humour, rumour.

5.5.1. Gossip

The one-day training session which I described earlier was also the stage for gossip and criticism among call centre operators. This was most pronounced during the lunch break. As I pointed out people were distributed round several tables according to their professional ranking inside the firm. Among operators the majority of the comments concerned the food that was being served, how it was being served and the

amount that was being served. Operators gossiped extensively about the fact that management was usually ‘very stingy’ when it came to providing a good meal for their workers. They also criticized some other temporary workers (especially the trainers) who were seated next to management saying that they were ‘practising flattery’ in order to move up inside the company. This illustrates how gossip is a powerful resource not only as a form of disguised criticism, but also as a way of asserting moral boundaries concerning the acceptable form of behaviour within a given group, without resorting to direct confrontation (Gluckman 1963).

Every monthly team meeting I attended was shaped by the uses of gossip. The most recurrent humorous observations were made regarding working and employment conditions. Team leaders would joke about their low wages by stating (ironically) that they had finally reached the top of their careers and were earning 700 euros per month. However, the most frequent subject of gossip among call centre operators concerned the launching of new services or products of the user firm. Every week call centre operators belonging to all contact units had to attend a training session. Usually the training session was devoted to the presentation of new products and services, something which did not usually interest the technical call centre operators as it is not their job to inform clients about services and products. This made the weekly training session from their point of view a ‘waste of time’. Nevertheless, given that they were obliged to be present (the user firm is legally obliged to provide a specific number of training hours per month to its ‘collaborators’) they had to abide by this ritual. Every week during fieldwork call centre operators repeated, ‘the training was useless’. Every week they pointed out that the information on new products and services was useless because it was being delivered too late. The great majority of the operators had already got to know about new products from the clients themselves.

Each week there is widespread gossip about this aspect of the training session. Each week operators speculate on the same topic with some superficial variants, and they all lead to the same conclusion: management is incompetent, inefficient and poorly organized. Gossip as a form of criticism is extensively used among call centre operators and team leaders. This usually takes place during lunch or cigarette breaks or through emails. Events or gatherings organized by the TAW or the user firm are later talked about until the point of exhaustion. Such gossip achieves the same goal: creating a temporary alliance among the temporary workers in opposition to management. What the three modes – gossip, joking and rumour - have in common is that they

simultaneously express a moral evaluation of work conditions, are a form of propagating and controlling information and contribute to the ‘operational consensus’.

5.5.2. Humour and joking

Humour is primarily used about the clients, as I mentioned. There are several ways of making the client the leitmotif of humour on the call centre shop floor. In the gaps between calls, operators chat with each other especially when the team or the area coordinators are not present. The mute button allows for a running commentary such as ‘why can’t he understand (the client) ???’, or ‘can you believe that this guy asked me if I can send him the drives for software x by fax???!!!!’, or ‘just press the button you big animal!’. One consequence of the extensive use of the mute button was that management began replacing the telephones with ones without the mute button.

In emails, lunch or cigarette breaks and gatherings organized by the workers outside the workplace the client is systematically targeted. Emails circulate among operators containing jokes, cartoons and videos downloaded from the web, which portray the client as stupid and ignorant. At a given moment during fieldwork a plan circulated through email concerning the possibility of compiling the best (meaning most humorous) conversations with clients. Below are some of the conversations which circulated among operators, and which can still be found on the web.

> I work in a call centre where we offer our customers the option of receiving assistance through a chat program that is accessed from our website. A few weeks ago, one of our phone representatives received a call from a customer who informed us that our ‘chat’ was not working properly. Concerned that we might be having technical difficulties with this important service, the representative asked several questions regarding the problem, intending to notify the proper personnel to get the bug fixed. However, the representative realized the root of the problem when the customer described her attempts to chat from her new computer: ‘I keep talking to it as loud as I can,’ the frustrated customer said. ‘It's just not doing anything!’ At this point, the representative broke the news to the customer that in order to ‘chat’ online, one does normally have to type!

I am a supervisor for a directory assistance call centre and we have a customer that firmly believes that New England is a state. Here is how these calls would go:
Operator: What city and state please?
Customer: Uhhhh. . . Lincoln, New England.
Operator: I'm sorry, did you say New England was the state?
Customer: Yes, that is what I said.
Operator: Sir, I apologize but New England isn't a state.
Customer: Yes it is, I am reading it off a paper that says 'Lincoln, NE'.
Operator: I am sorry sir, but NE is Nebraska . . .could it be Lincoln, Nebraska?
Customer: Oh yeah, that's what I meant.

One of the jokes repeated to me more than once, and which no one knows who told it in the first place, concerned a client who called to ask assistance on the configuration of internet services. At one point the operator asked the client to close any dialog boxes that were open. In Portuguese the word used for dialog boxes is 'janelas', which means windows. According to the story, the operator then heard the noise of windows being closed. After short while the client returned to the line and asked, 'OK, I have closed all the windows (janelas) in the house, what shall I do now?'. Of course the fact that no-one could assure me that this situation had indeed occurred, did not matter. The truth or falsity of this story was not the point. What was was to repeat the story.

Several authors in management studies have stressed the roles that humour and joking play in the exercise of resistance or criticism from workers within call centres. From my point of view, however, such evaluations are so embedded in a positive evaluation of humour that they have no recognition of the limits of joking in terms of changing the social structure. According to Mary Douglas (1968):

> Abomination is an act or event which contradicts the basic categories of experience and in doing so threatens both the order of reason and the order of society. A joke does nothing of the sort. It represents a temporary suspension of the social structure; or rather it makes a little disturbance in which the particular structuring of society becomes less relevant than another. But the strength of its attack is entirely restricted by the consensus on which it depends for recognition (372)

Furthermore, it should also be noted that forms of humour which appear rebellious may also have consequences which present themselves as conservative, conformist and even disciplinary. Such is portrayed by Michael Billig (2005):

> When the professionals tell the apprentice to fetch the sandwiches, they seemingly flaunt the authority of the manager. But there is no actual rebellion in these jokes. The old professionals may take pleasure in the momentary infraction of the codes, as if they are momentarily escaping like schoolboys from the demands of serious living. But they are not abandoning such codes. Moreover, the manager recognizes what is happening and smiles knowingly. By teaching the apprentice a lesson that will not be forgotten easily, the professionals are strengthening the codes that maintain the structure of differential power. Thus, the momentary release takes meaning from the enduring power of constraint. The joke simultaneously teaches the conventions and takes innocuous revenge against them. There is rebellion against the codes in the disciplining of the apprentice (211)

Scholars who have emphasized the rebelliousness contained in the ritual joking which pervades call centre work fail to distinguish between the rebellious nature of humour and the social effects of the humour. Within closed workplaces – such as call centres – where workers spent many hours in the same physical position subject to a high degree of emotional distress, due to the particular nature of work, humour and joking are to a certain extent permitted by management. One of the reasons for such permission is that the social effects of such humour do not jeopardize what is demanded from workers; instead they are intended to be a source of relief and transference. It is preferable that the worker tells his colleague clients are stupid rather then saying this to clients themselves. Therefore, humour and ritual joking allow for the daily maintenance of the conditions under which work is carried out – operational consensus - and in which the client remains a 'transcendent entity' to be served and cared for.

5.5.3. Rumours

One common rumour concerning call centre work consists of stories about clients who were able to 'penetrate' inside call centres. There is an immense collection of stories, and again no one knows exactly whether or not they are true, and no one knows exactly who told the story. One afternoon while I was smoking a cigarette with the group of operators in front of the building another operator approached us and asked, 'Did you hear about the client?'. Everyone was curious. He said someone had told him that a client had managed to get inside the call centre. We all went back into the call centre to ask if anyone knew exactly what had happened. An eyewitness told me that a client had been able to get inside the call centre through the door that is connected

to the garage because he had been a worker in the company and still had the card which allowed him into the garage.

Once he was inside the call centre he asked the eyewitness 'which one of these contact units is the technical support?. The other replied, 'It is here, are you an assistant?' and the client replied 'No, I am a client.' 'Client... what do you mean?' 'I am a client.' 'Can you please just wait a second? I will call the coordinator'. The eyewitness went to the team coordinator of the technical support unit and explained what was happening. The team coordinator asked the client to follow him into the meeting room where they stayed for about an hour. Later I found out that what had compelled the client to go to the call centre was the fact that the call centre had not yet processed the change of address he had asked for. The operator who had been present during the entire incident finished his story laughing and saying, 'Look, when he said that he was a client I was scared! It was like I was seeing the devil!!'. There are also rumours concerning clients who manage to discover which operator talked with them on the phone, manage to discover where the call centre is located and then, so goes the story, threaten the operator in front of the buildings where call centres are located.

'In a call centre the news runs fast', I was informed early on in my fieldwork by the area coordinator. By this he meant that no matter what happens inside the call centre in the end everyone ends up knowing the entire story. I must say that when I first heard this comment I attributed little importance to it. But it became clear during fieldwork how rumours in the call centres constitute the main device for propagating and controlling information. This is particularly true of the kind of information through which persons are included or excluded.

Along with other persons who are new to call centre work I was the subject of extensive rumours regarding what I was doing in the call centre, why I was there, and how I was going to proceed with my research. No matter how clearly I presented it or stated my purpose suspicion was always present. Several rumours started by both workers and management were disseminated during the initial period of research. Some speculated and asked me if I was interested in getting a job in the firm, others asked if I was going to sell the thesis to the firm when it was finished, while others speculated that I was being hired by another company (industrial spying). I should emphasize that I was the target of rumours not because I was 'an anthropologist', a qualification which is intriguing for most people, but because I was someone about whom they lacked

information, and without the necessary information it is difficult to project expectations over either imagined intentions or observed behaviours.

5.6. Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to discuss the extent to which the ideology of the 'transcendent client' affects the form through which labour as service is mobilized within the call centre sector. Such emphasis on the client as a means of analyzing, defining work processes and work relations is absolutely central within the call centre labour process. Such was demonstrated by providing evidence of how marketing strategies within the firm manufacture what I have called 'the transcendent client'. Through symbolic production, rituals and the enactment of the 'group spirit' firms transform the slogan 'to satisfy the client' into a normative model of work performance. Furthermore, this emphasis on the client also allows firms to alter the organization of paid work. Firms which outsource their call centres to temporary work agencies justify it on the basis of the uncertainties and risks associated with 'consumer demand'.

The terms in which operators portray clients and the way they describe their experiences in dealing with clients reveal the extent to which those serving the clients have to bear direct insults and aggressive verbal assaults. Such an emotionally-charged form of labour is both internalized and contested. The extent to which 'serving the client' is internalized is revealed for instance in the separation one operator made between what he considered to be 'insults which come with the job' and 'personal insults'. However, internalization coexists with contestation. Such contestation is to a certain degree allowed by management which means that it takes place on the public stage.

I have also provided evidence of how important gossip, humour and joking are to both workers and management as ways of expressing criticism, disseminating information and maintaining the 'operational consensus'. For operators engaging in criticism and challenge the devices of gossip, humour and joking are effective as long as they 'secure a laugh' within the boredom and routine of everyday life at the workplace. The unintended consequences of the operator's compliance is that a set of regulations concerning what they do, how they do it and why remains unquestioned. Thus, the reverse side of the 'client's stupidification' is the internalization of a set of self-discipline techniques which shape the transactions between clients and operators, and

which are highly beneficial for management purposes. Management wants operators to 'serve' the client, show deference, instruct the client, and other complex tasks of the imagination such as 'imagining what is happening at the other end of the line'. For operators, adherence to these prescriptions always entails a dilemma: to be a robot or a creative thinker.

In the next chapter I explore this theme further by discussing the forms through which the call centre sector attempts to solve this dilemma by the extensive use of audit practices such as 'benchmarking'. I also detail how these practices are expressed on the call centre shop floor by the resort to quantification and surveillance as essential tools of imposing accountability and discipline on workers. Following this I clarify what I mean by a *regime of disciplined agency*, an expression which was advanced in the introduction and concerning which the present chapter still only tells part of the story.

CHAPTER 6

Frames of self-discipline, quantification and surveillance

Moments are the elements of profit

(Marx [1867] 1990: 352)

The chapter which Karl Marx wrote in *Capital* concerning 'the working day' - from which the quotation above is taken - is a crucial piece of writing regarding temporality and the creation of surplus value in the capitalist labour process. Marx analyzes, with demographic detail, why and how the limits of the working day were (and will continue to be) a fundamental issue of struggle between capitalists and workers. Both parties involved in the dispute know (from different points of view) that the limits of the working day establish the pattern of work; more importantly the working day establishes how the extraction of surplus value is organized in time and space at the level of production. The working day is also an apparatus which disciplines, controls and normalizes conduct and behaviour both inside and outside the workplace. In sum, the disciplinary apparatus contained in the working day is a definitive part of the process of creating surplus value, that is, the process by which labour power is consumed and value is created, how moments become elements of profit.

In this chapter I examine how discipline, (labour time) quantification and surveillance are embedded in the call centre's daily organization of work in order to disclose the specific characteristics of the nature of value creation within the call centre sector. That is, in simplified terms the rentable maintenance of the call centre sector is dependent on the operator's effective and efficient execution of its main task –, dealing with clients, the subject of its work. As I show in the following sections, the rigid and extreme control to which call centre operators are submitted does not prevent them from evading control by deploying 'strategies of improvisation', mainly consisting of the ways in which they can use language and communicative skills. Thus, I argue that the central paradox pertaining to the nature of value creation within call centres is that the uncontrollable –intervention by the human agent - is what is effective in terms of productive output leading to profit creation. All the sections of this chapter are particularly focused on describing and examining the conditions under which this central paradox is produced. In other words, it is not my intention to provide a defence of the labour theory of value but instead to scrutinize the mechanisms used to control

labourer's time in the call centre sector. In the final section I discuss the theoretical implications of the empirical material presented in the preceding sections and in light of the previous chapters.

This chapter is structured in the following way. Before considering the production process inside the workspace more closely I describe how the call centre sector, as presented by the Portuguese Association of Contact Centres (APCC), understands the nature of the business and the techniques deployed to assure profitability. One of the foremost recommendations offered to firms is to outsource (sub-contract) work as an important tool in the maintenance of levels of profit because it substantially reduces labour costs. After considering the justification put forward by the Association I contrast it with how call centre operators understand and interpret the effects this business practice has on their lives and the daily life at the workplace. I then move on to analyze how the business practices and rhetoric put forward by the APCC are expressed on the call centre shop floor. As I hope to show, the techniques which are deployed on the shop floor to meet the desired level of profit contain within themselves a latent contradiction between the qualitative and the quantitative targets of productivity. The description and analysis of this contradiction will reveal the extent to which the call centre regime of labour might be defined as *a regime of disciplined agency*, an expression which I clarify in the conclusion of this chapter.

6.1. 'Strategic management', benchmarking and outsourcing in the call centre business

The Portuguese Association of Contact Centres[41] (*Associação Portuguesa de Contact Centers*) was founded in 2005. The association was created with the goal of promoting a 'sustainable development of the activity of contact centres in Portugal'[42]. According to the vice-president of the association one of the main goals is to promote adherence to the rhetoric and practice of 'strategic management' among the members of the association. This means, according to the vice-president, stressing that call centres are important for the economic development of the country; and that call centres should

[41] See www.apcontactcenters.com.

[42] Some of the data presented in this section was collected in the context of an interview with the vice-president of the association during fieldwork. I was not allowed to record the interview but permission was given to use his testimony in this thesis.

be viewed as part of the company to which they are allocated and not as autonomous entities.

The concept and practice of 'strategic management' has, however, other meanings and practical effects. According to Robert Lamb (1984) it has the following definition:

> Strategic management is an ongoing process that evaluates and controls the business and the industries in which the company is involved; assesses its competitors and sets goals and strategies to meet all existing and potential competitors; and then reassesses each strategy annually or quarterly [i.e. regularly] to determine how it has been implemented and whether it has succeeded or needs replacement by a new strategy to meet changed circumstances, new technology, new competitors, a new economic environment., or a new social, financial, or political environment (ix)

The above definition shows how measuring, evaluation and controlling are key aspects of this management rhetoric inaugurated in the 1950s and 1960s by several gurus such as Peter Drucker. Other devices were later added to this practice from the 1970s onwards. One was the implementation of 'management by objectives' another an emphasis on the customer and a 'marketing orientation' (in opposition to a 'production orientation'); and another the adoption of Japanese production techniques such as the 'just-in-time' production and 'total quality management' in which the entire workforce focuses on improving the quality of their product (Elger 1994).

The APCC has been, in its four years of existence, promoting such management rhetoric mainly through the organization of international conferences and studies of the use of 'benchmarking' in call centres in Portugal. 'Benchmarking', a common tool in many businesses, which involves measuring one's working practice against the best (the benchmark) in the sector in order to make improvements that will reach that benchmark. In call centres that meant scrutinizing labour costs, quantitative and qualitative productivity, the distribution of the industry in the country and its growth in different sectors of the economy to establish the 'best practice'. The vice-president of the association said this was highly important because 'in order for a service to be managed, it has to be measured'.

These 'benchmarking reports' are exchanged not only among national members of the association, but also with international networks of the industry[43]. The reports cover the following items:

- Outsourcing: measuring the percentage of call centre work which has been outsourced;
- 'Human resources': the relation between the number of persons working in call centres and the size of the call centre in terms of answering positions; the degree of workers' rotation (turnover);
- 'Quality control': internal and external monitoring of the performance of call centre operators (internally through calls monitoring and externally by surveying the clients regarding their 'level of satisfaction' when contacting the call centre); and the number of call centres with accreditation and certification bodies according to the ISO 9000[44];
- 'Performance indicators': average call duration, average hold time (time during which the client is waiting to be answered), average time to answer a call, average number of missed calls, average service level (the total number of calls answered divided by the sum of total number of calls answered and the total numbers of calls missed after 20 seconds waiting in a queue), average number of calls answered per hour, etc;
- 'Technology': this item evaluates the percentage of call centres using a given technology. The most common technological equipment used in call centres consists of: 1) the 'automatic call distributor' (ACD) which is a server connected to a telephone exchange designed to distribute the calls received by available operators; 2) 'computer telephone integration' (CTI) which according to the benchmarking report is 'a tool which allows the optimization of the operator's time because it displays in real time details of the client calling the line' (APCC 2008: 154); and 3) 'interactive voice response' (IVR) which is defined as 'self-service' and by which clients get to the department they need by pressing numbers on their keyboards;

[43] Such as www.contactcenterworld.com,

[44] ISO 9000 is a set of standard measures for 'quality management systems' that a business activity should have according to the International Organization for Standardization. Such standard measures are outlined according to the science of measurement: metrology. Industrial metrology was initially applied to manufacturing but has since been extended to services.

- ‘Activity volume’: this measures the number of incoming and outgoing calls by economic sector and size of the call centre;
- ‘Operations costs’: that is, labour costs. This is the measure of the average wage of an operator, of team leaders, of the average cost of training; etc.

These items are compared in the benchmarking reports and are the aspects in which firms should concentrate on their daily practices. Further to these aspects outsourcing is also considered in great detail[45]. In the Portuguese call centre industry 45 per cent to 50 per cent of the total number of call centres are outsourced to temporary work agencies (APCC 2008: 96). Outsourcing is justified by the APCC in the following terms:

> Organizations are always looking for results. Globalization has imposed a level of competition which did not exist before in the market. The recent (economic) threats have led companies all over the world to focus on a new form of work; and have ‘forced’ firms to concentrate on their main area of business by externalizing certain areas of operations to other companies (2008: 94)

In the call centre sector the agreement established between the client (user firm) and the outsourcer (TAW) is constituted as part of ‘fixed costs’ and ‘variable costs’. The fixed costs for the user firm can be established according to one of these items: 1) each hour of the operator’s work; 2) each call answered; or 3) the total number of calls answered per month. The ‘variable costs’ are dependent on the ‘service level agreements’ (SLAs) between the two parts which establish common goals for the number of calls answered per day; the average duration time of each call, etc. If the outsourcer does not achieve a standard specified in the SLA it is their responsibility to compensate the client in monetary form.

During fieldwork I was not allowed to consult the official document which established the agreement between the user firm and the TAW at EVA. Nor was this information available through unions. The secrecy surrounding this issue is itself

[45] The uses of the term outsourcing throughout the thesis do not involve the externalization of business services to other countries but only to external providers within the same country, that is, Portugal. The outsourcing of services and activities is not unique to the call centre sector but the sparse available quantitative data strongly suggests that in the call centre sector it is more prominent than in other economic sectors. According to a report published by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions the main user sectors of temporary work agencies in 2000 were agriculture, fishing (3.9%); manufacturing (51%); civil construction (33.3%); retail (17.6%); and services (58.8%) (EUROFOND 2002). The call centre business is included in the service sector and there is no data available for separate types of business within this sector.

meaningful[46]. Nevertheless, it is common among call centres operators to discuss this topic – the contractual agreement between the user firm and the TAW as well as the extensive use of outsourcing in the sector – using information gained informally. From the point of view of operators the justification for externalizing call centre services is quite different from that given by the APCC.

At EVA's call centre, operators frequently discuss this issue among themselves and the theme was also raised in interviews. Operators emphasize on the one hand, the huge gap between their wage and the payment made by the client (user firm) to the outsourcer and on the other hand, the injury caused by being treated as disposable workers, that is, as not belonging to the company on the same terms as permanent workers. From the point of view of operators their employment conditions would be significantly improved, both in terms of security and level of earnings, if they were hired directly by the user firm as permanent workers are.

One operator when asked about who he considered to be his employer replied:

> I feel that my employer is EVA. But then we have in the middle the TAW, we work for EVA but we receive the wage from TAW. We end up not doing any work for the TAW (..) And the TAW does not do anything to receive the money that it does. Probably EVA pays around 1000 euros or 1200 euros for each operator to the TAW and we end up receiving at the end of the month 600 euros! I think that… what firms (such EVA) gain with this is they don't have to worry if they fire a certain worker, they do not need to pay him any kind of social benefits. But at the same time I think that if EVA contracted the workers directly it could also save some money.
> Q: *so why do you think they use the TAW?*
> I don't know. I can't understand what the advantage is. Maybe it's only a matter of not having to take care of paperwork, employment contracts, not having confusions with paying social benefits if people want to leave. The only advantages are economic…

When asked what reasons have led to such an increase in call centre activity in recent years in Portugal, another operator commented:

> Call centres are basically a form of eliminating jobs without having to pay for it. Because it's like this: what I do on the phone is what the technicians used to do when they went into people's houses. They went into the client's houses, charged for the service plus the travel. In two weeks a technician earns what I earn in a month. So, if you have a call centre and you pay your workers the national minimum wage (which is what generally happens) if you have 20 persons you

[46] A Portuguese saying which is commonly quoted in call centres and elsewhere states that 'secrecy is the soul of the business'.

spend 8000 euros, if you have kept the technicians on the street you would probably need to spend around 32000 euros. That is, call centres are basically profit for the firms.

Another operator when asked about the reasons that for the growth of call centres in Portugal, replied succinctly: 'it's cheaper'. He added that he remembered an email sent by the coordinator saying that: 'what we want is skeletons to answer calls, and persons in front of the screen pressing the button and answering calls, what we don't want is calls waiting on the line'. According to this operator the insult of being called 'skeletons' was greeted with sadness and grief by his fellow workers. What this operator was emphasizing was how the metrics for measuring call centre labour subsumed the workers and their labour into a thing, such as a 'skeleton'.

The reason why I contrast the call centres' reason for outsourcing (best means of increasing profitability) with the operator's experience of the effects is that I want to show the extent to which exploitation is partly visible and highlight the most important effects it has on operators. As I stressed in chapter four, the uncertainty and powerlessness experienced by people seeking employment in call centres is first associated with the short duration of work contracts, low wages and lack of social benefits. These are effects which are common to other forms of work. However, within call centres when new recruits are hired and begin work this same uncertainty and powerlessness takes on a new image as evident in the operator's report about being called 'skeletons'. Dispossession is not only internalized because of the formal characteristics of employment (temporary work) but also a direct effect of the system of labour control – derived from the macro-business orientation described earlier – established on the shop floor through techniques of discipline, labour measurement and surveillance. In the following sections I analyze how these techniques are embedded in the organization of work, and how they shape the transactions between operators and clients, and between operators and management.

6.2. Frames[47] of self-discipline

The call centre environment is highly technological which means that it is not advisable to speak freely in order not to interfere with the interactions in progress (APCC 2008: 115)

Every call centre has specific rules concerning modes of conduct and behaviour inside the workplace. They usually form a set of disciplinary devices constraining the conduct of work and social relationships in the workplace. From the point of view of both the temporary work and user firms they are absolutely indispensable in order to ensure 'efficiency' in the work organization as the above quotation expresses. In this section I explore two of these devices: the 'code of conduct' and what is involved in 'performance evaluations'. I am emphasizing these two devices because they are so common in call centres operating in different economic activities.

6.2.1. The 'Code of Conduct'

Three months after beginning fieldwork I was informed by one of the team leaders that it was necessary to again email the code of conduct[48] to all the operators in the call centre. The team leader found this necessary because some operators were complaining that some of their colleagues were not following the rules of 'healthy hygiene conduct'. The best way the team leader found of handling such a sensitive issue was by sending everyone the 'code of conduct' which includes the rules on hygiene. I give the document below.

[47] I in this section I am following the concept of frame as developed by Erving Goffman in *Frame Analysis* ([1974] 1975). Here he develops with greater precision than in previous books, the technique of 'frame analysis' as a means of producing an 'analysis of social reality', which follows closely the work of William James, who put the question, 'under what circumstances do we think things are real?'. Goffman provides a set of analytical concepts which intend to explain how this feeling of realness is constructed and maintained in everyday activity. The main unit of analysis is the 'character of strips of experienced activity'. According to Goffman a frame can be defined as 'principles of organization which govern events and our subjective involvement in them' ([1974] 1975: 11). Thus, they could be interpreted as basic cognitive structures which guide the perception and representation of reality.

[48] This code of conduct was created by the temporary agency work with the agreement of the user firm.

Figure 11: 'Code of Conduct' at EVA's call centre

CODE OF CONDUCT

Everyone should follow the instituted procedures and respect them.
In case of any doubt you should consult your team leader.
This code of conduct should be a reminder to the Assistants not to forget the composure they should maintain inside the call centre; and which should be guided by professionalism and mutual respect.
One should have towards colleagues and senior leaders the same kind of respect, attention and cordiality that we have towards our clients.

'Breaks' and similar issues

We appeal to the good sense of everyone with respect to the 'break times'. When you are inside the building you should use all the existing receptacles for the different kinds of garbage (plastic, food and cigars) in order that everyone can enjoy a greater wellbeing.

Clothing and personal hygiene

The clothing you wear should be suitable for a workplace and good presentation and you should be careful with personal hygiene. For obvious reasons, beach clothing or any other kind of clothing with typed inscriptions which might contain conceptions of political, racial or religious discrimination are not allowed.

Food

You are not allowed to eat or drink inside the workplace. The canteen is provided for this purpose and can be used during break times. The consumption of alcoholic drinks inside the call centre is expressly forbidden as is working after consuming such drinks.

Mobile phones

Mobile phones should be kept in silent mode in order not to cause disruption to the normal functioning of the call centre.

Internet

Internet access should be used only for professional purposes. Consulting the internet should be used exclusively to help your professional functions.

Email

Email use is only for professional purposes and all the messages should be sent with the CC of your direct team leader. In the signature to the email the name of the team leader should be visible.

Installations

Given that everything was made to provide a good working environment, we hope that everyone handles the installations with care; while contributing to the maintenance of good conditions.
At the end of each shift the Assistants should put their headsets in the locker and should make sure not to leave rubbish or papers on

top of the desk.

It is not allowed to install any kind of software in the computers.

Calls recording and monitoring the computer screen

In order to obtain greater quality control, the improvement of dealings with the client and the information needed, as well as greater personal development of the collaborators, EVA monitors phone calls with clients, using recording mechanisms.

This monitoring includes voice registration and the handling of the computer applications, which constitute the operational setting of calls, until the conclusion of all the procedures of customer service.

Smoking

It is expressly forbidden to smoke inside the premises of the call centre, refectory and WC.

Readings and games

It is forbidden to read any kind of material which is not related with work. It is forbidden to play games on the computer, or on any other device.

Breaks

The times of breaks should be respected so that every one may have a break, without harming the colleague’s work and the service level.

Punctuality

You should be at work on time allowing for five minutes before the start of your shift to turn on the computer and open the applications. Delays might be counted against from the productivity award.

Diligence

You should not skip work, and if there are occasions when you have to you should warn your team leader on the day before so that arrangements may be made to keep the number of Assistants available in accordance with the service level.

Professional confidentiality

Collaborators should preserve the confidentiality of the business while in the workplace as well as outside it.

The ‘code of conduct’ is one of the frames which disciplines informal and formal interactions inside the workspace. A careful reading of this code of conduct reveals the main reasons for the necessity of disciplining the workforce. ‘Professionalism’ is emphasized as well as the ‘service level’. Operators are not allowed to read anything, play games or talk with each other in the intervals between calls because this might have consequences for the ‘service level’. Operators should not be absent from work because this might also have an impact on the ‘service level’. Here I wish to bring out the numerical abstraction of the ‘service level’ which is omnipresent in the workplace, as will be clearer in the next section of this chapter.

The ‘code of conduct is necessary not only as a frame of normative behaviour inside the workspace but also in order to manage the SLAs previously mentioned. One operator, when asked about the code of conduct, said:

> I was being hired by the TAW, the TAW had its own problems but it was only following the orders of the client [he means the user firm – operators frequently refer to the user firm as the client]. And the client orders workers to have a certain way of being in the job. Sometimes, bosses who were my friends used to pass by me and I was reading the newspaper and used to say ‘look, you should put the newspaper away; if there is a visit from the client to our section we can get a big fine because of that. I am telling you this because they can even know without coming here because there are cameras around the place. So you should not be reading the newspaper…

The code of conduct is elaborated and executed with the total agreement of the user firm both when the call centre is in-house (in installations belonging to the user firm) or external. Apparently such a set of rules can be found in other forms of work regarding the use of the space and tools of work. Within call centres however, it gains a different dimension due to the system of surveillance over the pace of work which the code of conduct mentions. In the item designated as ‘calls recording and monitoring of computer tools’ workers are warned that in order to obtain ‘greater quality control’ their calls as well as their actions on the computer are recorded. Recording actions on the computer means the visual recording of the computer screen while the operator is working. The operator’s voice, gestures and actions are indirectly recorded by what appears on the screen as a result of their actions.

Therefore, the code of conduct is a frame of self-discipline which constrains behaviour and social transactions between colleagues and superiors inside the work

space. The code anticipates the forms of evaluation to which operators are subjected during the course of work. Within call centres workers' performance evaluation is divided into two kinds: qualitative and quantitative. In the next sections I explore each of these forms of performance evaluation and its function in the overall system of labour control within call centres.

6.2.2. Evaluations

Every time an assistant answers a call he must follow a grid established by the user firm which moulds the transaction between operator and client. This grid determines both the form and the content of the conversation. An operator knows from the start that he will be evaluated according to this grid by team leaders every time they perform 'evaluations[49]'. These evaluations are made once a month and future operators are told to follow a set of 'orientations' (which team leaders also use to evaluate). The orientations are divided into three groups: 'amiability and sympathy', 'technical competence' and 'speed in the resolution'. In the first group the following is recommended:

- To call the client by their first and last name
- To have a smile in your voice
- Always confirm if the client is available to hold on -line while you search for the information
- Say 'thank you' before and after the 'hold'[50]
- Explain to the client in clear terms why you are going to put him on 'hold'
- Check with the client if he is available to do some equipment tests with you
- Use expressions of comfort and sympathy

In the second group concerning 'technical competence':

[49] The number of 'evaluations' may vary according to the call centre. There are call centres where operators are subjected to daily qualitative evaluations. When this happens at the end of the work shift operators have a meeting with a member of the quality control team which informs the worker concerning the points which were detected in a set of calls which needed improvement. In other call centres operators are monthly evaluated. At the end of each month operators have a collective meeting with the team-leader which hands in the evaluations on a paper-sheet with the errors noted and recommendations of improvement. At EVA operators had monthly evaluations. Although all the calls were recorded and stored both the team-leaders and team-coordinator had to carry out the evaluation of 5 phone calls. These calls could either be traced in real-time or they could be chosen randomly from the database which stores all the calls.

[50] The 'hold' – the time during which the client is waiting on line after talking with the operator; or according to the operator's definition, the time during which the client is listening to music - is subject to quantitative measurement as I show in the next section.

- Security in the voice and when transmitting information to the client
- Make your speech positive by eliminating negative expressions
- Present alternatives to the clients before presenting limitations
- Don't use 'ready-made expressions', it might indicate insecurity
- Be sure that the operations made by the client are successful
- Run tests

Finally, in the last group regarding 'speed in the resolution':

- Accompany the client while he carries out the operations
- Explain to the client which operations he is going to execute and why
- When you put the client on 'hold', you should regularly return to the line[51]
- At the end of the call you should register and 'categorize' the contact[52]

These instructions on correct behaviour are bounded with contradictions which are only disclosed during the course of work; and which operators qualify as being one of the most difficult aspects of the job. Operators are obliged to display specific emotions in their voices (sympathy, friendliness, a smiling voice) at the same time that they have to remove opposite 'negative' emotions. They need to show deference towards the client but also convey security. They have to register information on several software applications but they also need to be aware that there are time limitations associated with each task. What is demanded from operators is a synchrony of gestures, actions and speech regarding the specificity of each client (i.e. call the client by the first and last name) and standardized technical rules (i.e. categorize and register each contact at the end of the call).

This sort of contradiction was noted by Claus Offe (1985) regarding the growth of the service sector in Europe. Claus Offe reviews the arguments put forward since the 1930s on the positive implications of the growth of the service sector in terms of 'the distribution of social power and the structure of political domination' (Ibid.: 101). Among such positive implications Offe pointed to three potential developments: 1) the decrease in use of tools and material objects in service occupations would lead to a reduced strain put on each worker; 2) service work would absorb surplus labour therefore reducing unemployment; 3) there would be a reduction or even elimination of

[51] Usually it is advised that the client should not wait more than 2 minutes.
[52] 'Categorize' the contact involves registering the content of the call in a specific application, which contains a database with all the company's clients and reasons for contacts.

industrial conflict. The author is cautious about these positive implications of the dissemination of technologies of information and control service work because at the time he wrote the book – the 1980s – this sector had only recently begun its expansion.

The author begins by acknowledging that service work has been defined poorly and in negative terms by the available literature. The negative definition included: 1) **not** being a form of work which produces a material outcome; 2) a form of work which is '**less** susceptible to technical and organizational rationalization when compared with goods-producing labour'; 3) the **impossibility** of measuring and controlling the productivity of service work (Offe 1985: 104-5). To avoid these negative attributes, the author argues, there has been an attempt to define service work in terms of the role it plays in maintaining 'normal conditions' in society. That is, 'the task of defending and preserving the differentiated elements of the social structure, as well as mediating between them' (Ibid.: 105). In order to achieve the status of 'normality' service work has to resolve a central contradiction, that between the preservation of the particularity, individuality, contingency and variability (for instance of clients) and the production of 'a state of affairs which conforms to certain general rules, regulations and values' (Ibid.: 105). As the author puts it, 'it is always necessary to simultaneously normalize the case and individualize the norm' (Ibid.: 106). The dilemma which is identified by Claus Offe can neither be resolved by complete standardization nor by complete individualization.

One of the team leaders, João, had a recurrent sentence to evoke the dilemma just described and that call centre operators have to bear: 'You know Patrícia, the problem is that the little man of quantity never meets the little man of quality…'. It is a dilemma which operators face in each call they answer, and which team leaders have to justify every time the coordination asks for the monthly quantitative and qualitative results of the line. The rules of conduct that I earlier described are understood as being the qualitative aspects of the job. They should thus be followed by operators as the principles leading to 'good quality customer service'. But this set of principles has to be articulated with the set of quantitative targets that operators individually need to achieve.

The extensive use of computer-based technologies to evaluate the quantitative performance of operators joined with the systematic surveillance of the work activities comprises the management response to the problem of marrying quantity and quality in such a way as to maintain profitability. I get back to this theme further in the

conclusion of this chapter. Here, however, I examine the quantitative techniques of labour measurement as they are deployed within call centres.

6.3. ‘We are only numbers to them’: quantification and numbering (or the fetishism of numbers)

The measurement of an operator’s output is done by both the qualitative prescriptions earlier described and methods of quantification. These methods of quantification usually take the form of productivity reports which evaluate almost all the tasks performed in the course of work. From the point of view of call centre operators they are an alienating mechanism which reduces both the worker and his labour to ‘a number’.

6.3.1. Productivity reports

Every day team leaders send the following table to the operators and coordinators. From the point of view of operators and team leaders these reports are the only knowledge directors have of the work being performed at the call centre. It was quite common to hear operators referring to the productivity reports with ‘we are only numbers for them!’. This sentence was repeated many times and epitomized the understanding operators have of how their work is perceived by the top hierarchy.

Table 3: Daily productivity report of call centre operators

Periodo	Login	GivenName	ChamAtendidas	Chamadas Hora	DMC	%Hold	%NR	%Idle	%Talk	Logged
25-Jan-08	4493		0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00%	12.59%	63.87%	0.00%	6.16
25-Jan-08	4514		2.00	0.27	387.00	0.75%	6.90%	87.59%	2.89%	7.44
25-Jan-08	4522		4.00	0.68	482.75	1.33%	4.66%	80.26%	9.08%	5.91
25-Jan-08	4509		8.00	1.52	383.63	1.38%	0.01%	83.00%	16.25%	5.25
25-Jan-08	4496		8.00	1.38	430.00	3.43%	8.58%	74.07%	16.45%	5.81
25-Jan-08	4507		9.00	2.65	919.89	0.00%	6.07%	23.40%	67.82%	3.39
25-Jan-08	4500		9.00	1.66	1274.00	11.35%	21.99%	19.12%	58.66%	5.43
25-Jan-08	4525		10.00	1.29	786.30	5.05%	17.44%	41.48%	28.24%	7.73
25-Jan-08	4511		11.00	1.64	428.45	4.07%	11.81%	61.69%	19.56%	6.69
25-Jan-08	4506		11.00	1.92	1233.91	2.83%	9.88%	23.65%	65.76%	5.73
25-Jan-08	4488		12.00	1.53	973.67	3.20%	6.94%	42.95%	41.43%	7.83
25-Jan-08	4521		13.00	1.61	306.31	3.81%	4.23%	62.16%	13.72%	8.06
25-Jan-08	4502		16.00	2.52	556.81	11.57%	21.70%	23.26%	38.98%	6.35
25-Jan-08	4491		16.00	2.94	666.81	9.11%	8.81%	32.32%	54.37%	5.45
25-Jan-08	4526		17.00	2.19	410.47	5.72%	12.81%	52.59%	25.00%	7.75
25-Jan-08	4490		17.00	2.24	685.06	2.24%	11.84%	43.26%	42.60%	7.59
25-Jan-08	4519		18.00	3.00	531.83	1.52%	14.43%	39.63%	44.38%	5.99
25-Jan-08	4515		18.00	3.33	544.89	8.07%	10.30%	31.40%	50.44%	5.40
25-Jan-08	4516		20.00	2.49	794.35	22.94%	8.40%	31.92%	54.91%	8.04
25-Jan-08	4510		24.00	2.93	677.58	11.99%	8.83%	26.79%	55.16%	8.19
25-Jan-08	4489		25.00	2.92	579.72	1.29%	22.53%	22.26%	47.04%	8.56
25-Jan-08	4487		25.00	3.08	816.20	3.27%	6.94%	22.58%	69.90%	8.11
25-Jan-08	4523		26.00	3.38	289.54	1.44%	11.79%	59.68%	27.19%	7.69
25-Jan-08	4513		28.00	3.47	526.04	7.89%	16.89%	30.77%	50.68%	8.07
25-Jan-08	4494		35.00	4.36	518.71	9.84%	10.48%	24.41%	62.87%	8.02
				4.50	480.00	10.00%	15.00%	44.16%	38.54%	

25-Jan-08	4528		1.00	0.13	460.00	1.04%	10.86%	81.73%	1.64%	7.80
25-Jan-08	4504		2.00	0.34	101.00	0.00%	0.01%	96.48%	0.95%	5.88
25-Jan-08	4492		3.00	0.34	170.00	0.29%	13.81%	79.40%	1.62%	8.77
25-Jan-08	4524		4.00	0.51	334.25	0.00%	4.01%	90.10%	4.71%	7.88
25-Jan-08	4527		5.00	0.63	199.20	0.25%	9.32%	78.24%	3.47%	7.98

---------- esteve a fazer BO.

Periodo	Login	GivenName	ChamAtendidas	Chamadas Hora	DMC	%Hold	%NR	%Idle	%Talk	Logged
26-Jan-08	4509		2.00	3.21	237.00	0.00%	0.00%	73.21%	21.13%	0.62
26-Jan-08	4512		5.00	0.68	618.40	0.00%	8.07%	78.87%	11.64%	7.38
26-Jan-08	4529		10.00	1.70	373.50	3.96%	0.36%	73.69%	17.62%	5.89
26-Jan-08	4503		15.00	2.49	460.13	0.28%	13.35%	50.76%	31.85%	6.02
26-Jan-08	4496		15.00	2.52	472.13	3.48%	11.23%	42.62%	33.07%	5.95
26-Jan-08	4521		16.00	2.06	419.38	2.97%	8.04%	66.55%	24.05%	7.75
26-Jan-08	4526		16.00	2.00	630.81	6.12%	10.24%	54.14%	35.00%	8.01
26-Jan-08	4516		18.00	2.22	506.83	6.98%	7.86%	58.31%	31.19%	8.13
				4.50	480.00	10.00%	15.00%	62.27%	25.69%	

As chamadas atendidas por (……….) foram respeitantes ao dia 25-01-2008

The productivity report is organized by name of operator, number of calls answered during the day and per hour (*chamadas atendidas* and *chamadas hora*), average call duration (DMC – *Duração Média de Chamada*), 'hold' time, NR, ('not ready'), time used by each worker on breaks and meal time, 'idle' time (no calls answered), 'talk' percentage (the proportion of time spent talking on the phone while being logged to the machine), and 'logged' (the time in which the operator was connected to the application which measures the work shift). There are targets to be achieved for each of these items, highlighted in yellow at end of the table. For instance, operators are supposed to answer 4.50 calls per hour; the target established for the 'average call duration' is 480 seconds; and the time spent on break should not go over 15 per cent of the total work shift. The data highlighted in red corresponds to results which need to be corrected in order to meet the desirable targets.

6.3.2. The 'symposium' and the wallboard

The necessary data to fill the 'productivity reports' is obtained via a specific program called Symposium to which only team leaders and the team coordinator have access. The picture below is the typical report extracted through this application. This application monitors and records all the seconds, minutes and hours of the worker's shift. Counting is a constant activity at the call centre. All the ranks of the internal hierarchy of the call centre transform what they do into numbers. Operators pay attention to the number of calls answered, the minutes spent on break, the hours to go until the end of their shift; team leaders construct several kind of reports concerning the work done, they also receive several Excel sheets with an analysis of the call centre activity from other areas of the company. The coordinators analyze endless statistics on the performance of the 'contact unit' of which they are in charge compared with the performance of other contact units from the company. Numbers circulate in talks between colleagues, clients, team leaders as though they contained in themselves all that goes on at the workplace.

Figure 12: Worker report as formulated by Symposium

- Agent Performance 2

Report Interval: 00:00:00 31 Julho, 2008 - 23:45:00 31 Julho, 2008

Site Name: NGEN1001T
Table Name: iAgentPerformanceStat

	Logged In Time	Skillset Talk Time	Avg ACD/ NACD Talk Time	DN Talk Time	Not Ready Time	Break Time	Ring Time	Waiting Time	Walk away Time	N/W Time	Re-srv'd Time	Calls Pre-sent'd	Skillset Ans'd	N/W Ans'd	Re-srv'd to Call	ACD/ NACD Ans'd	Short Calls Ans'd	DN Calls	Conf Out	Trans Out	Return Calls To Que	Return Calls From Time Out
GRAND TOTAL																						
	90:50:21	**37:02:33**	**00:00:00**	**03:47:23**	**11:03:30**	**00:09:46**	**00:11:23**	**38:22:25**	**00:00:05**	**00:00:00**	**00:00:00**	**240**	**234**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**8**	**71**	**0**	**21**	**4**	**1**
			Avg Skillset Talk Time:		**00:09:30**									**% Work:**		**52.95**						
Agent Name & ID: ATN -				**4487 - 4487**																		
	04:05:24	**01:16:17**	**00:00:00**	**00:30:34**	**00:23:16**	**00:00:21**	**00:00:28**	**01:48:47**	**00:00:00**	**00:00:00**	**00:00:00**	**11**	**11**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**9**	**0**	**2**	**0**	**0**
			Avg Skillset Talk Time:		**00:06:56**									**% Work:**		**40.57**						
07/31/2008																						
02:15	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
08:45	00:00:02	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:02	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
09:00	00:14:12	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:01	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:14:11	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
09:15	00:15:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:15:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
09:30	00:15:00	00:00:54	00:00:00	00:01:20	00:00:03	00:00:02	00:00:04	00:12:11	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	2	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
09:45	00:15:00	00:01:25	00:00:00	00:01:31	00:02:07	00:00:03	00:00:00	00:08:54	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
10:00	00:15:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:12:20	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:02:40	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10:15	00:15:00	00:00:40	00:00:00	00:00:05	00:03:29	00:00:03	00:00:02	00:08:35	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
10:30	00:15:00	00:10:54	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:03:55	00:00:01	00:00:09	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
10:45	00:15:00	00:14:56	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:01	00:00:00	00:00:02	00:00:01	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11:00	00:15:00	00:08:27	00:00:00	00:02:11	00:01:05	00:00:02	00:00:00	00:02:11	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
11:15	00:15:00	00:03:30	00:00:00	00:10:58	00:00:03	00:00:03	00:00:06	00:00:02	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	2	2	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0
11:30	00:15:00	00:02:06	00:00:00	00:12:49	00:00:01	00:00:01	00:00:03	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11:45	00:15:00	00:15:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
12:00	00:15:00	00:12:14	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:03	00:00:01	00:00:02	00:02:40	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
12:15	00:15:00	00:06:11	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:04	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:08:45	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
12:30	00:15:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:01:40	00:00:01	00:00:05	00:00:00	00:12:27	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
12:45	00:15:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:15:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13:00	00:06:10	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:06:10	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Daily	**04:05:24**	**01:16:17**	**00:00:00**	**00:30:34**	**00:23:16**	**00:00:21**	**00:00:28**	**01:48:47**	**00:00:00**	**00:00:00**	**00:00:00**	**11**	**11**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**9**	**0**	**2**	**0**	**0**
			Avg Skillset Talk Time:		**00:06:56**									**% Work:**		**40.57**						
Agent:	**04:05:24**	**01:16:17**	**00:00:00**	**00:30:34**	**00:23:16**	**00:00:21**	**00:00:28**	**01:48:47**	**00:00:00**	**00:00:00**	**00:00:00**	**11**	**11**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**9**	**0**	**2**	**0**	**0**
			Avg Skillset Talk Time:		**00:06:56**									**% Work:**		**40.57**						

Through the Symposium software real-time information is extracted which is displayed in the 'wallboard' that each 'contact unit' has, a rectangular screen on a wall nearby. The 'wallboard' is the icon of control and surveillance *par excellence*, which is quite often mentioned by its name in English. The wallboard shows real time information in numbers: the number of calls waiting to be answered; the number of operators currently logged into the system; the number of operators who are on break; the average waiting time of the last client who is calling the line.

Figure 13: The 'wallboard'

The wallboard is such a powerful icon of control for two reasons. First, it is the physical manifestation of the use of counting and quantifying as a form of rationalizing and objectifying the work process. It follows the ideal of 'informational transparency', according to which numbers are supposed to convey objective information for all to see, or 'self-apparent facts free from the distortions of social information' (Zaloom 2006: 62). The numbers which appear on the wallboard acquire a quality of authority over work tasks due to the characteristics which management attributes to it, namely, neutral and efficient measurement. Second, because the wallboard acquires a quality of authority which is independent from human subjects, it not only reifies the vigilance exerted directly by team leaders and team coordinator by transferring it to an object, it also instils self-surveillance. In an article consisting of historical meditations on the

rise of statistics Ian Hacking commented that, ‘the bureaucracy of statistics imposes not just by creating administrative rulings but by determining classifications within which people must think of themselves and of the actions that are open to them’ (Hacking 1991: 194). The author further adds that from his perspective the two most important philosophical questions which the advent of statistics raise are the ‘erosion of determinism and the taming of chance’.

Within call centres the information which appears on the wallboard instils self-surveillance over actions and behaviours because it reduces the frame of possible available actions for operators. Being on a call with a client means that operators may have time gaps during the call when all they need to do is explain again what was explained in the call before. The automatism which management seeks from workers is achieved through several mechanisms, one of which being the inherent repetition attached to call centre work. When all that needs to be explained is already memorized there are few things to look at apart from the wallboard. From the point of view of the worker it shows the number of calls still waiting on line, and which he will have to answer, but it also shows if there aren’t too many people on break, which means that there might be a possibility of his taking one. Moreover, the usual blank walls in call centres, the common absence of windows, the separation of each worker in cabinets means that the spatial arrangement is made specifically in order for the worker to have no other direction to look except towards the screen of the computer or higher, the wallboard.

6.4. Surveillance, control and depersonalization

The systematic surveillance of labour activities is deployed by management through formal and informal channels. What both forms of surveillance have in common is that they represent a form of depersonalization of the workers. In this section I show how this takes place on the call centre shop floor. The most frequent formal strategy deployed by management is to instruct team leaders that they have to ‘police’ operators’ work in order to ensure ‘efficiency’. Such instructions are often noted during the monthly team meetings between team leaders and the coordinators. Email communication at work between operators, team leaders and coordinators indicates the extent to which the email itself is deployed as a strategy of surveillance and depersonalization.

6.4.1. 'I can see everything that they are doing!'

Besides being a tool for counting, Symposium is also a tool for surveillance and control over the pace of work as well as another software application which records the activity on the computer screen. As mentioned before, this means that voice and (indirectly) gesture are monitored and recorded. The applications also allow monitoring in real time. Several times one of the team leaders at EVA described to me the virtue of all these applications, saying 'I can see everything that they are doing!'. Once while following Manuel while he was doing the monthly evaluations of the operators he found it important to share with me an incident which had happened with one of the back-office operators; and which is representative of the level of surveillance.

In the previous week Manuel had accessed the screen of one of the operators to see exactly what he was doing. When he did this the operator was surfing on the web paying detailed attention to several women's profiles available in HI5[53]. He decided to record from that moment the operator's activity and send a general email to the back-office team asking how tasks were being organized that day. Everyone replied telling him what task they were doing, including the operator who was distracting himself on the web. After that Manuel communicated to the coordinators what had happened and asked for instructions on how to deal with the incident.

The coordinators decided that the operator should be called aside and asked why he was using the internet for private purposes during work time. The operator's answer was that he was on his lunch break and thought that in that case there should be no restrictions on internet use. Manuel was not convinced by this answer and went to check in the Symposium application the operator's log-in and log-out times on the day of the incident. He decided that the longest absence of the worker 14.30h to 15.30h, and the half hour spent by the worker surfing the web occurred from 14.00h to 14.30h. While he was telling me the story Manuel was showing me the relevant data on the operator, how he had accessed Symposium to extract log-in/log-out information, all the while reinforcing through comments the idea that this kind of vigilance was very important to discipline workers and the way they behave at the workplace. When confronted with all this data the back-office operator said 'I think I know what you

[53] Hi5 is a social networking website similar to Facebook.

going to show me…'. After this incident an email was sent to all the team describing what had happened and re-asserting the prohibition against using the web for personal purposes and how that can result in being fired.

6.4.2. Team meetings

Only team leaders participate in team meetings alongside the team coordinator. They usually take place once a month unless some aspect of the work-flow needs to be reviewed and analysed. The topics usually discussed in these meetings concern the qualitative evaluations of operators; the upgrading of 'trainee assistants' to a higher rank[54]; and discussions over the bestowal of the 'productivity award'. The award – given by the user firm – is of 50 euros and is given to operators who achieve more than 90 per cent of in the monthly qualitative evaluations and have also reached the quantitative targets. Decisions on the productivity award and the upgrading of operators are made by assessing each operator according to considerations of their performance. In these discussions it was common for the team coordinator to intervene with personal judgments on whether or not the operator had 'acceptable conduct' according to the standards laid out by the user firm. Having 'acceptable conduct' means from the point of view of management that the worker must be compliant with the normalization of face-to-face behaviour inside the workplace. This entails keeping a low profile by not contradicting orders, asking permission of the team leaders every time the worker needs to go to the toilet or go for lunch or a break, showing reverence to 'superior bosses' when they appear at the call centre by showing themselves to be efficient and rigorous workers totally absorbed in the 'team spirit'. Also, most importantly, adhering without hesitation to the values of 'team work' and the 'cult of the client', as discussed in the previous chapter.

Although the area coordinator is usually not present at team meetings he sends his messages of authority and control through the team coordinator. In one of the meetings a special request was made to 'make the team more productive'. Team leaders were asked to deliver on a monthly basis an Excel sheet to plan the work of assistants segmented by week, day and shift. The goal of this planning was to make

[54] The operators who begin work at the call centre initially stay for 6 months in the rank of 'trainees', every 6 months they can be upgraded to levels 1, 2, and 3. Each of these categories has a different wage, which means that workers executing the same functions earn different salaries.

sure there was an adequate number of operators available for the company's needs. The team leaders were asked to approach the assistants to check if any of them were available to change their work shift in case there was a larger volume of calls to be answered. EVA was reminding the team leaders that workers should adapt themselves to the 'client's needs'. When this kind of conversation takes place operators are not referred to by their names or any distinctive trait they might have, they are simply called the 'gang' (*a malta*) or the 'guys' (*os gajos*). Only in specific situations are the operators called by their names.

Although the high degree of formal control over operators via the tools contained in the call centre infrastructure, informal control also operates at the level of personal considerations like those mentioned in team meetings. Management continuously invests in the available resources for informal control as it happens, for instance, in normalizing face-to-face behaviour from the start in the training period (described in chapter four).

6.4.3. Email as a tool of control

The uses of email permitted at the call centre are intended to expand the space for informal control. Both operators and team leaders may only use email for professional purposes. Specific procedures attached to the use of email make it an omnipresent tool of control. Nearly all the work time of both operators and team leaders is spent in sending emails. Almost all the complaints and requests made by clients on the phone require assistance from another department of the company. The 'contact units' have almost no contact with other departments except by email. The great majority of time, of all the ranks of the hierarchy, is spent in sending and answering emails and retrieving information from the 'intranet' and the software applications. Disembodied communication between operator and client, operator and team leader and from team leaders to coordinators frames mechanisms of control and self-discipline of which email is a central one.

Email addresses are not equal: temporary workers have the designation of 'external' in their email address and permanent workers the designation of 'internal'. This difference has important consequences in the exchanges between departments. It determines the terms in which the emails are answered. Quite often they arouse among operators and team leaders feelings of shame and humiliation when the answer

expected does not come, or when the answer implies by its wording some kind of diminishment of call centre workers.

All the emails sent by workers from the call centre have to be sent with the 'CC' of a specific mailing address called 'supervisors'. These people may interfere with the content of the email if they choose to. That address, includes all the hierarchy of the call centre. Operators are not allowed to send requests by email to certain departments, having to first ask a team leader and justify the email's pertinence. Although not present at the call centre, by being on the mailing list, the top hierarchy normalizes the tone and content of the emails sent by operators and team leaders. Operators and team leaders are careful not to make mistakes, such as sending a request to the wrong department. They are immediately reminded that this kind of mistake costs the company money as well as increasing the time needed for solving the client's problem.

The frames of self-discipline, the techniques of qualitative and quantitative performance evaluation deployed by management and the extensive surveillance over interpersonal transactions, the tasks and organization of work which I have been reviewing form an apparatus of labour control. They pervade the working days at the call centre with a degree of systematisation which disciplines and normalizes conduct, behaviour and ways of talking. However, as I mentioned earlier, they contain within themselves a latent contradiction which I described using the sentence of one team leader: 'the little man of quality never meets the little man of quantity'. The maintenance of this contradiction allows management to exploit that which is not reducible to the mere act of talking on the phone. That is, it allows management to exploit the capacity of workers to be individual agents - their agential capacity. By agential capacity I mean that which is an irreducible quality of human beings, the capacity for complex symbolic thinking expressed through the medium of language, or improvisation as I call it in the section below.

6.5. Strategies of improvisation

The emotional and physical labour which is demanded from operators in order to balance qualitative and quantitative goals is expressed through a technique which, although not formally learned, is, in constant use: *improvisation*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb to improvise: 'create and perform (music, drama, or verse)

spontaneously or without preparation' and 'make from whatever is available'. Being able to improvise ways of meeting both qualitative and quantitative demands depends almost solely on the individual operator, depends on his agential capacity of autonomous decision-making, putting himself into 'someone else's shoes', the operator's ability to 'imagine what is happening at the other end of the line' as well as on the operator's creativity.

While following Sérgio, an operator who has been working at the call centre for the last three years, an illustrative episode occurred. Operators do not have to press a button on the telephone in order to receive a call[55], calls are automatically distributed among available operators. Before answering the call the operator hears a sharp tone and then he introduces himself, 'Hello, my name is… how may I help you?'. On one of the many days I followed Sérgio, there was an unusual number of calls waiting on line due to damage to the telephone exchanges in the north of the country. The first call he answered was a complaint concerning some other subject. Sérgio decided to run some tests with the client although he was not sure what the result would be. To Sérgio's relief it was good. The call went on for 20 minutes. The next call Sérgio answered was a much more serious complaint from a client who had contacted the line several times before. In his last call, the client said he heard the call being answered and then he began hearing people chatting and making fun. According to the client the operator did not notice that he was receiving a call, and when he did realize that he hung up on the call. With this very 'angry client' there was no justification Sérgio could give except to present apologies in the name of the company. He commented to me that what happened with that client often happens because some of his colleagues take their headsets, which means they might not hear a call is being answered.

In the next call, which lasted for one hour and a half, the client was waiting for his username and password in order to access the internet. According to company procedures this kind of information should not be given on the phone 'for security reasons'. Sérgio knew about that but at the same time after trying to get client access through other forms he knew that the only thing that would bring a solution to the client's question would be to inform him of his username and password. After almost one hour and half, during which most of the time was spend talking about general

[55] This is an aspect which changed while I was doing fieldwork. In the beginning the operator would have to press a button in order to pick up the call. After two months of fieldwork management decided that in order to make the 'waiting time' lower a new system would be implemented, one in which operators would need to have the headsets always on their head in case they lose the call.

issues of internet uses and also how to use the router Sérgio decided to give the client his username and password. He knew he was breaking a serious rule but at the same time he felt compensated by the pleasant reaction of the client.

In their daily work operators have to constantly deploy their agential capacity of improvisation in order to balance and manage the latent contradiction attached to the call centre labour process. This contradiction exists because there is an aspect of unpredictability which cannot be solely solved by machines. This unpredictability is the client's motives and problems which occur regardless of the kind of call centre, on commercial and technical helplines. Management might create typologies derived from a systematic analysis of clients' contacts registered on databases; it might even create specific scripts for answering calls based on the same typologies which might reduce the average call-time (thereby augmenting the relative surplus value through technology). It might also reduce the variable capital associated with labour costs through the extensive use of outsourcing. But it can never assure total control over the conversation itself. For this it needs specific human intervention. The human intervention which is needed is not reducible to speaking. It demands listening, processing information, anticipating results, creating solutions, imagining (put yourself in someone else's shoes) and conceptualizing before seeing (imagining what is happening at the other end of the line). In sum, it demands expressing through language that which distinguishes human beings from all the other species: agency. And it is precisely this irreducible human capacity which the apparatus of control established within the call centre regime of labour attempts to discipline and control.

6.6. Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to disclose the specific characteristics of the nature of value-creation within the call centre sector through an examination of the deployment of frames of self-discipline and computer-based techniques of labour quantification and surveillance. I have shown the main ideology disseminated by the Portuguese Association of Contact Centres – strategic management – and how it impacts on the call centre shop floor. This managerial ideology impacts on the call centre shop floor first by imposing disciplinary mechanisms which regulate interpersonal transactions inside the workspace. Operators need to abide by a code of conduct which disciplines behaviour and attitudes. They have to follow 'qualitative

prescriptions' in the course of their work in order to meet the goals set out in the SLA between the user firm and the TAW and meet the qualitative targets. The quantification of call centre labour involves the constant conversion of activities into numbers which is enabled by the technological infrastructure available. Commuting everything into numbers also involves the constant surveillance of the operator's pace of work. Workers are systematically depersonalized in the course of being submitted to a tight structure of surveillance and control. The qualitative and quantitative targets demanded from operators contain a latent contradiction which has been mentioned as being inherent to service work at a general level, that is, the dilemma between complete individualization and standardization (Offe 1985: 106).

Since the seminal analysis of the capitalist labour process provided by Marx several authors have emphasized how technological innovations originate new forms for disciplining and controlling labour (Braverman 1974; Edwards 1979). Marx, in the chapter concerning 'machinery and large-scale industry' in *Capital*, begins by acknowledging that 'the machine is a means for producing surplus-value' ([1867] 1990: 492). Machines do not produce value[56] but are repositories of past labour which is then transferred to the final product through the process of production (relative surplus value). This means that besides allowing a greater control over the labour process and the intensification of labour, machines also allow the reduction of variable capital involved in production, which is the portion of capital spent on buying labour power. However, as Marx noted, the uses of machinery with the exclusive goal of producing relative surplus value contain the following contradiction:

> Hence, there is an immanent contradiction in the application of machinery to the production of surplus-value, since, of the two factors of the surplus-value created by a given amount of capital, one, the rate of surplus-value, cannot be increased except by diminishing the other, the number of workers (Ibid.: 531)

[56] Unlike authors such as Rifkin (1995) who prophesized the 'end of work', George Caffentzis (1997) argues that the increase of unemployment particularly since the 1970s does not indicate a reduced need for work and workers, but rather that 'the creation of unemployment is an instinctual capitalist stratagem for increasing the mass of available labour power while reducing its value' (31). Furthermore, according to Caffentzis some social scientists were led to believe that the new technological innovations were qualitatively different from the previous ones therefore deducing that 'machines can create value, hence surplus value and profits' (1997: 31). These social scientists failed to see that technological innovations do not necessarily alter the nature of capitalist accumulation.

Therefore, in the capitalist labour process the introduction of machinery 'produces a surplus working population, which is compelled to submit to the dictates of capital' (Ibid.: 532). As Marx vividly indicates this fact creates another paradox:

> Hence too the economic paradox that the most powerful instrument for reducing labour-time suffers a dialectical inversion and becomes the most unfailing means for turning the whole lifetime of the worker and his family into labour-time at capital's disposal for its own valorization (Ibid.: 532)

I have shown in chapter 4 how the organization of hiring and job allocation within the Portuguese call centre sector manipulates the uncertainty and vulnerability attached to precarious employment conditions in order to demand 'investment' and 'dedication' from workers. I have also emphasized that the training process that new recruits go through reveals the extent to which management demands from workers the contradictory efforts of automation while at the same time 'showing a smile in your voice'.

In chapter 5 I showed how the 'transcendent client' becomes a matrix around which the intervention into the organization of work is justified and by which a normative model of work performance is legitimized. Furthermore, the everyday maintenance of client sovereignty in the workplace coexists with a set of public strategies of defiance (humour, gossip and joking) allowed by management inside the workplace. Such strategies of defiance conceal the fact that they contribute to the maintenance of an 'operational consensus' which mystifies how and what kind of labour is being exploited within the call centre regime of labour.

The processes through which new technologies are deployed within call centres either for qualitative purposes – monitoring, recording and storage of calls – or quantitative purposes – commutation into numbers and statistics – are intended to maintain a live contradiction between securing automatism and encouraging agential intervention from workers. Within the call centre sector the code of conduct and the qualitative grid which operators have to follow in their transactions with the clients are both modes of normalizing behaviour inside the workplace and enforcing a specific way of talking with the client which follows the company's marketing rhetoric. The extensive informal (team meetings, email) and formal (productivity reports) surveillance to which workers are subjected is not only a form of making workers accountable for their 'productivity'. It is also a form of assuring that workers will have

a disciplined agential intervention in the labour process in order to balance the qualitative and quantitative targets set out by management; and without which profit maintenance would be impossible.

The question of profit maintenance is central in the valorisation process because as Marx mentions:

> Our capitalist (…) wants to produce a commodity greater in value than the sum of the values of the commodities used to produce it, namely the means of production and the labour power he purchased with his good money on the open market. His aim is to produce not only a use-value, but a commodity; not only use-value, but value; and not just value, but also surplus-value ([1867] 1990: 293)

To achieve this discipline and control over the uses of socially necessary labour time is absolutely indispensable, 'all wasteful consumption of raw material or instruments of labour is strictly forbidden, because what is wasted in this way represents a superfluous expenditure of quantities of objectified labour, labour that does not count in the product or enter into its value' (Ibid.: 302). A disciplined labour force is therefore necessary in order to avoid making production more expensive. Marx explains this point by comparing it with the slavery regime in antiquity. In a revealing footnote Marx writes that the expression used in antiquity to designate and distinguish slaves from animals was *instrumentum vocale* (speaking implement); animals were designated as *instrument semi-vocale* (Ibid.: 303). The reason why production was more expensive under slavery was because living creatures kept their own character:

> But he himself [the slave] takes care to let both beast and implement feel that he is none of them, but rather a human being. He gives himself the satisfaction of knowing that he is different by treating the one with brutality and damaging the other *con amore*. Hence the economic principle, universally applied in this mode of production, of employing only the rudest and heaviest implements, which are difficult to damage owing to their very clumsiness (Ibid.: 303)

Thus, production under slavery was more expensive due to the lack of agility and robustness of the tools employed, a consequence of the indiscipline of slaves, constantly reminding both 'beast and implement that he is none of them, but rather a human being'. In the same vein, call centre operators cannot avoid being human and acting as such in spite of the encompassing machine of control established in the workplace. The difference, however, is that within the call centre regime of labour to

act as more than a 'speaking tool' is a source of value and as such it needs to be disciplined. It also needs to be concealed within the framework of the 'transcendent client' and by an apparatus of quantification and surveillance which apparently dissolves the human subject, reducing a heterogeneous group of workers into a collection of human robots. Therefore, I am arguing that the call centre regime of labour is to a certain extent beyond the disciplinary power of the Panopticon as described by Foucault (1977). Although it seeks to optimize the docility-utility relation of the working subjects – through the code of conduct, informal and formal surveillance – its principal aim is to establish a *regime of disciplined agency*.

In the next chapter I follow up the idea of 'speaking tool' by exploring how gendered ways of talking are used as a resource by management to create specific kinds of customer relationships; and how this in turn contributes to the reinforcement of old gendered divisions of labour. Recent research has emphasized the growing feminization of the workforce in call centres, shedding light not only on the size of the female presence in this workplace but also how gender segregation is constituted and promoted. Given the specificities of the call centre where I did my research – among 54 workers 52 were men – I argue that male call centre workers confront the threat of 'demasculinization' attached to a devalued (and feminized) labour regime with attitudes and discourses reinforcing broader gender inequalities at the societal level (*ritualized sexism*).

CHAPTER 7

Male shop floor culture: humour, electronics and the 'feminine other'

A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. (...) In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (...) He is the Subject, he is the Absolute– she is the Other.
(Beauvoir [1949] 1989: xxi-xxii)

The sexual division of labour and gender inequality have been recurrent topics of study within anthropology, particularly since the 1970s alongside what has been designated as the second wave of the feminist movement influenced by the work of Simone de Beauvoir (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Reiter 1975). Her work vividly examines how women are raised and brought up as being 'the other' in opposition to men. My interest in the contributions of these authors is with how women's social subordination has been produced and reproduced within different socio-cultural contexts and in particular in the distinctive setting of call centres.

As noted earlier, the great majority of my informants during fieldwork were men. In order to get a broader range of women's views I interviewed women from other call centres, through contacts given to me by trade union representatives or female colleagues from the years I worked in a call centre. The male shop floor culture I encountered during fieldwork – and which I describe in this chapter – does not interest me as phenomena *per se*. Rather, what is of central interest in the practices and discourses which constitute this group culture is the extent to which they allow us to understand them as a manifestation of sex segregation in the call centre labour regime promoted – either formally or informally – by management. That is, they show how a sexual division of labour is a device used by management to create specific kinds of customer relationships, and how in the process of doing this, gender is embedded in commodified[57] products of labour.

[57] According to Marx, commodification refers to the process whereby the products of human labour arising from socio-historical social relations assume 'the fantastic form of a relation between things' (Marx [1867] 1990: 165) established within the act of exchange (market).Furthermore, the 'fetishism of the commodity-form' determines how producers come to understand the products of their own labour. That is, 'to the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labour appear as what they are, i.e., they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things' (Marx [1867] 1990: 166). The process of

In the first section of this chapter I explore how distinctions between different types of call centre – mainly commercial and technical – are anchored in gender stereotypes. I then provide evidence of how gender stereotyping is interpreted by male call centre operators and how in the course of everyday life at the call centre this is expressed as a form of 'ritualized sexism'. In the final section of this chapter I draw on the testimony of a woman who became one of my privileged informants during fieldwork. Her testimony was particularly revealing as her career gave her a considerable degree of insight into the obstacles, negotiations and options she had faced at work. It also confirmed what I had previously observed and heard in many conversations with my male informants. In the conclusion to this chapter I further explore how gender commodification is related to the specificities of the call centre regime of labour which I summed up as, *a regime of disciplined agency*, introduced in the previous chapter.

7.1. Making distinctions: technical and commercial call centres

There has been considerably empirical evidence of the growing feminization of labour in the call centre sector (Holman, Batt and Holtgrewe 2007). Vicki Belt (2002) explores the relation between women and call centre employment, which she likens to a ghetto. Following previous theories concerning gender inequality, Belt defends the notion that the call centre labour process shows similarities with other forms of work which were in the past female-dominated. The similarities consist of the highly repetitive aspect of the job; the absence of career prospects, low wages and employment uncertainty.

One of the industry representatives interviewed by Belt says that a 'female underclass' has been developing in call centre employment, consisting mainly of women from the working class 'with childcare commitments (and) remaining solidly at the bottom of career ladders' (Belt 2002: 4). The lack of career opportunities is used by employers who 'are capitalising on gender divisions by actively recruiting whom they perceive not to be interested in promotion' (Ibid.: 5). The scenario is like that described in feminist literature regarding the incorporation of women into waged labour in

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embedding gender in commodified products of labour which I mention consists in selectively objectifying and assigning a commercial value to the social properties of workers' voices based on a hierarchical gendered distinction between masculine and feminine ways of talking.

developing countries (Nash and Fernández-Kelly 1983; Ng and Mitter 2005a). Pearson (1998) shows that in the 1970s women workers were a central part of the new industrial map in which 'manufacturing production meant that an increasing proportion of the world's production of key consumer goods – textiles and garments, and new goods and components based on electronic components – was being manufactured or assembled in certain low-wage economies of the developing world' (171-2). Women were preferred because they were 'cheap labour'. According to the author:

> And as countless studies and analyses have demonstrated, when 'cheap' labour is deconstructed beyond the absolute wage levels to include employee protection, employer's contribution to the social wage, taxation, investment and working conditions in combination with non-militancy, docility, manual dexterity and conscientious application to often monotonous production process, women are almost invariably the preferred labour force (Ibid.: 173)

In the 1980s the 'global feminization of labour' reinforced the link between the female labour force and flexible systems of organization of production and deregulated employment (Harvey [1989] 1990: 153). What is also worth noting is that in the 1990s, according to Pearson (1998), there was considerable evidence that women 'were being displaced from their share in the industrial workforce partly because of the upgrading of the level of technology involved and the reduction in the labour intensity of production' (177). I am selecting contributions within feminist anthropology to stress the parallels and continuities between the incorporation of women into the labour force of industries with a global dimension, such as manufacturing, and the call centre sector. As I show throughout this chapter these continuities do not preclude the existence of differences resulting from the specificities of the call centre labour process and the Portuguese wider socio-historical context.

The technical call centre in which I conducted fieldwork illustrates the opposite scenario to the feminized mass-customer call centre. That is, out of a group of fifty four call centre operators fifty two were men. The group of men with whom I had the closest contact were aware that they were working in a 'female dominated occupation'[58] (as I explore later in this chapter). Recent research on flexibility and the

[58] One of the most pronounced and deliberate engendering of call centres in Portugal was achieved through advertising. At the beginning of the twenty first century the most common image of call centres was presented daily in a television advertisement about an insurance company. In this advertisement a young girl with correctly aligned dress, hair, gesture and words, answers the telephone and says: "Hello, my name is Marta, how can I help you?" This image (among others) contributed to the idea of a clean,

‘new economy’ sectors in Portugal (Casaca 2005) has suggested that - contrary to the thesis that in the ‘new economy’ inequality in employment conditions between men and women would tend to disappear - ‘the ICT sector (which includes call centres) is characterised by strong sexual discrimination: the work carried out by men is concentrated in the more valued, highly paid and contractually stable occupational segments’ (Kovács and Casaca 2004). These findings were partly confirmed during my research, particularly in the distinction between technical and commercial helplines, a distinction which I analyse in more detail in the next section.

7.1.1. Female and male voices

Bourdieu ([1998] 2001) argues that the ‘lived consensus’ regarding masculine domination in the social order is first of all inscribed through the body. That is, the biological differences between the male and female bodies are socially defined and ‘can thus appear as the natural justification of the socially constructed difference between the genders, and in particular of the social division of labour’ (11). According to Bourdieu:

> The particular strength of the masculine sociodocy comes from the fact that it combines and condenses two operations: it legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction (Ibid.: 23)

The main work carried out by operators is done with their voices. Operator and client meet each other in a telephone conversation in which the voice of the operator is supposed to encapsulate the desirable characteristics for a certain kind of service. In this section I explore how management exploits both femininity and masculinity as products which are commodified in the service rendered to the client.

A report - belonging to the firm where I conducted fieldwork - concerning outsourcing in June 2008 outlined the typical profile of a call centre operator: ‘female, with secondary school education, living in Lisbon and with an average age of 30 years. This statistical profile matched what I had seen while simply walking around the different ‘contact units’ at EVA. Commercial helplines were mostly staffed by women and technical helplines by men. In informal conversations, when I asked managers why

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safe and ‘female-friendly kind of work’. Boyer and England (2008) make a similar point in the case of office technology in the information services sector during the twentieth century in the US and Canada.

there was this sexual division the answers were usually evasive or that women only applied to commercial call centres and men only applied to technical ones. The official discourse was that the individuals themselves make that choice and not management.

The team coordinator of the technical support helpline where I conducted fieldwork answered the question as follows:

> Technical helplines are more demanding because we have active services involved. A commercial helpline is designed to deliver information. I am not saying that delivering the correct information is not important, because incorrect information may cause problems…Commercial questions are closed because there aren't many options, the price of a service is x, and so on… Technical questions are always more unpredictable because technically speaking nothing is exact, there is always a certain degree of unpredictability and each case is a case.

Technical helplines are therefore more *demanding* in terms of the information being given to the client; they demand creativity from the workers due to the unpredictability of the technical problems raised by clients. When I asked him if the company deliberately segmented the workers it hired he denied it. He disavowed the responsibility of the firm and cited the social consensus which treats men as being more suited to technical work:

> I think the social understanding which is rooted in us [Portuguese] is that technical areas are areas for men. This means that if a client calls a technical line and he is answered by a man most likely he will be more satisfied and reassured than if answered by a woman. Concerning commercial helplines it will be the reverse. … I think that socially we still have that orientation

Of course I was not expecting management to admit they had a clear strategy of giving clients what they demand, that is, of providing gendered products because clients equate a female voice with sympathy, availability and docility and a male voice with creativity, technical capacity and determination. Nevertheless, while listening to calls and questioning both male and female operators such a strategy is revealed to its full extent.

It was common to hear from the male operators I followed harsh commentaries and an abundance of stereotypes about the work being done by their female colleagues on the commercial helplines. As I said in chapter five, the company which provided land-line services for the corporate clients has two main contact units, the commercial and the technical one. There are situations in which these two contact units have to

communicate with each other. Such situations occur when, for instance, a client calls the technical helpline complaining that the broadband service is not working properly and the operator discovers that this is due to a missed payment. In such situations the operator has to transfer the client to the commercial helpline. The reverse can also occur if a client calls the commercial helpline to inquire about the conditions of a new service and afterwards asks for help in the configuration of the router.

Among male operators workers on commercial helplines are considered as the *ralé* (rabble) of call centres. The work carried out, as opposed to technical support, is considered repetitive, boring, unskilled and subservient. The existence of answering scripts in commercial helplines is one of the features referred to by male technical operators as a way of distinguishing what they do from what their female colleagues do in the commercial sector. The answering script is interpreted as a form of work mechanization leading workers to function like automatic machines, lacking the skills of creativity and improvisation.

Another important distinction circulated through rumours among male operators is the difference in how wages are paid in the technical and the commercial helplines. That is, according to these rumours the service agreement between the TAW and the user firm establishes that in the technical helplines the user firm pays for each hour of work and for the commercial ones the user firm pays for each call answered. In the commercial helpline full-time operators have a daily target of 2300 points, receiving two points for each call answered. If operators exceed the target they are paid 0.50 Euro per call answered.

There was a pronounced tendency among male operators to distinguish themselves from the mechanization of the answering script as well as from the strictly monetary motivation for answering calls. In contrast to the work on commercial helplines, men see their work as more creative, inventive and less dependent on the number of calls answered - although they do have targets to be achieved, which are evaluated monthly. The most important issue for male operators was to deny that their work could be equated with the ‘dull’ work carried out by their female colleagues. The following extract from an interview with a male operator reveals not only how commercial operators are judged by male operators, but also how the latter interpret the client’s reactions to women or men:

Q: what differences do you think there are between commercial and technical help lines?
A: speaking freely the commercial helpline is the *ralé* [rabble], full stop. If a client calls us and if it has nothing to do with technical support we just pass it over to the commercial. If we wanted we could try to help them but we don't. So, to start with, I think there is that distinction, because they cannot do the same with us. [he changes the subject while answering the question and starts talking about how differently clients who call the technical helpline react if they are answered by a man or a woman] If a client has a technical problem and if he has been waiting for the past two weeks to get the problem solved he will certainly react differently towards a man and a women. I mean, if the woman hesitates the client will not give her a break. If a man hesitates maybe the client will excuse him… Because the client will immediately have this preconceived idea, 'if it's a woman she should be at home washing the dishes or doing some other kind of housework.', if it's a man, even if he hesitates, the client will give him another chance of trying to solve the problem.

The understanding of this operator concerning the client's reactions to a male or female voice is widely shared among the male operators I interviewed. Furthermore, the operators themselves tend to comply with the same stereotypical views on the 'natural' abilities of men and women, as I show in the next section. What is surprising is the extent to which both clients and male operators – the latter having an average age of 28 years as I show in the next chapter – reinforce long-lasting ideological dichotomies which legitimize women's social subordination such as the distinction between public and private (Rosaldo 1974), or between movement and fixity (Bradley 1989).

Given the pervasive client-orientation philosophy in the call centre sector managers capitalize on these ideological dichotomies even if they do not acknowledge a formal segregation in job allocation. The simple fact that this difference is not contradicted – for instance by encouraging the allocation of women to technical helplines and men to commercial ones - is in itself evidence of compliance with stereotypical views regarding female – passive and subservient - and male – active and rational – voices.

7.2. Masculinised power, technology and the 'feminine other'

The fact that commercial helplines are mainly staffed by women in contrast to the technical helplines did not surprise my male interviewees. The ease with which male workers accept this distinction actively contributes to the reproduction of an

unequal gendered relation among call centre operators belonging to different contact units. Moreover, male workers' views concerning the 'natural inclination' of men towards technology also suggest a rhetoric and practice of masculinity which is set up by reference to a 'feminine other' to which are implicitly attributed other kinds of interest such as managing the household and raising children. In this section I provide evidence of this rhetoric based on interviews carried out with the group of male operators from the technical support helpline which I followed more closely.

This group had since the beginning insisted that their call centre was 'somehow different from the others'. They repeatedly claimed the difference was because theirs was mostly composed of men. When asked about the advantages of being only men working together one operator replied:

> The fact that we are all men helps a lot. We have a good sense of comradeship among ourselves; we can speak freely without problems… I don't know… We have two women in the line, its not because of them that we do not have a good work environment… But in general, and this is a personal opinion, I think that when it comes to technical issues men are more suited because we are more out-going, and you need that in technical areas…

The advantage of being able to 'speak freely among themselves' was always underlined. Not simply because of the conversations concerning electronics and computing but also because men are considered to be less sensitive to what is called the 'natural aggressive talk' among men. As another operator remarked: 'Sometimes we need to use a more careful language towards women because they are more sensitive. I had a female colleague whom I had to reprimand and she almost started crying…'.

According to the operators not only are men more aggressive but they are also more rational, that is to say, less emotional than women, which is also an underlined reason for the existence of more men on technical helplines. As noted earlier, on technical helplines the level of complaints is particularly intense, another reason they give for men being particularly suited to the job. Male operators said this was not just their own opinion but was also shared by clients. One of the operators expressed exactly this to me by recounting an incident which had happened with him more than once in the course of work. This operator has - according to himself and his colleagues – a feminised voice. Adding to this his name is also ambiguous, being easily mistaken for a feminine name. More than once clients thought they were talking with a woman.

In difficult situations where the client was complaining in harsh and rude language the operator would interrupt him in order to correct the client by pointing out that he was talking with a man. According to the operator this was a powerful technique because the client would then immediately change his tone of voice and be less aggressive and less arrogant.

This story exemplifies and confirms the shared understanding among male operators that clients (both male and female) are more aggressive towards women than men: 'The client is more aggressive towards a female voice than a strong voice. If an operator answers a call with a strong and secure voice the client will immediately calm down, of course that it can depend on the person, but generally this is what happens.'

The reason that clients are more aggressive towards women than men is their view that technology is not 'women's work'; technology and computing are men's work. The extent to which both clients and operators reproduce this gendered division of tasks is illustrated by another operator's remarks on why there are more men working on technical support helplines:

> Honestly, I think it's basically because women are afraid (…) When a group of men starts talking with each other about technologies and related subjects *it comes out naturally, it's fluid…* But if you talk with a woman about that, I don't know if it has to do with ignorance on that kind of matter or if it is because they do not care, but their reply will be 'OK, so what's fun about that?'. It's like, I turn to my friend and I say 'look I just got a new camera, it has 3 megapixels', and he will say 'oh, that is amazing'. If it is a woman she will reply 'look, it's only a camera, you are all a bunch of geeks'. For instance, our colleague Luísa, she was already working here before I came but maybe her husband had chosen that for her! Our other female colleague I don't understand, I really don't think there is any apparent reason for her to be here. I don't know if it was because she really needed the job or if she liked the environment. Maybe she finally felt something in her life which she had not felt before, maybe it was like going into the army! [Laughter]

This operator's comment was repeated in various circumstances and with different interlocutors. It was not an isolated comment; on the contrary it was the most stressed shared opinion among male workers: men have a natural tendency to deal with issues of technology and computing. From this it follows that women who happen to work in this area are only there for one of two reasons. Either they were influenced by their husbands and partners (as Luísa, above) or by having rediscovered themselves as 'new persons' leading a woman to 'feel something she has never felt before in her life'. Which is to say, they have rediscovered themselves as 'real workers', that is, as men.

Thus he likens the arrival of his second female colleague at the technical helpline to going into the army (considered to be a masculine rite of passage in Portugal).

The group of male operators which I followed used the equation masculinity=technology as a form of exercising power over their female colleagues on the commercial help lines. By exercising power I mean presenting themselves as more dynamic, rational and proactive than their female colleagues on the commercial helplines whom they subordinate as 'inauthentic workers' (Cockburn 1985: 185). In the next section I continue to explore how the assertion of masculinity is expressed on the call centre shop floor, particularly through *ritualized sexism*.

7.3. Precarious labour, call centres and the threat of 'demasculinization'

Paul Willis, writing in the late 1970s, argued that the common-sense definition of gender was very much based on the socially accepted stereotype of the woman's role as being to 'provide the emotional home for the family, and to wipe out the brow of the "bread winner": this is seen not as work but as a service, or a state of being' (Willis 1979: 187). Focusing on British working-class culture Paul Willis began by asserting that 'the system of capitalism still means essentially, despite its contemporary "human face", that labour is bought, detached from the individual, and directed towards the production of commodities for the profit of others. Labour is dispossessed from its owners' (Ibid.: 187). The principal effects of this dispossession are most pronounced in the case of jobs which are boring, repetitive and mindless. In the midst of this constant feeling of being dispossessed through the course of work Paul Willis argued that individuals pursue meaning in their activity through the 'celebration of shared values, symbols and artefacts'.

In the course of doing this, individuals constitute what is called a 'culture of recognition'. That is, individuals appropriate what they do on terms which allow them to recognize themselves in what they and their colleagues are doing. This is, however, one could say, the 'benign version' of the male fight against capitalist alienation. What was not envisioned by Willis was the different form this same male 'culture of recognition' takes when it is pursued within the context of devalued and feminized labour. Here, I argue, the manner in which male workers assert their masculinity is shaped by a set of discourses and practices which in general imply the cultural and

social construction of female inferiority. In particular situations this verges on misogyny, as I show.

The generation of Portuguese male workers which has entered the call centre sector in the last two decades faces an opposition between the employment conditions they were able to achieve and the social expectations which were raised for them by their parents and extended family. After the April revolution the country was infused with hopes of a better future for the generation which was then being born. In spite of the specific incorporation of ideas of stable employment in Portugal (explored in chapter 2), this generation grew up thinking that their future working trajectory was going to be based on the ideas of better education and stable wage-labour.

The connection between masculinity and the stable wage earner, 'a good provider for the family' particularly in rural areas, was for a long time a normative model through which to think about work, the life-cycle and the sexual division of labour in Portugal (Almeida 1996: 68), and other western countries, particularly wage labour (Connell 1995). Since the inclusion of Portugal in the European Union (1986) neoliberal policies regarding greater flexibility in employment relations and the privatization of key sectors of the economy have changed the possibilities of achieving the expected middle-class lifestyle associated with having a career, a long-term job on which to plan the future and constitute a family. This expectation was many times illustrated by the male workers I followed in the technical call centre. Quite often male workers would complain about low wages, precarious employment conditions and the reluctant realization that work in the call centre was a 'profession without a future'.

The male operators often connected feelings of dispossession to being a temporary worker. Being a precarious worker was never explicitly connected with feelings of being 'less of a man' or with the threat of demasculinization. Nevertheless, the male shop floor culture I encountered in the call centre derived from these fears given the almost teleological relationship which they saw between labour power and the nature of masculinity. Correspondingly, they also feared incorporation in a devalued (feminized) regime of labour. That is, call centres are in many respects taken to be a feminine kind of work of which the remote image of women in the old telephone exchanges is perhaps the most obvious symbol. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the feminization of call centre labour is not confined to the fact that women constitute the majority of the workforce. That is, it is not only a matter of quantitative feminization. Deborah Cameron (2000b) anticipated what I came to observe during

fieldwork, that the commodification of language in call centre work involves both scripting (standardization) and styling (genderization). 'Styling the worker' within call centres involves establishing frames for *how* to talk; and these frames are symbolically coded as feminine; "the style is gendered, produced through a consistent and deliberate preference for ways of speaking that are symbolically coded as 'feminine'(Ibid.: 333) – to show a smile in the voice, expressive intonation; rapport/empathy; minimal responses (see chapter 6).

As I showed in the first section of this chapter the typification of speaking as feminine is not the only orientation, although it is certainly the preferred one. Management and male call centre operators are compliant with a hierarchical division between commercial (feminine) and technical (masculine) helplines. Male domination prevails over a devalued and feminized labour regime, which allows management to commodify femininity and women's inferiority, both products of a patriarchal social order. That is, femininity and masculinity within the call centre sector are not 'two sides of the same coin'. This does not prevent male call centre operators from feeling the 'threat of demasculinization' inherent in the typification of call centre work as feminine. Thus, precarious employment conditions and a kind of work which is taken to be feminine in many of its aspects produce on the male shop floor a culture of assertive masculinity, composed of several elements. There are mostly expressed in *ritualized sexism* and which is address in the next section.

7.3.1. Ritualized sexism

The first element of the culture of assertive masculinity consists of male workers regularly planning activities to be carried out outside the workplace. These weekly activities consist of gatherings for car tuning, street racing, football, 'lan-parties' and working-out in the gym near the call centre. 'Lan-parties' usually take place in the house or flat of one of the operators. All the workers bringing their laptops which are then connected in a network. They play games while drinking, listening to music and watching films. The themes of the movies run from terror to soft pornography. During the week, events which happened during the weekly gathering are discussed and joked about in the breaks from work. Male call centre workers have their own language for discussing these events which sets them apart from the other 'contact units'. This is an example of what they mean when they say of male

comradeship 'we can talk freely among ourselves'. They also engage in extensive bodily activity (gymnastics, football, etc) which they interpret as being in control of their bodies and emotions in contrast to the stereotype of the 'naturally sensitive woman'.

The second element of the culture of assertive masculinity - which was also noted by Willis (1977: 56) - is the continuous assertion of the value of practice over theory. In the call centre this distinction takes the shape of an obsessive enthusiasm about the latest technological equipment (routers, mobile phones, web software, etc). The issues are not only discussed but the equipment is also brought into the workplace in order for everyone to have a chance to 'play around' with it. Colleagues usually refer to each other as 'technological geeks' who are more interested in touching the equipment and learning its internal workings than in speculating which is best based on the advertised characteristics.

This element is connected to a third one which also resembles what Willis described as being the hope of each worker of 'repossessing some control over one's labour power'. By mastering the latest technological novelties male call centre workers encourage the belief among new and old colleagues that their tasks involve a certain 'mastery' which the commercial lines (composed of women) do not have. This mastery is not only claimed on the basis 'that men have a natural leaning to technology' but also as a form of achieving recognition among peers for their performance of work tasks.

The fourth element, ritualized sexism, runs across the previous elements and is mostly disseminated through jokes, aggressive macho humour and badinage; as well as chauvinism as noted by Willis (1977: 53). One illustrative example of such ritualized sexism is described in the two boxes below. The first box contains a text which was sent out by email to all the team (including permanent workers) by a male operator. It refers to an imagined automatic cash machine style drive-in which contains specific instructions for men and women.

Figure 14: Email I – Imaginary drive-in automatic cash machine, use instructions for women

The Portuguese have just invented the DRIVE-IN ATM machine. It is equal to all other ATM machines but this one is specifically located in order to allow users to stay in their cars while getting cash. Please follow the group of instructions which better apply to yourself.

Men

1. Drive to the ATM machine
2. Open the car window
3. Insert debit card and PIN number
4. Select the amount of money you wish to withdraw
5. Collect your money, card and receipt
6. Close the car window
7. Keep on driving

Women

1. Drive to the ATM machine
2. Reverse the car one metre in order to align it with the ATM machine
3. Stop the car
4. Open the car window
5. Open your bag, take out the make-up pouch and find the debit card
6. Check your make-up in the rear-view window
7. Attempt to put the card in the ATM machine (open the car door in order to more easily access the machine due to the distance between the car and the machine)
8. Insert debit card
9. Re-open the bag and locate the pack of cigarettes where the PIN number is written down
10. Insert PIN number, cancel, insert PIN number again
11. Select the amount of money you wish to withdraw
12. Check your make-up and hair in the rear-view window
13. Remove your money and receipt
14. Locate your bag and keep your money
15. Locate your check book where you will keep your money
16. Check your make-up again
17. Go forward two metres in your car
18. Reverse the car two metres in order to align the window with the ATM machine
19. Remove your card
20. Locate the card pouch in your bag and keep your card
21. Check make-up again
22. Turn on the ignition and go
23. Drive for 3 km
24. Release the handbrake

This text was sent out by email and aroused many jokes and comments among the male members of the team as well as extensive elaboration of two main themes. The first was the stereotype of the ‘silly woman’, expressed by her obsession with her

appearance set out in opposition to men who are seen as self-directed, pragmatic and effective in their actions. The second was a woman's supposed lack of orientation and physical agility when dealing with machines, in contrast to the supposed inherent ability of men to operate any machine.

On the day this email was sent I was following one of the two women working in the call centre. Maybe due to my presence Luísa decided to answer the email by retelling the story from a feminine point of view, which she called the 'realist version'. The second text is in the box below.

Figure 15: Email II - Imaginary drive-in automatic cash machine, use instructions for men

Reduced and realist version of ATM machines/DRIVE-IN

Men

1. Drive to the ATM machine after beating up the front car which was preparing to leave
2. Open the door outraged while beating up someone who was passing by
3. Argue with the person while the front car calls the police
4. Scream at the person who has called the police while looking for the car documents
5. Get into the car and speed away (because you do not have a driving license)
6. Keep on driving at high speed going through red traffic lights and afraid that the police might detect the number plate
7. Give back the car to its owner (who also does not have a driving license) without speaking of the incident
8. Call your sister asking her to take you by car to the DRIVE-IN ATM machine

Women

1. Drive to the ATM machine at a less busy time
2. Look around you in order to be sure that it is safe to open the car window and insert card
3. Press your code and select the desired operation
4. While the operation is being processed check your make-up in the rear-view window, and look around
5. Remove and keep your money and card in your bag, while taking a look at the receipt
6. Look with disdain to the guy who is in the back car waiting
7. Close the car window and your handbag slowly
8. Go forward and brake immediately so as not kill the cat who just crossed your path
9. Listen to a pronounced bang and feel big jolt
10. Call the police without getting out of the car
11. Remove your daily agenda and pen from your bag, take note of the licence plate of the car which was speeding away, deliver it to the police

In this second story the stereotypical assumption regarding femininity is met by another stereotype regarding masculinity. Men are defined as aggressive, careless and

‘female dependent’. This over-turning of the first story was, however, an exception to what usually happens at the call centre, which is the silencing of the two women working there. Although I could endlessly quote many other stories, jokes which were either sent out by email or were said in person by ‘one of the guys’ they all tend to ritualize sexism as a form of asserting masculinity. Another example is quoted in the box below:

Figure 16: Email III – Sexist humour

***Computador* or *computadora*?[59] – the differences between Portuguese and Spanish**
While talking with a Spanish friend I raised the following question:
-Why is it that computer in Spanish is a feminine word, that is, *computadora*?
My friend answered firmly:
-It is scientifically proved that computers are from the feminine sex, without a shadow of doubt.
Then I asked:
-Ok, give me one reason
He gave me several
Here are a group of scientific reasons which attest that computers are females:
1-Once you get one there is one better in the nearest corner
2-Nobody, besides the Creator, is able to understand its internal logic
(*Very good*!)
3-Even the smallest mistakes that you might make are kept in its memory for future reference
(*This is one is fatal*!)
4-The native language used among computers is incomprehensible by any other species
5-The message ‘bad command’ or ‘file name’ is as informative as ‘if you don’t know why I am upset I am not going to be the one who is going to explain it to you!!’
(*This one is great*!)
6-Once you choose a given computer, no matter which, soon you will be spending all your salary buying accessories…
7-Computers are able to rapidly process information, but they do not think…
(*This one is very very bad!*)
8-Your friend and neighbour’s computer is always better than the one you have at home
(*This one is really mean…*)
9-Computers do not do anything unless you order them to
(*This one is terrible!*)
10-It is always at the most important moments that your computer stops
Does anyone still have any doubts that computers are from the female sex?????

[59] Computer in Portuguese is a masculine word – *computador* – and in Spanish a feminine word – *computadora*.

The extreme sexism (verging on misogyny) contained in this story and expressed by male operators on the call centre shop floor through jokes, comments and gestures while talking is not in itself new to anthropological and sociological research (Willis 1977; Bourgois 1996; Mills 2003). Mary Beth Mills (2003) elaborates on the 'crisis of masculinity' associated with global migrant male workers who experience marginalization and economic insecurity as a denial of their masculinity; but also white workers in developed countries who face the loss of relatively high-paying working class jobs to de-industrialization or the loss of managerial positions under corporate downsizing (54).

For instance, describing his experience of conducting research among mineworkers in Zambia James Ferguson (1999) observed that:

> The objectifying and sexually instrumental nature of the mineworkers' discussion about women did not, itself surprise me. Mineworking communities all over the world tend to be male enclaves, where the stereotypically masculine nature of the labour process and the gendered solidarity of manual workers create a receptive environment for male supremacist ideologies. (…) The man's world genre of joking sociality that I encountered while drinking with mineworkers – the incessant sexual banter, the stylized 'naughtiness' of men demonstrating their superiority from women – often became tedious to me but it was hardly unfamiliar; on the contrary, it presented only a specific instance of an only-too-familiar global pattern of working-class male sexism (…) But if I was prepared for all of this, at some level, I was not prepared for the intensity of the working men's misogyny, which was extreme and unremitting (188)

I was not prepared either for the reality I encountered, although I was previously aware of anthropological studies which had documented similar realities in very different socio-cultural contexts. In call centres, the male operator's adherence to the practices and discourses which constitute ritualized sexism actively reinforces management goals of embedding gender in the commodified products of labour. The commodification of a gender regime lends itself usefully to the goals of providing the client with the expected service, that is, with the expected male or female voice. In order to account for the effects that the male shop floor culture earlier described has on women, I concentrate in the next section on the point of view of the 'feminine other', which also reveals the extent of naturalization of the 'mythology of masculine reputation' (Willis 1977).

7.4. The view from the 'feminine other': Luísa's story

Luísa was 30 years old at the time of the interview in 2008. She was born in Sintra, a village which is officially part of Lisboa, located around 20 km from the centre of the city. Her parents were both born in Lisboa although their extended family comes from other regions of the country. Her father worked all his life as a mechanic in a telecommunications factory called Alcatel-Lucatel – he was in the process of retirement when we had our conversation – and her mother was never engaged in paid employment outside the house. When her father decided to initiate the retirement process her mother started working part-time as a social worker in a primary school in order to help with the expenses of the household.

Luísa did not have any working experience before starting her graduate studies at the university. In Portugal young people usually finish their secondary school studies at the age of 18 as did Luísa. At that age, she was able to enter state university to do a course on Modern Literature (variants French and German) at the University of Lisboa. When people apply for state university in Portugal they can choose six options. Modern Literature was not her first option but she did not have the necessary grades to take her first options, which were anthropology and sociology. In the second year of her undergraduate studies she decided to quit because she was feeling disenchanted with the course and her future prospects of work after finishing it.

7.4. 1. Entry into precarious and male jobs

At 19 years old she travelled by train through Europe with colleagues and after that stayed for five months in Germany with a family. She had a couple of part-time jobs in Germany mostly as a waitress in restaurants and coffee shops. She then returned to Portugal and started working as a waitress in a famous bar in the centre of Lisboa, where she stayed for six years. During six years she did not have any kind of employment contract and this is how she described those years:

> Look Patrícia I worked for a long time in a bar. I worked there, I did a course on barmaid work, a professional course, very interesting (…) I was 20 years old (…) they allowed me to stay there but if I decided to leave, I would leave without any kind of social benefits. I had a couple of wild years… I stayed there for six years

> without any kind of [employment] contract. When I started working there I was highly exploited, I didn't know the value of people's work. There were persons who were earning more than double what I was earning [I asked her how much her salary was, she replied that she preferred not say because 'I am ashamed of it']

Luísa started by working six hours a day, from Tuesday to Sunday, and after one year began working eight hours a day, from 6.00pm to 02.00am. After four years working in the bar Luísa began thinking that being a 'barmaid' was not a job she could do for the rest of her life. She began to think up projects for the future, moving out from her parents' house, to be a mother and buy a car, as she told me. All these thoughts stimulated her to think of investing some money and time in professional training. She decided to go to the job centre where she was informed that most of the training possibilities were with computing and electronics. This was in 2002. Computing was not an area with which Luísa was acquainted but in those days in Portugal there was the rumour that it was a growing sector of job opportunities besides having the reputation of being very well paid. She decided to start the course, which lasted for two years.

During these two years she met the person who was to become her partner. Sérgio was also doing the course for reasons very similar to hers and one year later they began living together in a small flat in Lisboa belonging to his parents. In 2004 Luísa finished the professional course on computing and decided to quit the bar work to start looking for work in the area she was being trained for. She soon realized that this was not an easy task. The boom in computing was in those days reaching its end, that is, there were almost no job opportunities available although she tried persistently to find them in journals, through the internet and friends.

7.4.2. The feminine other in the call centre sector

For the two years that she was looking for a job she had several part-time and low-paid jobs. As she told me she had several 'little jobs': she worked in a clothing store as a saleswoman; as a part-time waitress; doing 'cultural animation' in shopping centres which involved distribution of material for primary school students; and she also had her first job in the call centre sector. In 2005 she had her first work experience in a call centre delivering support on software and hardware malfunctions to

technicians at a mobile phone company. She did not stay there for long as her contract was terminated. Afterwards she began working in another call centre, this time providing commercial support for an online clothing company. In 2006 she became pregnant and with financial help from both her parents and her partner's parents she stopped working. She had several health problems during the pregnancy which did not allow her to continue working. Her partner, Sérgio, was already working at EVA on the technical support helpline. In 2007 she began working part-time at EVA.

This short resumé of some of Luísa's options – some voluntary, others not – does not in itself reveal one of the most important aspects about her trajectory: the fact that from an early age she had been involved in jobs, which for a long period of time in Portugal, were considered to be in a 'male occupation'. The job as a 'barmaid' was certainly one of those. In the generation of her parents a woman working night shifts in a bohemian environment socially with drugs and drinking was socially condemned. Her later option of proceeding with training in computing presents similar characteristics which will be clearer later in this section. For this reason I always considered that Luísa's point of view and reflections on her working experiences would reveal much about the social reception of women in male-dominated occupations. At one moment in the interview I asked her if she had ever felt discriminated against by the simple fact of being a woman. To which she replied:

> I think I am vaccinated against that because my course [the professional course on computing] was very difficult… I can tell you the following: there were only men, the teachers were men, it came to a point that I was so fed up with all of that. The course was almost like a job, we spent around eight hours a day, in the same room, every day for two years, so I had to learn... *Because I thought we were all equal until I went through that experience*. Because then I understood that men do say things, have certain thoughts, do certain things among themselves which are not open to the world of women. Here you can also see that happening, in the beginning I was very sensitive to that but now I am vaccinated against that. You can see that here but it used to be much worse when we were alone in a room. And the truth is that each person is a person.

Later I realised how naïve my question was because it was too intrusive, too straightforward. That is, in our second interview I realised that in order to get an answer to that question in particular – if she had felt discriminated against as a woman in the jobs she had been doing – I would have to listen carefully. In spite of her vague response she did mention one important intuition she had 'I thought we were all equal

until I had that experience' (she is referring to the professional training on computing). In our second interview I asked her why it was worse at EVA before the location of the call centre inside the same building was changed. To which she replied:

> There was a lot of pornography, there were several stories… look, sometimes it was very difficult. Sometimes it's very difficult to be always in the mood to socialize, you feel that there is barrier… Then it's like this, *everything you say as a woman sounds like a joke to them* … When I was doing the course the boys in my class could say whatever they wanted but if you as a woman opened your mouth to say anything they would immediately distort what you were saying and give it other meanings! You needed to have a way of being, it had to be immaculate; otherwise it would all fall apart. It was very easy to leave the class feeling awful, because they show certain images, and then the teachers joke about that. (…) And then you are there, I mean… If it was a coloured person they would not say 'they are all like this', but in my case nobody though that was a form of discrimination. I think that… That was really not good for my well-being… But in the end maybe it was a good vaccine. Because in this area I will always work with more men than women… (…) Meanwhile there were other women who came and went, and I kept observing their adaptation. Because I know it is not easy…

This reflection on how everything 'was worse' in the early days when she began working at the call centre reveals several aspects of how masculinity is enacted by reference to a 'feminine other' and which I would find during the period of fieldwork. Taken together, the several aspects mentioned by Luísa constitute a form of ritualized sexism. The first aspect she mentions is the frequent exchange of pornographic videos and emails, some of them containing scenes which are sexually violent and sadistic towards women. I found this often during fieldwork, although my presence was in several circumstances an impediment for such exchanges to happen. Watching videos was usually followed by small talk which involved making extensive sexist jokes on every aspect of the video. This was always followed by conversations which involved the objectification of women. One example – among several – of this kind of conversation took place in one of the cigarettes breaks. The topic under discussion was the 'woman with the perfect body'. The conversation began with remarks about several parts of the bodies of their female colleagues on the commercial helplines. After which the conversation reached a consensus when one of the male operators suggested that the perfect woman would be 'made' by 'cutting one piece from each of them and then putting them together'.

The second point made by Luísa concerned the damaging effects this male shop floor culture has on women who try to work in this environment. She referred to her feelings of being diminished by not being taken seriously by her male colleagues - 'everything that you say as a woman sounds like a joke to them …' – and also her conviction that women have to monitor their own behaviour constantly in order not to provide an excuse for jokes or humour ('You needed to have a way a being, it had to be immaculate; otherwise it would all fall apart. It was very easy to leave the class feeling awful, because they show certain images, and then the teachers joke about that').

The third aspect mentioned by Luísa is quite revealing of way the constitution of masculine power over the 'feminine other' is made to seem natural. Luísa illustrates the kind of discrimination she felt by comparing women with black men. She further adds that if a male black colleague made a comment which was the subject of jokes and if his white male colleagues responded, 'they are all the same', this would be considered as discrimination. But where women are the target of such comments 'no one considered that a form of discrimination'.

When Luísa referred to episodes which happened to one of her female colleagues she made this point even more insistently:

> Do you remember that girl who was here, the one who was my friend? You know who she is… Well, she was very peculiar… They were always saying that she was stupid. Then there was another girl that ended up leaving for the same reasons. I think I am the one who has been here longest because I have a certain degree of protection. (…) when it comes to all others the truth is that culturally technical areas are still men's work. When women are recruited the usual comment is 'now they want to bring women onto this line'… This is not going to change quickly…

With this comment Luísa justified her male colleagues behaviour towards women using arguments about the social and cultural perception of technical work as a 'man's job'. And for this reason behaviour towards women is not going to change quickly. As she noted, when women are recruited the usual comment is 'now they want to bring women onto this line'. The personal cost for women of having to negotiate the weight of deeply engrained social stereotypes, in order to be seen as fellow workers alongside men, is portrayed by Luísa when she remarks that:

> You feel bad, you do, I have to be honest about that. But you have to learn how to deal with that. Unfortunately I did feel bad. I am so sorry because of that… (…) We have to be always proving that we are good, not only in the workplace but also in social relations… (…) You have to listen to all kinds of things but you have to think 'this is not personal'. This is cultural, they are doing the macho role, do you understand? (…) But you need to have confidence in yourself, you have to. You cannot allow for that kind of thing to put you down… I think like this: there are persons in worse situations, there are persons who are dwarves, and it's not their fault, it's not. But I think like this, if I am weak I am also telling that person to be weak. Or that person with a different colour from mine to be weak. And I cannot allow them to do this to me… I cannot.

It is worth bringing out some of the aspects which are mentioned by Luísa in this interview excerpt where she told me for the first time that she had felt discriminated against among her male colleagues. The first aspect is related to how she says that after feeling discriminated against in several informal moments - and after describing these events as 'sad' events – she remarks that 'we have to be always proving that we are good.. Not only on the level of work but also in social relations'. For women to be tolerated in male-dominated occupations they have to present a kind of *persona* at work which is both neutral and non-reactive. Again, the issue of having to be constantly engaged in self-monitoring behaviour comes up as something which has to be present in both the processes of work and also in relations outside the workplace. The second aspect is the response exemplified by Luísa in order to monitor her own behaviour when referring to her male colleagues: 'This is not personal, this is cultural, they are doing the macho role, do you understand?. Luísa does not take it personally because it is cultural. The cultural idiom which is the source of women's social subordination is simultaneously its source of reification. That is, by engaging with a custom of depersonalizing comments and behaviour from her male colleagues she is also, in order to protect herself, showing compliance towards 'the rules of the game'. However, it is a sort of game which does not have equal effects upon men and women. Luísa illustrates exactly this when she remarks that:

> They may say that I am stupid, or that I am something else… That I like to gossip because that is what women do… You have to show with intelligence that you do not take personally such insults, that is the first thing to do. If you do that they will lose interest… I think that I made some gains by acting like that, I never had a direct confrontation with anyone… but still, it is sad… We know that it is sad, it will never stop being sad if you know that people do not see you as someone equal. It is not only equal in capacities… I don't even know how to explain…

Although ‘compliance in the game’ may bring immediate rewards at work – such as decreasing the level of face-to-face confrontation between women and men – it also consolidates the feeling of not being seen as ‘someone equal’.

Luísa’s story is revealing not only of how damaging it is for women to develop a career in a field traditionally occupied by men but also of the personal costs involved. She repeatedly mentions feelings of being diminished, discriminated against and even of being constituted as ‘the other’ who is not seen as an equal human being. Her story also reveals – and confirms – that management in the call centre sector is compliant with the strategies of ritualized sexism in which male workers engage. Management complies with shop floor sexism because it helps the company to deliver the ‘expected service to the client’ and is thus profitable. As the team coordinator quoted in the beginning of this chapter argues: ‘I think the social understanding which is rooted in us [Portuguese] is that technical areas are areas for men. This means that if a client calls a technical line and he is answered by a man most likely he will be more satisfied and reassured than if answered by a woman. Concerning commercial help lines it will be the reverse’.

7.5. Conclusion

I began this chapter by addressing how call centre firms capitalize on gendered hierarchies in order to best deliver to the client the ‘expected service’. This was described as being in the first place inscribed on the workers’ bodies given that the central work carried out by operators is with their voices. Firms are compliant with gender stereotypes which define female voices as sweet and docile and male voices as assertive and competent. The stereotype that the female voice is ‘nicer’ and ‘smoother’ and that a male voice is more ‘credible’ and commanding is reproduced in the division between commercial and technical helplines. This division, however, is not a neutral one, it is power-laden. That is, female skills are taken to be intrinsic to women – caring in the household, nurturing the children, while men’s skills have to be acquired through creative apprenticeship – the special mastery of technical work which male call centre operators gain from playing around with equipment and ‘being creative’. Cecilia Ng and Swasti Mitter (2005b) make a similar point when they remark that:

> [W]omen's interpersonal skills are now being recognized and valued economically. In the workplace, these skills are used by women who work in diverse fields, such as human resources, public relations, and training, but these skills are hardly ever given an overt value. They are considered 'intrinsic', if not invisible skills of women. However, in call centers, a premium is attached to women's voices and their interpersonal skills as these are closely connected to the quality of customer care, and ultimately, will ensure the profitability of the company. Research in the 1980's and early 1990's on computerization and women office workers, pointed out how these interpersonal, cognitive, and experiential skills remain hidden and invisible because they are associated with 'women's jobs'. Recommendations were then put forth to recognize and reward these skills (154)

In the Portuguese call centre sector the gendering of the products of labour has one further consequence which is determined by the precarious conditions of employment. That is, the reason why male call centre workers are compliant with the gendered division of labour promoted by management – through *ritualized sexism* – is enhanced by a generational frustration at being unable to follow their fathers' path of being the 'breadwinner' of the family in democratic times. While their fathers were able to achieve financial independence and to support the family during a period of dictatorship – that is, they were able to 'be a man' - their sons could not achieve this in the era of democracy. The gap between expectations and achievement is certainly one of the main reasons for the need to assert masculinity against the metaphorical threat of 'demasculinization' attached to the devalued (feminized) call centre regime of labour.

Given the underlying power relations between gendered conceptions of what being a man or a woman means, the assertion of masculinity by resorting to old stereotypes has unequal consequences. The reinforcement of a 'feminine other' has damaging costs for women who have tried to gain access to male-dominated occupations as is evident in Luísa's career - even taking into account the fact that she has been able to hold onto the job in the call centre. Moreover, following Linda Lim's argument (1983), in strictly economics terms all workers are exploited because they receive less than the value of the products of their labour, but the degree of exploitation is not the same for all workers. In the call centre sector women are not only exploited because they receive less than their labour output but also because their labour is socially downgraded as less skilled on the basis of gendered stereotypes - commercial support – than the one carried out by men – technical support.

In the previous chapter I argued that call centre work is pervaded by a latent paradox between the qualitative and quantitative targets set out by management to be

accomplished by workers. I have also argued that the high degree of formal and informal surveillance to which workers are subjected during the course of work has two main goals: control by accountability and the need to ensure human agential intervention in the labour process (improvisation) on which the creation of value is dependent. The human intervention which is needed is not simply 'talking', but the ability to communicate symbolically through the medium of language which distinguishes human beings from other species. Therefore, the call centre labour process contains an apparatus which allows the exploitation of human communicative competence.

Several authors have vividly explored how gendered ideologies contribute to capital accumulation focusing particularly on the functions of reproductive labour within the capitalist system as a form of reducing the value of labour power (Redclift 1985; Fortunati 1995; Federici 2004). Such authors have criticized the Marxist notion of productive labour for not treating the tasks involved in the reproduction of labour power, such as caring, feeding or nurturing people as productive work. As partly enunciated by Hoschchild (1983) when these tasks were transposed to the market, they remained subordinate to men's work. The call centre regime of labour besides presenting an advanced apparatus for the exploitation of inherently human communicative abilities also allows for the reproduction of women's subordination showing clear continuities with labour regimes in the past.

What I have tried to show in this chapter is that the specific framework of labour exploitation in the call centre regime of labour relies on a gender hierarchy (which stresses *how* to communicate) serving not only to reduce the costs of labour; but also to commodify both masculinity and femininity in the service rendered to the client. The embeddedness of a gender hierarchy in the commodified products of labour (between female and male voices) contributes to the reinforcement of a patriarchal social order in which the male voices are rational, dynamic and creative; and female voices are sweet, docile and subservient.

Luísa's story in the last section of this chapter anticipates the tone of the next chapter where I move beyond the workplace and concentrate particularly on workers' narratives about their sense of dispossession, stigma and relegation and how this impacts on their personal relationships and family.

CHAPTER 8

Beyond the workplace: shame, dispossession and stigma

The previous chapters have focused on the call centre labour process particularly the processes operating at the shop floor level. In this chapter, however, the focus will be on the workers' narratives concerning their work trajectories, their entry into call centre employment and their understanding of the consequences call centre work has on their lives, particularly the feelings of dispossession, shame and stigma. For the purposes of the research I conducted forty semi-structured interviews with call centre operators, all of them temporary workers. I had more than one interview with the majority of workers, each one lasting between two and four hours. In the technical call centre where fieldwork was conducted the majority of workers were men and only one worker among fifty two was affiliated with a union. In order to go beyond this limitation I also carried out interviews with workers with whom I was put in contact by the unions which participated in the research. There was another reason which led me to interview call centre workers outside the field site: it was my expectation that call centre workers attached to a union would speak more freely and with less constraints given that I was not a permanent presence at their workplaces and this indeed turned out be what happened.

At the field site, in the presence of a tape-recorder, workers would generally not speak freely about their feelings of discontent or frustration with the words and concepts I was expecting. Usually it was during the break for a cigarette or during lunchtime that workers talked 'of themselves through others'. I had previously outlined a set of questions to guide the interviews. This was meant to approach the following topics: 1, basic socio-demographical data (age, place of birth, place of residence, parents' profession, etc); 2, experience of work, school, family and personal relationships; 3, experience of work at the call centre and of precarious labour; 4, work projects for the future. The main goal, however, of the interviews was to understand how this specific regime of labour, enforced in the midst of insecurity and vulnerability, is justified and understood by workers and the effects it has on their lives, inside and outside the workplace.

Therefore, in this chapter I first provide a socio-demographical characterization of the workers interviewed. I next discuss how the feelings of resentment and

frustration expressed by workers are linked to their frustrated hopes of upward social mobility and I examine how the experience of dispossession is connected with their internalization of class inequality. The last two sections of this chapter address how workers interpret the feelings of shame and stigma both in their intimate circle of friends and family and also in the public sphere where call centre work is seen as inferior and mechanical. Throughout the chapter I present the data to substantiate my argument in the form of interview transcripts. These are meant to illustrate both the pathological effects of call centre labour and its causes. By doing this I hope to show how workers' narratives are embedded in the recent economic history of Portugal as well as how they are linked to the themes discussed in previous chapters.

8.1. Flexible trajectories, generation and resentment

Portugal was late in comparison with countries from North West Europe to institute state provision for welfare. Meanwhile, the ideal of 'job security' was only realized briefly and in urban centres. After the revolution of 1974, the introduction of democratic principles associated with a free health service, education and social security was accompanied by growing hopes of upward social mobility through, for instance, educational achievement. After the 1950s a great number of people migrated from the rural areas to the most important coastal cities such as Lisboa and Porto. These movements of migration to cities seemed to promise the opportunity of achieving better jobs and life conditions. Many of my interviewees' parents had made this 'trajectory of hope', some of them in the 1950s and some of them later. Their children were exposed, on the one hand, to a rhetoric of middle-class achievement associated with stable employment and educational achievement, and on the other hand, to the increased flexibility of employment relations intensified after the inclusion of Portugal in the European Union.

In this section I address two of the main responses to the entrapment between these two conflicting discourses. As narrated by my interviewees, they are resentment and frustration. I also address how these feelings are linked to the social hopes of upward mobility which were casted upon them; and the generational frustration which resulted from the failure of meeting these hopes.

8.1.1. Trajectories and social hopes

The great majority of my interviewees were originally from Lisboa and born after the April Revolution (1974). As the table bellow shows the average age of my interviewees was 28 years.

Table 4: Operators' year of birth and average age

Workers	Year of birth	Age in 2009
1	1982	27
2	1985	24
3	1984	25
4	1977	32
5	1980	29
6	1982	27
7	1984	25
8	1983	26
9	1978	31
10	1988	21
11	1985	24
12	1977	32
13	1980	29
14	1981	28
15	1983	26
16	1979	30
17	1974	35
18	1974	35
19	1980	29
20	1982	27
21	1986	23
22	1978	31
23	1973	36
24	1984	25
25	1976	33
26	1977	32
27	1979	30
28	1978	31
29	1981	28
30	1980	29
31	1979	30
32	1980	29
33	1985	24
34	1985	24
35	1983	26
36	1981	28
37	1977	32
38	1984	25
39	1987	22
40	1982	27
		Average age - 28

They grew up in a country desperately trying to change its reputation as the 'naturally poor and backward' country of southern Europe (see chapter 2). The beginning of their adult lives (mid 1990s) coincided with the diffusion of the myth of modernization and progress brought about by the Portugal's accession to the EU (1986) which the funds from the European community later reinforced. The myth of modernization was made real through the construction of major roads and highways which would reduce regional disparities, the argument went, by linking the country together. During the late 1990s there was also a visible change in habits of consumption, particularly, but not exclusively, in cities. In 1985 the first shopping centre (called *Amoreiras*) was constructed in Lisboa. It was visibly post-modernist in the kind of construction and contained shops selling the international clothing brands which before were only accessible in other countries. This shopping centre was for the generation of my interviewees a space (among others) of leisure and middle-class distinction, separate from the rural universe inhabited by their parents.

Most of my interviewees had, however, contact with the rural background of their parents, particularly during school holidays. It was also during these periods that they had their first experiences of unpaid work, i.e. agricultural work. The majority of my interviewees did not characterize these activities as 'proper work'. In fact, when questioned about their first experiences of work most of them did not refer to these activities, only mentioning them after I pressed them about any experience of 'working with the family'. Therefore, 'proper work' for my interviewees meant stable wage employment. That is, they understood labour with a career structure as being the opposite of 'atypical forms of employment' which I discuss in chapter 3. Their main definition of work was deeply shaped by the social expectations which were produced for their generation. They were the generation which was born 'in freedom' as opposed to the previous generation who had lived through the years of the dictatorship. Theirs was also an urban and progressive generation who had the possibility of achieving high levels of education and fulfilling the expectations of upward social mobility nurtured by their parents.

The majority of the parents of the persons interviewed came from a background of clerical, low-skilled or manual trades who migrated to Lisboa particularly during the 1970s looking for a better job and better living conditions for them and their children.

Table 5: Operators' parents: level of education and occupation

Workers	**Level of education**		**Occupations**	
	Father	**Mother**	**Father**	**Mother**
1	4th grade	4th grade	Carpenter	Street cleaner (in the borough of Lisboa)
2	4th grade	4th grade	Factory Labourer	Cleaning staff
3	9th grade	12th grade	Military (Air Force)	Bank clerk
4	12th grade	12th grade	Bank clerk	Housewife
5	4th grade	4th grade	Operations manager	Housewife
6	4th grade	4th grade	Entrepreneur	Secretary
7	9th grade	bacharelato	Head Manager (at an IT company)	Schoolteacher
8	9th grade	9th grade	Military (Air Force)	Social Worker
9	9th grade	9th grade	-	-
10	12th grade	12th grade	Bookkeeper	Civil Servant
11	4th grade	4th grade	Contractor	Entrepreneur
12	12th grade	12th grade	Bank clerk	Civil Servant
13	4th grade	4th grade	Firefighter	Housewife
14	4th grade	4th grade	Locksmith mechanic	Social Worker
15	-	4th grade	-	Cook (at a factory)
16	9th grade	9th grade	Salesman	Technician (at a quality check company)
17	4th grade	4th grade	Clerk	Housewife
18	4th grade	4th grade	Táxi driver	Housewife
19	9th grade	*Bacharelato*	-	Schoolteacher
20	4th grade	9th grade	Entrepreneur	Civil Servant
21	12th grade	Ba degree	Military	Nursing Teacher
22	4th grade	4th grade	Chief-technician, National Rail	Housekeeper
23	9th grade	4th grade	Technician, Portugal Telecom	Housewife
24	4th grade	4th grade	Retired Customer Service Assistant	Customer Service Assistant in a supermarket
25	9th grade	4th grade	Civil Servant	Housewife

26	4th grade	4th grade	Retired Navy Mechanic	Cleanig staff, state hospital
27	9th grade	*Licenciatura*	Entrepreneur	General Practitioner
28	*Licenciatura*	*Licenciatura*	Civil Engineer (at a borough)	Clinical Nurse
29	12th grade	12th grade	Radio Dj	Sound Technician
30	4th grade	4th grade	Mechanic (at an air company)	Cleaning staff, primary school
31	4th grade	4th grade	Entrepreneur	Housewife
32	4th grade	4th grade	Locksmith mechanic	Housewife
33	4th grade	4th grade	Farmer	Housewife
34	9th grade	9th grade	Salesman	Secretary
35	9th grade	9th grade	Quality Manager, telecommunications company	Housewife
36	9th grade	9th grade	Clerk	Tailor
37	4th grade	4th grade	Food and Beverage Assistant	Housewife
38	4th grade	4th grade	Lorry Driver	Housewife
39	4th grade	4th grade	Retired Factory Labourer	Housewife
40	4th grade	4th grade	Entrepreneur	Cook

Notes

4th grade - primary education; 9th grade – equivalent to Key stage 3 in England; 12th grade – complete secondary education; *Bacharelato* – undergraduate degree of three years of study usually carried out in a university or polytechnic institution; *Licenciatura* – postgraduate degree ranging from four to six years duration

Their children were meant to be the generation which was going to take full advantage of the opening up of the country to Europe, of the increased opportunity of having a better education or of being able to acquire a clean and safe white-collar job, with the consequent lifestyle and habits usually associated with the middle class. That is, the new generation hoped to own a house and car, to enjoy the associated habits of consumption and a future without restrictions. Their children were supposed to be the *doutores* (doctors, those awarded with a diploma, widely seen as a sign of distinction) they were never able to be. Today most of the call centre workers carry all these unfulfilled expectations as a burden. They could not meet these hopes either in terms of social status or of having a 'life of one's own'.

Early in 1994 public signs began to appear that the dreams of upward social mobility were not going to be easily fulfilled. The editor, Vicente Jorge Silva, of the most important newspaper in Portugal, *Público,* published an editorial headlined *Geração Rasca* (Cheap Troubled Generation) in which he criticized the generation born between 1970 and 1985 for having extreme 'scatological behaviour in public', which he attributed to their lack of ideology beliefs and moral character. Later, at the beginning of 2000, public commentators and journalists brought back the expression *Geração Rasca* and changed it to *Geração à Rasca* (Generation in Trouble) to describe a generation trapped in low-paid, unskilled and precarious jobs. The dreams of a progressive generation began to fade and were replaced by the permanent threat of labour flexibility.

A significant number of the workers interviewed had held between three to six different jobs; each lasting from three months to two years. None of them had ever had a permanent contract of work, although this was their stated ambition. Although their working lives were embedded in low-paid and insecure forms of work they did not designate themselves as precarious or temporary workers. They also did not present themselves as agency employees; when asked to name their employer entity they always gave the name of the user company. They had a tendency to blank out the limiting conditions which precarious workers face not because they were not aware of them, but because they had invested in the illusion that 'it is only a phase' or that it would only last 'until a better work opportunity arrives'. In the face of having no other employment option available, hopes for a better future become accommodation and resignation; and complicity with the discourse of the centre-right wing political parties and the Portuguese association of temporary work agencies which publicize their jobs

as a form of 'entering the labour market for the younger generation' (the lack of control over time is further explored in the next section).

As the table below shows, more than half the workers interviewed are either studying at the university or have already completed their degrees.

Table 6: Operators' level of education

Workers	Level of education
1	12th grade
2	universitary student
3	universitary student
4	universitary student
5	universitary student
6	universitary student
7	universitary student
8	universitary student
9	BA degree
10	12th grade
11	universitary student
12	BA degree
13	universitary student
14	universitary student
15	12th grade
16	12th grade
17	12th grade
18	12th grade
19	BA degree
20	BA degree
21	universitary student
22	BA degree
23	BA degree
24	BA degree
25	universitary student
26	BA degree
27	BA degree
28	BA degree
29	BA degree
30	BA degree
31	BA degree
32	12th grade
33	12th grade
34	12th grade
35	universitary student
36	universitary student
37	universitary student
38	BA degree
39	12th grade
40	12h grade

Final level of education, proportion of total: 12th grade – 27.5 %, university student – 37.5%, BA degree – 35%.

Most of them went to state universities but a small minority attended private universities, which for some parents represented a major financial investment and, in some cases, sacrifice. The university experience was ambiguously described by workers. On the one hand, it allowed them to accumulate a certain amount of symbolic and cultural capital which they displayed visibly, through clothing for instance, and verbally through specific topics of conversation, for instance the environment at the universities or their experiences with teachers. On the other hand, they often avoided the experience of university, as if it were *the* source of shame and failure. This subject, not being able to have a job fitting their qualifications, is understood as their own responsibility, or more precisely, their own lack of ability. Some of the operators sometimes commented that maybe they had chosen the wrong course or that they had spent a lot of time at parties and gatherings instead of trying to achieve the grade which would give them the possibility of continuing study.

8.1.2. Failure and resentment

Pierre Bourdieu (1999) has observed of France, from which parallels can be drawn with Portugal, that until the end of the 1950s the secondary school system reproduced a polarized stability between primary and secondary education which corresponded roughly to the social hierarchy. From the 1950s onwards social classes which were culturally disadvantaged (i.e. farmers, artisans, factory workers) have gained access to a degree of education from which in the past they were excluded. According to Bourdieu this process intensified the level of competition among classes, and increased the level of investment in education made by the upper classes. As a result the supposed democratization of the school system produced a paradoxical effect which was 'the progressive discovery by the most disadvantaged of the conservative functions of the supposedly liberating school system' (Bourdieu 1999: 421). He wrote:

> After an extended school career, which often entails considerable sacrifice, the most culturally disadvantaged run the risk of ending up with a devalued degree. If, as is more likely, they fail, they are relegated to what is undoubtedly a stigmatizing and total exclusion even more absolute than in the past. The exclusion is more disgraceful in the sense that they seem to have "had their chance" and because social identity tends more and more to be defined by the school system. And it is more absolute because a growing number of positions in the job market are customarily reserved for, and are in fact held by, ever

> growing numbers of degree-holders. This explains why, even in the lower classes, people see failure at school as catastrophic. So, to families as well as to students, the school system increasingly seems like a mirage, the source of an immense, collective disappointment, a promised land which, like the horizon, recedes as one moves towards it (1999: 423)

In the same vein the call centre operators interviewed experienced their degrees as 'devalued degrees', and because socially 'they had had their chance', the failure to find a job fitting their qualifications was understood as being their own responsibility. It is not a social failure, it is taken as an individual failure. The downgrading of qualifications and the loss of a sense of entitlement experienced by the call centre operators interviewed has been further reinforced by their labour experience in the call centre sector.

For the majority of workers, entering call centre employment is connected with the university. Most of them gained knowledge of call centre work through circles of college friends. Actually, temporary work agencies have a deliberate strategy of recruiting call centre operators through circles of friendship. One of the TAWs which did the recruitment for EVA had a slogan which it used in its email logo: 'Refer to a Friend'. It encouraged workers to look among their personal network of friends to see if anyone was interested in working in the call centre by offering 50 euros to the person who recommends a friend, as long as that friend stayed in the job for a minimum of three months.

Starting work in a call centre was not, according to my informants, a choice. They regarded it as the only option of employment available. This view was less to do with a lack of options than with the social expectations to which they were exposed. That is, for call centre operators there have been other options of employment, not many though, but some. They could apply to work in restaurants, they could apply for manual work in civil construction, and they could perhaps get clerical and secretarial jobs. Industrial jobs in Portugal have been receding for a long time, which means that factory work would be much more difficult. To a certain extent call centre employment is perceived as not being entirely compromising in terms of social status. The workers do not have to publicly provide customer service, they do not have to wear a uniform, and they are mostly among persons within their age group. Furthermore call centre

work places are clean, organized spaces attached to larger companies which gives them an 'aura of professionalism' and 'efficiency'[60].

The fact, however, is that a person's feeling of being trapped because of an internalized notion of prestige, associated with specific forms of work, is no less damaging than the feeling of being trapped due to not having 'objectively' any other option of employment. Indeed, as Bourdieu ([1984] 1989) has shown, the personal tastes which individuals attribute to their unique temperament and singular character, are in fact a product of class structural inequalities and as such they represent a form of symbolic violence. The view of call centre workers that they do not have any other option is an expression of having internalized a set of expectations regarding their trajectories towards middle-class status. These expectations are not individual but socially defined as constituting a better life than that enjoyed in the rural universe inhabited by their parents and the historical backwardness associated with it. This, however, does not alter the feelings of inferiority and resentment for being in an occupation which does not meet their individual expectations. I would say that the degree of violence to their sense of self is even more pronounced for not having the tools to be able to recognize that what they consider to be their own personal failure is actually the product of class domination. The lack of options is sometimes confronted by workers, as when expressing their opinion that both workers and companies would benefit if there were more security attached to call centre employment. At other times they see this simply as an inevitability due to changes that are not under their control. These changes are centred on the end of a job for life because 'the only thing that exists now is temporary agencies work, they are all over…', as one team leader told me.

[60] The way my interviewees portrayed their entry into call centre employment resonates with the 'affluent worker' study carried out by John Goldthorpe (1969) in the UK. According to this study blue-collar workers who had adopted a lifestyle and patterns of consumption more closely associated with white-collar workers had, however, only a relative affluence which did not preclude feelings of disenchantment with the work carried out and the adoption of an instrumental orientation vis a vis the job. That is, seeing it as only a means of achieving a better remuneration. To a certain extent, although call centre employment has an aura of white-collar employment, operators do not find any intrinsic satisfaction in the work and see it as only a way of earning a salary while waiting for something better to appear. At the same time the experience of downgrading qualifications and the sense of disentitlement which I alluded to earlier is also reminiscent of the study undertaken by Sigfried Kracauer ([1929] 1998) in the Weimar republic among white-collar workers, originally published long before the 'Affluent worker' study. Kracauer vividly captured how the transformation from blue-collar to white-collar worker was only an outward appearance which did not prevent workers from feeling they were still beleaguered, under-appreciated workers.

What was most pronounced among all the interviewees were the feelings of resentment for not being able to escape the feelings of inferiority and impotence which are linked to the experience of insecure labour, in particular to the call centre regime of labour. For some of the interviewees such resentment tends to block the ability to act and reflect on the social causes of their own condition; while for others it is the source of a lucid confrontation with themselves and the frustrations experienced. Such is the case of Ana, on whose working life I concentrate below.

8.1.3. Ana

Ana was 30 years old when we had our first interview in 2008. She was born in Alpiarça, a village in the central province of Ribatejo, when her father was already retired after working for more than thirty years as an electrician in the Portuguese national railway company (CP). Her mother was still working as a housekeeper in a house belonging to a family of rich landowners of the region. Ana came to Lisboa at 18 years old to study social work at a private university. In Lisboa she lived in a rented room shared with other students and in order to help her family with the cost of accommodation, food and tuition she started working full-time in a telecommunications call centre when she was in the fourth year of study. She worked there for six months, from 10.00am to 19.00pm, five days a week, earning around 600 euros. She never went more than one month without being engaged in paid employment. She left the call centre she said because 'the pressure was tremendous'. Through a friend she was able to get a secretarial job in an insurance company where she earned slightly more (700 euros) but had a difficult relation with the supervisor, whom she considered to be a womanizer. She stayed in this job for four months. She then applied to work in the call centre of an insurance company, where she stayed for one year and half, until she finished her degree. The salary was the same 600 euros she had earned in the telecoms call centre. Her job consisted of providing telephone assistance in the case of car and health accidents. She tells me there was a lack of rigour in internal promotion which was the main reason for leaving the job. She obtained her degree in September and in October presented her letter of resignation in the insurance call centre.

In November she started looking for another job and started working part-time as a telemarketer in another telecommunications company. While at this call centre a

colleague of hers mentioned the idea of going to London to look for a better job, something which Ana had always aspired to, not only to know the city but also because she believed there could be the possibility of a better future.

She and her friend decided to come to London, where they found a cheap double bedroom to rent in West Ham. She immediately started looking for a job and after one month was working as a part-time waitress in a restaurant, earning around £600 per month. The money was not enough to pay the bills and she got another job in a call centre, where she contacted clients from Fujitsu-Siemens in order to schedule sales appointments.

The call centre was located outside London, she does not remember where exactly, the journey took her 40 minutes by train from Victoria station. The salary was quite good – £250 pounds per week – and together with her restaurant salary it was more than enough to 'get by'. She worked in the call centre during the day and four to five hours at the restaurant at night. She said that when there were no clients the boss used to send her home, which reduced her income. The friend who came to London with her decided to return to Portugal after six months and Ana moved to the house of a Portuguese couple she had met in Portugal while working in the insurance call centre.

During the three years she was in London she had several temporary jobs, one of which she laughed about ironically while describing it. This was her job at the BBC digitalizing drawings made by African children to be sent to British children. She returned to Portugal when she was 27 out of loneliness and the lack of emotional family support. She also hoped that maybe things were different in Portugal in terms of jobs opportunities.

On her return from London she first stayed with her parents. Her parents encouraged her to look for a job in her area of qualification: social work, which she did. There was a pronounced bitterness in her voice when she recounted the hundreds of CVs that she sent out to private companies, hospitals, clinics and schools. Because she did not want to be dependent on her parents she found a job as a waitress in a local restaurant. During the day she bought the newspapers, checked for job vacancies on the internet, wrote letters of application, posted them, and at night she worked at the restaurant. After three months she felt the need for her own autonomy, her own space. She received an offer from an insurance company call centre and she accepted. She had been working in the same call centre for the last three years. In the first year she had monthly contracts of work; in the second and third year she signed a one year fixed-

term contract, she earned around 700 euros. She provided technical assistance for clients in case of accident. She described the clients as follows:

> It happens a lot of times… In part I understand that people can be frustrated…. To have an accident is a terrible thing… But many times they use expressions like 'do you know with whom you are talking?', or something like, 'you are only reading your script and are not saying anything that matters'. There are other expressions that clients use, almost like calling us stupid, like saying 'I am Dr. X and you are only there picking up the phone'... Even the other departments of the company calls us the 'colleagues who send out trailers to remove the cars', as if it was a minor task.

She told me that she had recently decided to do a part-time apprenticeship in social work in order to get experience, because all the job vacancies advertised asked for previous experience, which she didn't have. She said that maybe she should have done it before going to London, implying that she it was partly her responsibility for not having found a job in her area of qualifications. At the same time she had invested in the call centre work because she still hoped to be hired permanently by the user company instead of the temporary work agency. This investment was to give her some security and stability, and in order to mitigate the 'frustration' of both her parents and herself. As she remarked:

> My parents feel frustrated because I have a degree and did not had any opportunity of finding a job in my area. Because… They are right… My parents invested a lot in my course, in economic terms and they think that… They are right… The only possible good thing I could be doing which would be good for myself would be to have some professional security in the area for which I qualified. For which I studied and in which I invested so much. (..) When my parents see me working in a call centre, earning less than 800 euros, not having a house of my own… They are right, when they were my age they had three daughters and they were already stable in their jobs. Personally I do not even think of having a family which goes beyond me and my partner because neither of us has any kind of financial stability. Today we have a job but tomorrow we might not have one. Being only two persons we can more or less manage because we are both adults; but with a child, with a life dependent on us… All my close friends are in the same situation because they have lived until now with their parents and with low-paid and precarious jobs. I think it matters a lot if you are a temporary worker or not… I would like to be a mother someday… But in this situation is not possible…
>
> I have moments of great frustration. In the beginning when I came to this call centre it was very difficult to hear some things from clients. Right now it gets through one ear and it goes out through the other. Because they don't know who they are talking to, and I know that from their point of view I am only a voice.

> They don’t know my qualifications, they don’t know anything about me. They think they are talking with the insurance company… But in the last few months I have been feeling quite frustrated with myself, also for not having any kind of opportunities inside the company… Because I know I am a good worker. In my opinion I am a better worker than many permanent workers. And it is because of that I feel frustrated, because they don’t give us any kind of opportunity.

Despite the resentment and frustration Ana kept investing in her future. When she started working in the call centre she also began studying psychology at a private university. She recently had to suspend her enrolment because she did not have enough money to pay the tuition fees. She mentioned this while telling me that, ‘I always tried to invest in the future, always hoping that things were going to improve but there was no door opened for me. Right now I need security… I try to keep up the optimism but I have moments of terrible pessimism’.

Some call centre workers, such as Ana, have managed to find ways of contradicting the stereotype of the ‘geração rasca’ and persisted in the attempt to secure the possibility of being able to find a better job. But despite going against the stereotype Ana felt resentment remarking, for instance, how call centre operators are mistreated by clients or in reflecting on her parents’ frustration. Although she didn’t acknowledge it, directly, she, like all workers, has interiorized such frustration as being caused by herself, as being her own responsibility. This was evident when she suggested a reason for not having found a job in social work might have been because she went to London after finishing her degree, instead of gaining some unpaid experience. The study carried out by Sennett and Cobb (1977) in the early 1970s among white North American working class men reveals the extent to which ‘the lower a man defines himself in society in relation to other people, the more it seems his fault’ (96). Quoting an illiterate garbage man:

> Look, I know it’s nobody fault but mine that I got stuck here where I am, I mean… if I wasn’t such a dumb shit… no, it ain’t that neither… if I’d applied myself, I know I got it in me to be different, can’t say anyone did it to me (Sennett and Cobb 1977: 96)

There is the importance of the different treatment between temporary and permanent workers, which Ana raised. I explored that difference in chapter 4 when I addressed the distinction between ‘internal’ (permanent) and ‘external’ (temporary) workers. In most circumstances permanent and temporary workers are in the same age

group. The conditions of employment at call centres and the form through which employment is organized produces a division within the same age group which is as potent as a generational or class division. The differences in the workforce were supposed to be minor within democratic times but instead they are more pronounced. In the next section I analyse this particular theme while relating it to the experience of dispossession.

8.2. The temporal experience of dispossession and class

Call centre employment was always characterized as 'work without a future' by my interviewees. Pierre Bourdieu was one of the authors who analysed the relations between time, power and domination. The three themes are articulated through the concept of 'symbolic violence'. The concept attempts to unravel the coercion inscribed in the 'naturalized' *doxa* about the social world. The coercion is exercised by the 'normal things about the world', by the feeling of 'knowing one's place in the social structure'. Coercion is hidden by the consent given by the dominated to their domination due to the fact that the dominated have incorporated through the *habitus* the norms of perception and evaluation established through the language of the dominant classes (Bourdieu [1972] 1990: 164). According to Bourdieu dispossession is experienced through two axes: subjective expectations and objective chances. Alongside these two axes the sense of dispossession is inculcated through three main mechanisms: 1, the fear of redundancy, 2, the act of waiting which detaches the individual from the historical and social context which creates time in itself, therefore one could designate it 'alienated time', and 3, the sense of justification in one's existence which comes from the recognition of others, a recognition which is derived first of all from social relationships, from the social fields crossed by individuals through their life trajectories (Bourdieu [1997] 2006: 216-28). In this section I address these themes by focusing particularly on the narrative of Alexandre. His testimony is especially revealing of how the call centre regime of labour is not only capitalizing on class divisions, but actually reinforcing them.

8.2.1. Alexandre

Alexandre is 24 years old. He looks strangely old for a person of only 24, and he was someone who always impressed me by his silence and his constant helpless expression. He was born in Lisboa, to where his parents had migrated from a northern region of Portugal during the 1970s in order to look for work. His mother worked as a *cantoneira*[61] in the *Camâra Municipal de Lisboa* (Borough of Lisbon). His father died when he was finishing high school, aged 18. After the death of his father Alexandre had to look for a job in order to help his mother, given that she earned the minimum wage, around 450 euros. Previous to the death of his father his plan was to go to university and study computer engineering. Alexandre came to know call centres through a friend who was already a team leader in a telecommunications call centre. He was sent by an agency to this same call centre, doing the shift from 6.00pm to 3.00am. During the two years he worked at this call centre he had no employment contract. According to Portuguese labour law Alexandre was officially self-employed because he was paid by *recibos verdes* (green slips) which meant that Alexandre had to pay his own social security contributions. The 'green slip' exonerates the employer from having to pay social security, as he must do when a worker has a regular contract of work.

When he was 20 years old he quit the call centre because, 'I was exhausted', and he started working at the *Camâra Municipal de Lisboa* as a helpdesk operator. He was not recruited directly by the *Camâra* but again through a TAW. He stayed there for three years. After six months one of the oldest persons working at the *Camâra* decided to form a small company in order to work only for the *Camâra*. Alexandre then changed to this small firm. In his last seven months there he did not receive any kind of payment due to the fact that the *Camâra* was not paying the firm. Alexandre is still waiting for this money.

After being made redundant because the firm filed for bankruptcy Alexandre applied for social benefits. He was unemployed for six months, while he looked for another job on a call centre helpdesk, because, he told me, this is what he liked to do.

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[61] Street-cleaner.

Going to another call centre was the only way he could to earn some money. Alexandre has been living alone since his father died.

You don't live with your mother?
(...) – No, No… since my father died I basically removed myself from the world, I stayed completely isolated and my mother suffered a lot with that. My mother met someone else and I told my mother that she should go and live with that person, she said she did not want that but still she moved. It was really my request. I wanted to stay by myself because I don't like to make anyone suffer, I don't like to disturb other people. (…) I stayed in my father's house and I have been living there ever since.
And can you manage with only your salary?
It's not always easy… Basically there was a certain moment in the month when I had no money to buy cigarettes and I had to ask other people for a cigarette, and I hate to do that, the thing I dislike the most is to ask for things from other people. But here there is a great advantage. Your colleagues at work understand that and you don't even need to ask for a cigarette, they will give you one. But it is really not easy… After five months working here I discovered there was a productivity prize and I have been trying to win it ever since, and I also work overtime for more money.
(…)
I can tell you that my mother is more demanding with me (than she was with herself), and she wants me to be someone in life. It breaks her heart to see me working here, she wanted me to go to university. … Mothers want the best for their children because they know how exhausting the work we do here is. I know they also suffered a lot but now everything is different, is very different… When they were young [his parents] they did not have anything, they didn't have shoes, they didn't have clothes, but our generation has everything, big cars…
Except for those who still don't have anything…
There are some people who walk around the university with their books and their parents are paying for everything. Then you have other people who make a really great effort to go to university and they can't. I see that happening every day, and it really revolts me to see it.
Is that what you really wanted to do, go to university?
Yes, I wish I could go to university and study.
Do you think you will still have that opportunity?
Maybe when I finish paying for my car. I will finish paying in 2010.
What do you hope for from the future?
My dream was always to go to university. To have that experience and also to be able to be someone. With time passing, I am already 25, you need to start thinking about fixing yourself in some kind of job. How can I explain…? Here I have to progress, from front-office operator to back-office operator. There comes a moment when you need to choose an occupation and invest in it. But it's hard, it's a bit hard…
Do you think people respect call centre operators?
From what I heard the advantage in foreign countries is that they treat people well. To be honest it's not like that here. Here you are paid to answer calls, that's how they see you, as a number. That means that if there are more numbers there

> is more work. They don't see you as a person, they see you as a number, and you will see this in all the call centres in Portugal (…)

The words of Alexandre are not exceptionally eloquent or particularly emotional but there was a constant look of disenchantment on his face. Such disenchantment was particularly marked when he mentioned his ambition of studying at the university and the impossibility of his doing so not only due to lack of money but also because Alexandre does not have the security net of family which he recognizes in other people from his generation. That is, the sense of dispossession is first experienced as being derived from a particular event in one's life (i.e. the death of Alexandre's father) but it is augmented by generational and class divisions. He used the expression 'revolt me' to characterize how much he resented seeing other people from his generation going to university and not taking full advantage of it. It is true that at the beginning of the 21st century the profile of call centre operator ranged from the nephew of the Minister of Education (my colleague when I was working in the call centre) to the son of an electrician. Over the years this profile changed and the ones who stayed in call centre employment are the ones who seem to lack economic, social and cultural resources. That is, the ones who cannot count on their parents' financial support or who do not have a useful network of family and social contacts to find informally a better job[62]. Thus, the call centre sector is contributing to the reinforcement of generational and class divisions.

The internalization of class resentment was exemplified by Alexandre when he said that he was only 'a number to them'. The greatest contradiction about dispossession is that it has real, external causes but is invisible and appears natural, to the person experiencing it. Not being able to buy cigarettes, not being able to go to university, waiting for payment for six months, waiting again for a job of his choice, and waiting again for a promotion to back-office operator. But still Alexandre finds compensation in the fact that his friends don't mind sharing a cigarette with him; he tries to earn more money by working overtime and meeting all the quantitative goals set by the company so that he might win to the productivity prize. And these little

[62] There is an expression in Portugal used to describe that kind of situation, *cunha*. This expression is used whenever someone wants to describe how someone else was able to move up the social ladder through special favours from a patron and through illegal influences.

compensations allow him to stay in an organization, which consider workers to be numbers, not people.

Call centre workers face dispossession with a strict economy of words as when Alexandre remarked *E custa. Custa um bocado*…. (And it's hard, it's a bit hard…) To say more than that would be to confront and break the 'taboo of shame' (Scheff 2000); a theme addressed in the next section.

8.3. Social anxieties: isolation, shame and family

Feelings of shame are not usually publicly acknowledged by individuals. In most circumstances the feelings are embedded in the normalized apparatus of social interaction. In his analysis of the social roles of embarrassment in social interaction Erving Goffman (1956a) emphasized how embarrassment 'is not an irrational impulse breaking through socially prescribed behaviour but part of this orderly behaviour itself' (271). Although embarrassment is acknowledged as a constituent part of social life Goffman also emphasized how individuals deploy a set of established social strategies of 'information management' about themselves in which the main goal is to avoid the 'loss of face'. Or, in other words, to avoid feelings of public shame.

Among workers it was most common to feel shame for not having met the expectations created by their parents and close family. This feeling of shame was never mentioned directly but it was expressed through different forms by the interviewees. They might refer to the difficulty of explaining to people outside the call centre what exactly the job of a operator consists of or mention that their parents do not rate the work they are doing as very important, advising them to change for a 'real job' as soon as possible. This forced silence regarding what call centre operators do eight hours a day increases the isolation which their job already brings, as described in the previous chapters. In this section I address how shame is expressed within the worker's close circle of relationships and I argue that one of the main consequences of the internalization of shame is a constant feeling of relational anxiety; which in turn reinforces social and personal isolation.

The isolation felt by operators during their work shift is extended to the time devoted to leisure activities, meetings and talks with friends. Such is exemplified by the following interview extracts where operators refer to the tiredness caused by call centre work and the inability to talk with others afterwards:

This kind of job, although it is call centre work, is not easy. It's a kind of work that demands a lot from you, mentally speaking, it's very demanding. I think people, when it comes to call centres, they still don't understand that… That it isn't an easy job…
Are you referring to the people that work in call centres or those who don't?
People from outside mainly. People who work at call centres, they know how it is. And after a while working at a call centre they understand how complicated it is. It's tough, it's a kind of work that means you sometimes arrive home feeling exhausted…
Wishing not to talk to anyone…?
Yes… Now it doesn't happen any more because I don't have to be always answering calls. But there were days, when I was answering phones, that I used to arrive home, and the last thing I wanted to do was to talk to people. Because it is an exhausting job, really exhausting…

I can see that it's very exhausting… do you feel the need not to talk to anyone after finishing your work shift?
That's so in my case. Now I am bit more 'loose', but… after spending eight hours talking to people you go and meet your friends and they start talking. And your head is so messed up that you don't want to know what they are talking about, and people are aware of that, they can tell…
Do you think that people who do not work at call centres have any notion of what kind of work is done?
There were six of us in my group of friends, and three of us were working at call centres. The other three did not understand why we always had our heads full of problems, and we did not want to go out or do something. We used to go out only at weekends. They never understood, and we also never understood why they didn't understand. Even my mother does not understand, and she is my mother. … After you work at a call centre then you know how much people suffer, but if you never work at a call centre you will think that people who are there can solve every problem. But it's not like that..

The aspect all interviewees most emphasized was the inability to talk with other people after spending many hours doing exactly that. This might seem like a trivial remark given that there are other occupations where talking is a privileged medium for the accomplishment of a set of expected tasks, i.e. a receptionist or a teacher. I have argued in chapter 6, however, that there is a particular quality to the act of talking in the call centre regime of labour. I have argued that this regime might be best distinguished as an advanced technological system which allows the exploitation of a specific property of human labour: linguistic agency. This degree of control differentiates call centre workers from others, such as teachers and receptionists, who also use linguistic agency. In this sense, the inability to talk with friends, close relatives and partners is not simply a result of fatigue (which can be noted in other professions);

rather it derives from a form of labour which expropriates workers from a fundamental human tool for meaning-making: language engagement.

This is not to say that workers do not talk at all with friends and acquaintances; they do, and sometimes with great need. For some of the workers I interviewed it was actually a relief to have someone to whom they could talk to, or better, it was a relief to have someone who was willing to listen to them, which is something that in their daily lives they cannot expect to have. On the contrary, friends expect to be listened to, to ask for advice and opinions, close relatives demand explanations, partners want to discuss matters of daily living, and so on. The inability to talk and be with friends is a direct consequence of a regime of labour which contributes to the reinforcement of social isolation. As I show in the next sub-section this aspect is further emphasized by operators' feelings of shame about what they do, a consequence of a form of labour which is socially stigmatized as unskilled, downgrading and inferior, and in which workers are considered disposable. That is, as a 'piece in the machine', as stated by Victor, on whose narrative I concentrate in the section below.

8.3.1. Victor

Victor was 31 years old when we had our interview (2008), he was born in Lisboa. He was the only worker I met at EVA who was in a union. Furthermore, in the past he had been a member of the *Juventude Comunista Portuguesa* (Portuguese Communist Youth) and more recently got involved with a leftist political platform – *Bloco de Esquerda*. He talked enthusiastically about being involved in demonstrations and environmental social movements while he was in his twenties. Victor was studying chemical engineering at the university when a serious conflict between him and his parents made him left his parents' house. Confronted with having to support himself Victor began looking for a job. Before working at EVA Victor worked for two years and a half in another call centre. Before that, while he was beginning study at university he worked in a publishing company doing clerical tasks during the summer. He tried to manage study at the university and working full-time in the call centre but after a while he decided to give up the university because he had no time left for anything else in his life.

Before you went to work at the call centre did you know what the job entailed? Did you have friends already working at call centres?
I knew some people already who had been working in other call centres. But I went to work at that one without knowing anyone, I left my parents' house in the middle of an argument and I had to manage. I was finishing my degree, started to look for a job and trying to manage. (…) What I had in mind was to find a job that would give me a wage which I could live on decently for a while. I think this is the way everyone starts. That story of finding a temporary job, stay there for a while, but then you just get used to it…It was fairly easy for me because I knew a bit about computing…

Due to his strong and unusual political awareness I began by asking him to define the uniqueness of call centre work.

Is there anything specific about call centre work compared with other kinds of job?
Maybe… In fact… usually you have very tiring tasks that don't demand a lot of imagination and t these kinds of tasks tend to isolate you from the rest of your life. Since I started working at ONI I stopped having any kind of political activity, I didn't manage to do both things, because I used to arrive home very tired from work… After spending so many hours locked inside a small space the last thing I wanted was to go to political meetings that could last for entire nights! My mental sanity cannot take that. I need to do other kinds of things, with other goals. (…)
Do you think that people who are not working at call centres have any idea of what is going on?
Actually it is funny that you asked that because in my close circle of friends most of them are from the left, but among them I am the only one who has had any kind of direct involvement with union activity. It's funny because usually they have a very interesting theoretical discourse, but then the people who are in the labour market don't really have a work situation which allows them to have that kind of discourse… No, people have no idea about the work being done at call centres.… Now in relation to the work being done, the pressure, the productivity which is demanded from workers, and the environment which is sometimes created… You must have noticed that, people being treated inhumanely at call centres. There are different ways of talking to people and sometimes some people don't realize that they are talking with human beings … Maybe it's due to the tension which exists; It is impossible to have 400 persons shut up in one room and not have tensions among them.
What do you think generates that inhumane treatment towards the other?
To start it's because of the physical limitation of the space. That is, the physical environment induces people to enter into stressful situations. It is a closed environment, the call centre is a closed environment in which you are face-to-face with a computer monitor, with a kind of light which is not the most adequate, in a hot environment, the air that you breathe is heavy, it is air which was breathed already by someone else, all your time is controlled from the moment you begin until you finish your work, you have one button to go to the bathroom, you have another button to take a break… You cannot afford to arrive at work and do what some people do, 'Today I arrived at work tired so let me

> take a coffee first and then I'll start to work' … All of this generates exhaustion and a great amount of tension, and also frustration among workers. It generates frustration because if you don't feel good about yourself; you inevitably behave badly with others. Not only in front of other people but also in your own mirror.

Victor´s involvement with the union came in a sequence of conflicts with the TAW which recruited the workers for the call centre where he worked for more than two years. These conflicts went on over one year and half. The user firm changed the conditions in the contract it had with the TAW (the 'service level agreement' which I mention in chapter six). These changes meant that the wages would have to be reduced. Before these changes became effective workers had a fixed monthly salary plus a prize for punctuality which was dependent on the worker's monthly performance. The new SLA stipulated that workers would start to be paid according to the number of hours worked, at a rate of 2.40 euros per hour. When Victor was describing what had happened and the way he managed to stand up for his rights as a worker he revealed an enormous sense of pride (notwithstanding the injuries he felt from his long experience of work at call centres).

> **What were your personal gains from all this process?**
> I made some really good friends, some of them are still my friends today. I became more mature, more affirmative, more confident, confident to manage a situation which was very complex. For instance, today I know I am ready to work everywhere... On the other hand I also lost a good part of my sanity, lost my patience for instance… I lost a personal relationship back then… It was not only because of this but it had a lot do to with this. I was in such an exhausted state… you begin to enter into a vicious circle, and then you end up not feeling well about yourself, you cannot treat other people well, it ends up affecting all the areas of your life… and this process was one of the main causes… maybe I lost the opportunity of one day having a really career, something you cannot do in a world like this.
> **Do you really think there isn't any possibility of that?**
> I am not saying is completely impossible but… I believe in some situations it might be possible but you have to be willing to let go of your own ideas… If you want to get to the post of team leader for instance you need to have a kind of attitude which is not my own. You need to follow all the orders, you are not supposed to question them... You have procedures for everything, you know what you have to do, and in each situation you just have to execute what's already planned, you are not going to question anything. Because if you do it is not going to be good for you, not only in terms of your employment relationship but also in terms of your personal relationships. If you do you end up feeling low and exhausted because you are fighting a very complicated machine, a procedure which is two years old is a very complicated issue.
> **But 'the machine' is only the procedures?**

> For me the machine is everything, and is not really anything personal against the team leaders, they can be great people but for me they are only acting out, they are only doing what they are ordered to do
> **But what is 'the machine'?**
> For me the machine is the structure of the call centre. Team leaders, procedures, wait, maybe I am not explaining myself… Everything that pressures you in terms of the company, that pressures you in terms of procedures, that tells you what to do…
> **It seems that the ones who execute and the ones who plan the procedures are very distant from each other?**
> Yes, is that, you are a bit like a piece in a machine. If the piece breaks, they take the broken piece and put in another one. Another person is posted on the same job who will do the same function. In a call centre you substitute any person at any time…

The sentence, 'if you don't feel good about yourself; you inevitably behave badly with others. Not only in front of other people but also in your own mirror', from Victor's statement above always seemed to me to be very illustrative of how shame is expressed without being directly mentioned. Not behaving well in front of one's 'own mirror' means being ashamed of oneself. Means not being able to recognize oneself in what one sees through the eyes of others. When dependent on the only source of income available workers have to bear being only a 'piece in a machine'. The shame of being a disposable worker is not verbalized but it is implicit in the many stories workers shared with me. During a break for a cigarette with one of the team leaders who had previously also been a operator we talked for a while about the possibility of buying a flat. Buying a flat is, for the generation which is currently working at call centres, seen as the first step towards a independence from the family. Also, in the middle-class social cosmology it is, of course, a necessary commodity if one wants to 'build a family', it's part of the common sense of 'making a living'.

During the previous weekend José had been searching for a flat to buy with his partner. He compared his chance of doing this on a TAW contract with his father's opportunities. His father had worked for 40 years in a ship repairing and building company called Lisnave. His father was a locksmith for forty years at this company and although he now received according to José a 'miserable' state pension, he had been able to buy a house and have a family. His father was the only member of family who 'brought money home' as José said. Furthermore, his father had pride in the work he did at Lisnave. According to José it gave him the sense of belonging to a cohesive

group of workers whose functions demanded singular and complementary skills from each of them.

This comparison is particularly important because it addresses what I consider to be an important part of the social matrix of shame call centre workers feel towards their family. Besides having greater security in his employment condition, José's father had specific skills which were not easily replaceable. That is why he stayed in the company for more than forty years. Call centre workers do not have or learn specific skills. Indeed, the call centre system of recruitment is designed to ensure disposability as an important strategy of labour control. The internalization of being a 'disposable worker', or 'a piece in a machine' as described by Victor, is one of the most important sources of shame in the private realm of family life. The other one is the public stigma attached to call centre work which I explore in the next section.

8.4. The sources of stigma and bodily injuries

Erving Goffman ([1963] 1990) defines stigma as a 'social discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity' (12). As such, it presupposes a) a relation between attribute and stereotype; b) a separation between stigmatized and 'normals'; and c) the consideration that the one who carries a stigma 'is not quite human'. In this section I explore how workers describe and justify the public stigma attached to call centre work, and the main forms through which this public stigma is expressed in the daily transactions within and beyond the workplace.

8.4.1. Humans or robots?

Call centre workers are seen by others as having acquired thorough their work a set of discredited attributes which diminish them, which imply inferiority and which are taken to be synonymous with what the whole person actually is. In their daily work the clients are the ones with whom operators mostly contact. It is mostly through their comments and insinuations that workers internalize how they are seen by others. The lack of physical co-presence between operator and client was sometimes mentioned by operators as a reason for clients' harshness. One of the operators said that not seeing the person leads clients to be less cautious with the language they use and the fact that

sometimes operators are obliged to follow a script during the call leads clients to think that they can act as if they were talking to a machine.

> **Do you think clients respect the work which is done by call centre operators?**
> I don't think so… I think there is a stigma… I think call centre work is taken as 'little work'… even my father when he is referring to my work calls it 'little work'… People see it as a hobby… So, there is a stigma, yes … It's that kind of work associated with young people who work part-time… Although that is not always the case, but people think we are mostly young people.… Even clients have that idea, we try to be always professional, but clients have that preconceived idea when they talk with us. But not only clients, I think it's an idea which is already rooted in society, in the way people deal with us
> **But people who work at call centres are very different among themselves…**
> Exactly, it's the contrary. That is, most of the people who go to work at call centres are looking only for a part-time job to make some money. But there are a great number of people who are older, with children, who need this job full-time to carry on their lives... There is something I am quite sure about now, we are nothing to them. I don't know how to explain to you, but they think that what we do is not work.
> **But why is not work?**
> Because they never did what we do. I might also think that it's simple, but usually I don't think that about any kind of Job. (….)

The work at call centres is not considered 'proper work'. It is understood as carrying certain characteristics – repetition, lack of creativity, monotony – which impinge on one's character, leading people to consider call centre workers as not interesting, robotic and dull. It is with this stereotype that call centre operators have to deal every day, every call. Inside the workplace as well as outside of it. This is also one of the reasons why workers say they work in firm X but not that they are working in a call centre. Workers are aware of the meanings attached to this specific workplace and their 'impression management' is anchored in a strategy of silence. By this I do not mean to say that workers among themselves do not talk about what they do. They talk a lot among themselves. Lunchtime is mostly filled with talk and jokes about a certain situation with a certain client. I mean that outside the workplace one cannot talk about one's profession with pride. They do not have the pride of those in a craft or profession which gives them a collective identity with which they can build bridges of identification and safety, like José's father. This absence contributes much to their lack of self-esteem which is itself deeply connected to the mechanisms by which labour is controlled (see chapter 6).

8.4.2. Inferiority

The feelings of being stigmatized arose due to the fact that workers have to face in their daily lives the separation between themselves and the 'normal' ones. This is sometimes revealed in quite prosaic situations. One worker talked to me about temporary agency work. He placed his situation in a global context, repeating several times that 'all there is now are temporary work agencies… they are everywhere…'. He then described an episode he recently experienced. He wanted to buy a quite expensive mobile phone and he wanted to pay for it on credit. The shop he went to told him that due to the fact that he had a contract of employment with a TAW they were not able to consider the possibility of payment by credit. The impossibility of doing something so prosaic and 'normal' as buying a mobile phone on instalments was seen as a moment of stigmatization by this worker. He later told me how unfair this situation was, as if being a temporary worker meant being a second class citizen not only in this situation but also in other areas of social life.

As Goffman remarks, in order for the stigma to be reproduced and maintained there must an ideology which justifies the inferiority of the person who carries the stigma. In chapter 6 I argued that measuring all tasks in numbers is a central mechanism of labour control within the call centre sector. Call centre operators constantly refer to the quantitative reports that are send to directors and besides acting as a form of labour control, this use of numbers greatly contributes to the everyday reproduction of call centre workers as 'numbers' or, in Goffman's expression, 'as not quite human'. I am not claiming that technology by itself contributes to the reproduction of a given stigmatized worker. What I am arguing is that the social inter-personal relations established inside the workplace and the technological frames by which work is organized are perceived as being mutually constitutive. Thus, call centre operators narrate their feelings of being only 'a number' by referring to the lack of communication between call centres and the other departments of the firm, by consistently emphasizing that they are treated as not being part of the firms for which they work and that they are only the ones who have to put up with the clients' discontent and insults.

Where do you think the stigma associated with call centre work comes from?
From its easiness. That is, it's a kind of job that with two weeks' training you will be able to answer and understand eighty per cent of the calls. There isn't any kind of special qualification you need to have, it's enough if you know how to use a computer, talk on the phone, be able to speak a normal sentence without making a lot of mistakes in the middle. And it is also a disposable job, the number of call centre operators increases or decreases depending on the demand.
Do you think people come to work at call centres of their own choice?
No, no! (surprised laugh) Lately no… I have even noticed that there is a growing number of older people who come to work here because they cannot find anything else. There are people working here who are forty years old. I remember my father aged forty and the fact that fifteen years later he retired. I wonder where will I be aged forty …?
Do you think it's easy to explain to your parents the kind of work you do?
It's complicated, they know that it exists. But they don't approve. They think it's a secondary kind of job. 'OK, if you find something else you should change.' I also agree with that, I also see things like that. 'If you find something else where you don't need to do that kind of job then don't do it.' It's their position on this matter.

8.4.3. Infantilization

There is a constant tendency towards reducing the operators to an infantile condition in call centres. The infantilizing rhetoric legitimates control and vigilance. Besides the prosaic and everyday contacts at the workplace between operators, team leaders and team coordinator the monthly evaluation illustrates this tendency. Team leaders are in charge of providing three evaluations per month of the operators in their teams, while the team coordinator has to listen to and evaluate each operator. As an internal worker (hired by the user firm) the team coordinator reflects and reproduces a certain discourse which reinforces the stigma about call centre operators as children.

While following the team coordinator evaluating the calls it was quite common to hear disparaging remarks about the operators. Before almost every evaluation the coordinator would comment 'vamos lá ver como é que este se safa!' (let's see how he gets away with it). According to the team coordinator operators 'safam-se', 'desenrascam-se' and 'desembaraçam-se'[63], they do not work in a more or less productive or efficient way. These common expressions justify the policing attitude of the team leaders who are instructed 'apertar com os gajos' (to put pressure on the

[63] These three verbs are not easily translated to English. They have similar meanings though. They are used in Portuguese when people are trying to 'pull through' or 'get over' some difficult task they were instructed to do.

blokes) in order to assure that operators - 'os gajos'[64] - behave like productive adults or efficient pieces of the machine.

Reprimanding the operators further infantilizes them leading to a direct comparison with school. At one of these moments, José, one of the team leaders, summoned a new recent operator to instruct him on how he should conduct his work given that on the first day he had made a lot of mistakes. The tone of voice used by José was not aggressive but professorial. He advised the operator that when people are at school the pupils should take notes of the materials to be studied, and only the pupils who applied themselves had good results. He ended the reprimand by stating that, 'I cannot do your work for you, I have already given you all the advice I can so that you can organize your work better. Now you are the one who have to prove that you can achieve the targets which you must do to keep working here'. The threat of being made redundant is always the subtext in all instructions for 'good and productive work'.

The sources of stigma which I have described in this section have implications for workers' lives and health. Jorge's narrative, on which I concentrate in the next section, is particularly illustrative in this respect.

8.4.5. Jorge

Jorge was 32 years old in 2008, and he had worked in several call centres. I first met him in August 2008. A union representative arranged for us to have a coffee together near the Castelo de São Jorge in the old part of Lisboa, it was a warm summer day, and when that happens in Lisboa it's nice to be close to a river where the air is fresher. He told me that he lived on the other side of the river. The south part of the river Tejo is called *margem sul* (southern margin). To say that you live in *margem sul* comes with a price in terms of 'class distinction'. It was here, in the borough of Barreiro, during the 19th century, that one of the most important chemical factories was located and Barreiro is still connected to factory workers and a place where until quite recently the Portuguese Communist Party had considerable influence. Jorge was born in Barreiro, his mother died when he was nine years old and he never had a good relation with his father. He left home at 18 years old and still does not talk to his father.

[64] The closest translation for this word in English would be 'blokes'. It's a slang word usually used as the antonym of 'sir' or 'mister'.

He did not want to talk about either parent in any way. I understood why and respected his decision.

He moved to the northern part of Portugal to a city called Bragança. He was accepted at the state university to study forest engineering. For the first two years he had a scholarship but it was then annulled because he did not manage to pass to the third year. He returned to Lisboa and in 1996 and 2001 he had several jobs: at Pizza Hut making home deliveries; as a security guard in a bank; in a bar at night serving drinks; as a catering assistant. During these years he decided to get back to study at night and did professional training in the insurance sector. In 2001 he decided to apply to the call centre of an insurance company, learning of the vacancy through a friend who was working there. He was accepted and initially worked giving telephone assistance to clients involved in accidents. During the seven years he was at the call centre he was made a series of false promises regarding the possibility of becoming a permanent worker. This never happened[65]. Therefore, the interview extracts which I use here are mostly concerned with his views on call centre work and the conditions of employment, and particularly regarding how it affected his life and way of being in the world.

The aspects which were most emphasized by Jorge were the consequences of living in a constant employment uncertainty and the emotional and physical stress attached to the job.

> It is very distressing to be working in a place thinking, is it next month that they will send me away? Is it next year that I am out of a job? Can I have a child one day? Will I have money to pay the rent next month? … We don't have conditions to have a life Patrícia. ... Because it is one thing if you are working with security, you can project your life … for example, my case, right now I am unemployed. My partner is a civil servant but she has been working on contracts too, she has a college degree, and she tells me 'imagine if I become unemployed too?'.

Jorge worked for six years in a call centre which might be considered a record. Out of all the people I interviewed Jorge had been working in a call centre for the longest continuous period. Several studies promoted by private companies indicate that the average turnover of call centre operators is around two years, due to the stress of the job. The majority of the interviewees had been working for a continuous period in

[65] Although he told me about what happened during those seven years he asked me not to write about it because the case is in court.

one call centre from one month to two years. He described the emotional and physical stress of the job:

> Once I arrived home with pain in my hands, from typing on the computer keyboard… It is not only one or two persons, I know dozens of persons that are in that situation, they go to the psychologist, the only thing he can do is prescribe tranquillizers and then these people are at the workplaces, some of them looking like zombies. They are very calm, almost falling asleep… and I am talking about people who are less than thirty years old! Because more than ninety per cent of the calls are complaints, people are angry, they had an accident or something else. We deal with all kinds of people, some people don't have any patience, some don't know how to talk, some are very rude… you get everything in there, people swearing at you, insulting you… I know that people don't beat you, but the psychological part… listening day after day to people insulting you on the phone, every day. The amount of people that I saw breaking down crying…

He brought the stress home from work:

> I don't know, now I take one day at a time, but I honestly don't know… I am very nervous, that's the reason why I always practised sport, did martial arts, it was my escape. Maybe there were people who let off the anger on their partners, I can tell you that I had arguments with my partner because of that. You get home with all that stress and then for the most minimal thing you explode, and it's not the other person's fault. I used to scream, then I apologized because I knew that it was because of my own stress, my partner understood… you try to let go of work but you can't…

The aspects mentioned by Jorge seem to me to be of the utmost importance because they illustrate how the feelings of being stigmatized gain a bodily and semi-permanent expression (*you try to let go of work but you can't)*. The bodily injuries caused by call centre work are an integral part of feeling that one is carrying a stigma. The pain in the hands due to excessive typing, high levels of stress and depressive symptoms and the development of chronic *otitis externa*[66] were reported to me by several operators. They remind the workers that they are not like the 'normal' ones who supposedly have a greater degree of control over their bodily functions and fewer limitations than call centre operators. Furthermore, a great part of what we are comes from what our bodies say about us; and sometimes what our bodies say about us is deeply stigmatizing. Another operator, Helena (thirty one years old in 2008), working in an insurance call centre for five years said:

[66] Inflammation of the outer ear, or ear canal, often known as 'swimmers' ear'.

> I learned a lot over those five years, I can't say that I haven't learned anything, but it is a very wearing profession; it simply broke both my hearing and vocal system. After five years working as a call centre operator I was physically debilitated. I went to the ear doctor and he told me that the maximum someone should work in a call centre is three years, and I had worked double that! … At home my parents started to notice that I always put the volume of the television too high. Besides that my mother started to notice that I was always very 'electrical', because in call centre work you need speed, more speed, more speed… When I was eating or talking about something I sounded too electrical. My parents started to notice that. And when it comes to my hearing I kept repeating 'sorry?', 'what did you say?' I was constantly doing that.

Emily Martin (1992; 1994; 2000) has investigated the relations between the emergence of a new model of body and person and practices of flexibility in late capitalist economies. One of her main findings suggests that the uses of flexibility in the corporate world also serve as a metaphor for the imposition of a notion of person and body which can constantly change and adapt to new circumstances and challenges. In the same vein, call centre operators are expected to be 'flexible' and 'adaptable' enough in order not to feel and internalize the emotional and bodily demands of the job. For workers, however, such imposition is a source of stigma. That is, workers feel as if they lack the ability to control their own personhood as it is expressed in the bodily injuries caused by call centre labour, particularly in the confrontation with others. Jorge mentioned the difficulty of avoiding arguments with his partner caused by the accumulated stress at work and Helena described how her parents started to notice something different in her behaviour when she started to lose her hearing and being always 'electrical'. Both the testimony of Jorge and Helena are representative of what other operators confided in me, that the social stigma attached to call centre work is inscribed on their own bodies and selves and acts as a social differentiator in their relationships with the others, the supposedly 'normal'.

8.5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have given prominence to the workers' narratives about their sense of dispossession, relegation and stigma, while at the same time establishing links between these feelings, and the larger social frames of generation, class and family relationships. I began by arguing that call centre operators, due in large part to the

particular historical Portuguese background (see chapter 2), are trapped between two conflicting ideological models of labour control. The two conflicting rhetorics might be roughly defined as the language of full employment and the flexibility paradigm. This entrapment is reinforced by the fact that call centre operators internalized throughout the course of their lives the social hopes instilled by their parents who associated stable employment and educational achievement with expectations of upward social mobility.

For call centre operators, having to enter into low-paid and precarious employment such as call centre work constitutes the feeling of 'falling from grace' (Newman 1999) which is often expressed as resentment and a sense of failure. On the one hand, call centre operators tend to attribute to themselves the responsibility of not having been able to pursue a professional career according to their educational qualifications, on the other hand, they display a deep feeling of resentment for not having had access to the opportunities projected by their parents and society at large. The sense of having been betrayed does not have, however, equal consequences in the generation as a whole. If, as I mentioned earlier, the group of call centre workers in the late 1990s and early 2000s, was fairly heterogeneous in class background, this has been changing in recent years. I have drawn on my own social memory from the years I worked in the call centre sector but also from interviews and observations carried out during fieldwork to make this statement. Not only is the call centre sector workforce more and more a concentration of the most culturally and economical disadvantaged members of the generation born after the revolution, roughly between 1970 and 1985, but it now includes those more than forty year old as part of the available labour supply. The workers I met belonging to this age group were mostly long-term unemployed with very low educational qualifications who despite having greater work experience than the younger generation, cannot compete in terms of educational qualifications. Overall, however, I would like to emphasize that the temporal experience of dispossession – briefly understood as the gap between subjective expectations and objective chances – is deeply connected with the internalization of structured class inequalities.

Throughout this chapter the short workers' biographical notes and the interview excerpts have tended to show the repetition of certain social anxieties, among which the most prominent are the impact of call centre labour on the realm of interpersonal friendships and the management of shame in the private realm of the nuclear family.

Workers emphasized how call centre labour affects their expressive abilities to engage linguistically and relationally with others outside the work environment. Within the private sphere the feeling of shame in their close family was often described through the remarks their parents made regarding call centre work ('little work'). Call centre operators confront these remarks with difficulty and shame not least because they tend to compare their trajectories with those of their parents. Shame concerning their work was aroused through this comparison and it is this comparison which reveals the extent to which call centre work downgrades human abilities and skills.

The management of feelings of shame is the more difficult due to the public stigma attached to call centre work as dull, robotic and repetitive. Furthermore, it is also a devalued form of work carried out through precarious and insecure employment conditions. In everyday life call centre workers have to deal with situations leading to low self-esteem and lack of self-respect due to the limitations of being employed on a temporary basis. The feeling of inferiority outside the workplace is parallel to the infantilization of workers inside the workplace. Managers demand a policing attitude from team leaders in order to ensure efficiency and the control of the 'service level'. Workers, on the other hand, experience high levels of emotional and physical stress which, in the extreme form, might lead to semi-permanent health injuries, such as depression or *otitis externa*. Goffman reports that originally the carrier of a stigma was identified by a specific body mark which would distinguished the stigmatized from the 'normal ones'. The health injuries attached to call centre work do not have the visibility of such bodily marks but from the point of view of workers they are as deeply discrediting of one's sense of self. For workers they represent the most concrete and tangible form of dispossession.

In the next and concluding chapter I provide a summary of the main arguments developed throughout the thesis; and the specific contribution of this research to the discipline of anthropology. Lastly, I discuss new questions brought about by the process of writing-up, and how these could constitute avenues for future research.

CHAPTER 9

Conclusion

The main concern of this thesis has been to investigate the broader themes of alienation and exploitation within the Portuguese call centre regime of labour. Thus, I have focused on the processes of value creation empirically observable in the workplace, while taking into account the historically changing relations between labour and capital in Portugal, particularly since the installation of *Estado Novo* (1933-1974). I have done so with the particular goal of answering the main research question, that is, how is the call centre regime of labour shaping the constitution of subjectivity and consciousness of workers? Throughout the thesis I argue that (1) the call regime of labour should be viewed as an advanced system of labour exploitation which is able to objectify and appropriate a particular and rarefied form of human labour power; for such a system I propose the designation *regime of disciplined agency,* (2) that in Portugal historically contingent processes as well as global processes of neoliberalization facilitated the rapid emergence of the call centre sector, which is contributing to the segmentation of the workforce along the lines of class, gender and age, and finally (3) that the workers' feelings of dispossession, shame and stigma are as much related to unfulfilled expectations of upward social mobility as they are a consequence of a labour regime which downgrades human abilities and skills. In this concluding chapter I begin by briefly summarizing each one of my main arguments. I then consider the specific contribution of this thesis to the discipline of anthropology and point out new avenues of research opened up by this study.

9.1. 'April is still to be accomplished'

Since the Carnation revolution there have been important changes in relations between capital and labour in Portugal. Initially these changes might be considered to have altered labour's position in terms of social rights and entitlements. These changes, however, were not sufficiently assimilated to alter the most important features of previous structures of inequality. Despite the accession of Portugal to the European Union and having to compete with countries with much stronger productive apparatuses, Portugal maintained in customs, law and politics some of the features

which characterized the period of the dictatorship. In practical and legal terms, as confirmed by the rapid growth of temporary work agencies work in Portugal (particularly noticeable when compared with other EU countries), the devaluation of labour remained constant; and, although union organization became legal, their capacities to recruit and mobilize remained, as unions representatives argued in chapter three, as restricted, in some ways, as they had been under the previous corporatist regime.

As mentioned in chapter two the previous rigid suppression of labour provided the historical ground which facilitated the emergence of the call centre sector. That is, the call centre sector has reproduced, the same tradition of labour power devaluation in a liberalized labour market as had characterized the economic nationalist protectionist regime of the dictatorship. To this extent, the phrase often quoted by left-wingers now in their 60s has some accuracy, 'April is still to be accomplished'. Nevertheless, the promises of greater social mobility brought about by the revolution did function as a normative model of life-planning for the generation now currently working in Portuguese call centres, even taking into account the differences in terms of social class background and geographical origin. The hopes of better educational achievement, of better job opportunities and home ownership provided a mental and relational template on which call centre workers modelled their desires and ambitions.

The majority of call centre workers have had greater opportunities for educational achievement than their parents did. Most of them have been able to attend university; they were able to access a set of cultural goods and social networks which contained the promise of 'middle-class distinction'. But at the actual moment of entering the job market they had to confront the inherited economic and historical structural inequalities which shaped their parents' lives. Unlike their parents, call centre workers confront this inheritance from with high individual expectations but also in the context of a regime of labour which possesses distinctive characteristics in terms of value creation.

9.2. A regime of disciplined agency

As argued in previous chapters, the emergence of the call centre sector benefited from the fact that the generation first available to work in call centres was drawn from a highly qualified labour supply which could not easily be absorbed by

other sectors, particularly those which demand specific skills and qualifications. That is, as mentioned in chapter three, when analysing the recruitment and training process call centre candidates and recruits go through, no specific training or skills are demanded. Candidates only have to have the ability to speak clearly and to deploy numerical and mathematical reasoning. That is, in contrast with other occupations, there is no need for skills that are specifically acquired through training and professional development. The skills required constitute the minimal requirements for other jobs: reading, speaking and writing. On technical helplines, however, specific qualifications are sought, such as advanced IT skills. Call centres attract students of computing or individuals who have gained professional training through the state or private companies. These individuals who have gained qualifications with the hope of gaining employment in a specific industry constitute an available labour supply particularly useful for technical helplines.

I do not mean to suggest that it does not take specific skills in order to be able to execute the functions of a call centre operator, because it does; workers are not only bodies with voices, or *human answering machines*. Although the most prominent aspects of call centre work – high isolation, rigid regimentation, high degree of computer-based surveillance - might indicate a regime of total control of labour, a closer analysis discloses the central paradox attached to the call centre regime of labour, which simultaneously reveals the specific aspects pertaining to the nature of value creation within call centres.

The system of control established at the workplace level is constituted by informal and formal means of surveillance. Some of them are like other workplaces, for instance the systematic instillation of the 'team spirit' and the 'team values' in order to stimulate peer-group surveillance. Some, however, are different in both degree and kind. The extensive use of computer software to monitor, record and store every minute of the operator's shift is particularly intrusive and it establishes a pace of control which is not easily replicable by humans (i.e. by supervisors or managers). Each of the forms of labour control and surveillance is meant to regulate two different kinds of productivity which are categorized by management as being the qualitative or the quantitative targets each operator has to achieve and which I discuss in chapter six.

The central paradox to which I referred above is related to these two different kinds of target and with the limitations of such an encompassing system of labour control. As mentioned in chapter six, a team leader at EVA frequently expressed this

central paradox, which I discuss further, with the sentence 'the little man of quantity never meets the little man of quality'. An example of this conflict is, for instance, the fact that operators are obliged to be completely available to listen to and stay with the client while running through several operations while at the same time not having time to accomplish all these tasks. Operators constantly complain that the 'qualitative' requirements of the job are incompatible with the 'quantitative' time restrictions imposed by management. I do not have empirical evidence as to the extent to which this incompatibility is premeditated by management, but the maintenance of its effects on the activity of call centre operators – through informal and formal mechanisms of surveillance - indicate one important aspect: that value resides in the unintended consequences of such an encompassing regime of labour control.

To put it another way, in order to balance the qualitative and quantitative requirements of the job operators deploy the most distinguishable form of specific human labour power: creative linguistic engagement. But they do so from the standpoint of certain frames of discipline which they have internalized throughout their careers at call centres. One such frame of self-discipline for instance is suggested by the advice given to new recruits – after a while 'it becomes automatic'. This is similar to the advice given by senior operators to junior ones, that they should, sometimes, 'act like a machine'. This example, more than any other, illustrates the extent to which alienation is not only a product of the valorization process (the extraction of surplus value through the production process); it is also a condition for its existence. That is, according to Marx ([1959] 1977):

> Production does not simply produce man as a *commodity*, the *human commodity*, man in this role of *commodity*; it produces him in keeping with this role as a *mentally* and physically *dehumanized* being. – Immorality, deformity, and dulling of the workers and the capitalists - Its product is the *self-conscious and self-acting commodity*… the human commodity… (82)

To sum up, at first operators' central function is to talk on the phone. Speaking becomes the central medium through which operators work on their material, that is, clients. The advanced system of labour exploitation deployed in call centres is aimed at disciplining this unique form of labour power, human communicative competence, on which the realization of value is dependent. To this extent the call centre regime of

labour could be characterized as *a regime of disciplined agency* which alienates this most complex and elaborated human skill.

9.3. Class, gender and generation

The changing forms of labour exploitation in the capitalist mode of production are made apparent not only by an analysis of the production process but also through the workers' accounts of how the work they do affects personal and family relationships and their own feelings of dispossession, shame and stigma. I hope to have shown in chapter eight how these feelings are related to the broader social structures of class, gender and the generation they belong to. That is, call centres both deploy an innovative system for the exploitation of a rarefied kind of labour power and they also reproduce these power-laden divisions of social stratification.

Class divisions among call centre operators and managers of the same age cohort are to a certain extent parallel to the division between precarious and permanent workers. This division has remained relatively stable since the appearance of call centres but there have been some important changes among the group of call centre operators with precarious employment contracts, which I have highlighted. At the beginning of this century the group of call centre operators was relatively heterogeneous in terms of class background. Since 2007 – and taking into account the expansion of call centres to rural and impoverished areas of Portugal as well as workers's accounts of their experience of work in different call centres – there has been a greater concentration of those without resources in call centre work. These are people who lack the forms of economic, social or cultural capital which allow them to undertake further graduate studies or professional training and development, or to find better jobs through personal networks. For such reasons call centre operators whose careers in call centres have lasted from two to six years tend to express a sense of dispossession through feelings of entrapment, resentment and failure.

Within the call centre regime of labour, the gendered division in the workforce is of particular significance, as I examined in chapter seven. The specific form of surplus extraction in call centres (human communicative competence) relies on a hierarchical distinction between feminine and masculine ways of talking. The call centre allocation of jobs between men and women tends to reproduce long-lasting images of women's inferiority. Although I did not follow systematically workers in

their households, I drew on my own memory of working at the call centre in order to affirm that the gendered division of labour inside the workplace tends to reflect the division inside the household and in society at large. For instance, the caring role primarily attributed to women inside the call centre sector is reflected in the household, i.e. women tend to spend more time with children and such 'feminine' tasks as cleaning, nurturing and establishing contacts between close kin.

With regard to generational divisions I have shown in chapter two how the goals of greater social equity which shaped the Carnation revolution, were transformed (and frustrated) as soon as Portugal began the process of 'democratic normalization' and later joined the EU. The majority of call centre operators with whom I had contact belong to the generation born after the Revolution, having thus inherited better access to education and cultural goods which prompted hopes of upward social mobility. After entering the EU, important changes occurred in labour and employment relations, most of which I emphasize in chapter two. The continuous transformation of stable into flexible employment relations in Portugal (as elsewhere), labelled as *precariedade laboral*, became symbolically attached to one generation in particular, the *500 euros generation* (see chapter three). For call centre operators detaching this label is particularly difficult because call centre work has been co-opted by the media, social movements against insecure labour and left-wing parties as *the* main symbol of labour precariousness. The potential emancipatory vocabulary of labour insecurity is ignored by most call centre operators who are instead infused with shame (in the private realm of the family) and stigma (in the public sphere) about their work. Furthermore, the label 'precarious worker' or 'labour precariousness', tends to obscure unequal social positions inside the same generation. That is, the *500 euros generation* is not a cohesive and single entity which shares the same possibilities. There are in fact many young adults (20-25 years old) working part-time in call centres and studying in the university who are protected by the socio-economic security of their parents and who do not work in the call centre sector more than one year and a half. The great majority of call centre operators I interviewed, however, already had long careers in the call centre sector, having changed at least twice from one call centre to another. Therefore, labour precariousness is a quite different experience among members of the same age cohort and is also an insufficient category for expressing the class divisions among them.

9.4. Contribution to the discipline and further research

In this section I situate the contribution of this thesis to the discipline of anthropology. I also clarify why the work of this thesis has produced questions which justify further research. In the introductory chapter I briefly summarized the important contribution of Eric Wolf to the study of the capitalist system through his emphasis on the different forms of 'mobilizing social labour'. Although I did not always refer to Wolf directly his reading of Marx has profoundly shaped the form in which I presented both the background economic and historical material on the specificities of the Portuguese economy and on how labour is mobilized, organized and deployed in the call centre labour process.

In his lecture 'Facing power' Eric Wolf (1990) stressed his commitment to a realist ontological position vis a vis the social world, when he remarked that:

> Structural power shapes the social field of action in such a way as to render some kinds of behavior possible, while making others less possible or impossible. As anthropologists we can follow the flows of capital and labor through ups and downs, advances and retreats, and investigate the ways in which social and cultural arrangements in space and time are drawn into and implicated in the workings of this double whammy. Some have said that these questions have very little relevance to anthropology, in that they do not have enough to say about 'real people doing real things', as Sherry Ortner put it; but I think that it is the task of anthropology – or at least the task of some anthropologists – to attempt explanation, not merely description, descriptive integration or interpretation. Writing culture may require literary skill and genre, but a search for explanation requires more: it cannot do without naming and comparing things, without formulating concepts for naming and comparison. I think we must move beyond Clifford Geertz's 'experience-near' understandings to analytical concepts that allow us to set what we know about X against what we know about Y, in pursuit of explanation. *This means that I subscribe to a basically realist position: I think that the world is real, that these realities affect what humans do and that what humans do affects the world, and that we can come to understand the whys and wherefores of this relationship*. We need to be professionally suspicious of our categories and models; we should be aware of their historical and cultural contingencies; we can understand a quest for explanation as approximations to truth rather than as truth itself. But I also believe that the search for explanation in anthropology can be cumulative; that knowledge and insights gained in the past can generate new questions, and that new departures can incorporate the accomplishments of the past

For Wolf, as well as for Marx (Roseberry 1997; Marx and Engels [1932] 1998), labour is not reducible to the engagement of human beings in the expenditure of energy (i.e. work), it is above all, an irreducible characteristics of human beings as a species-being. That is, it is an ontological aspect of social reality, as Wolf put it, labour is 'an undeniable aspect of human relations'. As such, the variable and historically contingent forms through which labour is mobilized, organized and deployed provide a unique perspective into the power-laden social relationships established between individuals, as well as, into the changing forms of labour exploitation within the capitalist mode of production. In this sense this thesis aims, first of all, to contribute to the reinforcement of a realist epistemological position within the science of anthropology as well as to the studies which have privileged labour and production processes as a valuable starting point of analysis into other spheres of social life, such as gender, class and age. This realist perspective does not assume that human agency does not exist, it simply stresses that human agency is always situated; and is dependent on pre-existing social structures (Bhaskar 1989). That is, as Goffman ([1974] 1975) remarked in precise terms:

> (…) the individuals I know don't invent the world of chess when they sit down to play, or the stock market when they buy some shares, or the pedestrian traffic system when they manoeuvre through the streets. Whatever the idiosyncrasies of their own motives and interpretations, they must gear their participation into what is available by way of a standard doings and standard reasons for these doings (63)

Second, this thesis contributes the grounding of 'global assemblages' in both contingent and bounded ethnographic contexts (Ong and Collier 2005). It also uses concepts and categories of analysis which can be used in further comparative studies. That is, the call centre sector has been seen as a paradigmatic case of the 'globalization of service work' and 'total labour control'. This first expression contains several assumptions which my research implicitly disputes. The first assumption consists of ignoring how economic and historical national traditions determine the appropriation of global processes therefore producing different outcomes. The second assumption is to accept uncritically the category of 'service work' without specifying both the continuities and discontinuities in the *modus operandi* of value extraction in both the production and reproduction realms. The second expression – 'total labour control' – is simply descriptive because is fails to deploy conceptual tools of analysis (such as

Marx's theory of alienation) which might help to explain *how* and *what* is being controlled.

The contributions I refer to in the previous paragraph are incomplete. It depends on what has historically shaped the anthropological enterprise, on cumulative knowledge by comparative research. As such this thesis is also incomplete and its realization opened up new research questions and the desire to compare my data with the data obtained in other countries and in different regimes of precarious labour. I highlight three topics for further research which were raised during research for this thesis. The first one is the changing role of unions inside the workplaces and in workers' lives and in the labour movement at a broader level. How are trade unions changing within the context of an increase in insecurity and flexibility in the wage labour relationship? Also, what kinds of organization have substituted for the role of unions in workers' lives, particularly in southern Europe? The second new topic for future investigation brought about by this thesis is related to top managers and CEOs of companies such as EVA. This new topic not only represents an impulse to 'study-up' as proposed by Laura Nader (1972) but also raises the question of the degree of influence of top managers of multinational companies in commanding and influencing state policies. Or, in other words, how is the reproduction of elites changing within the context of global processes of capital accumulation? I am aware that these questions are not new, but they were always present while I was conducting my research. This was for two main reasons. The first was my close contact with union representatives in the Portuguese call centre sector since 2000. The second was a consequence of my focus in this thesis on one specific professional category: call centre operators, which had advantages and disadvantages. The final topic which I would like to pursue is related to broader processes of neoliberalization and the extent to which a comparative analysis of such processes could help in the understanding and explanation of welfare-state mutations in the last decades. That is, as mentioned in this thesis, the terminology associated with the terms precarious labour and labour precariousness were mobilized as a form of criticizing neoliberal policies of employment. The manufacture of neoliberalism as an economic and political project remains, however, imprecise, both theoretically and empirically. One way of refining its meaning would be to research organisms attached to the state whose primary function is to reproduce state policies. Such research, if conducted in countries with distinct histories of the advent and development of the welfare state, might make it possible to answer the following

questions: how is the role of the bureaucratic state changing as a consequence of the implementation of neoliberal policies? And, how do historical and cultural specificities determine or facilitate the implementation of neoliberal policies?

The topics for further research which I have mentioned could expand the specific themes addressed in this thesis. Overall, however, I hope to have shown in this thesis the innovative capabilities of the capitalist mode of production in producing ever more elaborated technological devices which further increase the exploitation of the potential contained in human labour power. Such technological innovations, according to my research findings, do not seem to alter in theory what had been already advanced by Marx in his formal analysis of capitalist accumulation. That is:

> (…) within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment; they alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they deform the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time (…) *But all methods for the production of surplus-value are at the same time methods of accumulation, and every extension of accumulation becomes, conversely, a means for the development of those methods*. *It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, must grow worse* (Marx [1867] 1990: 799)

In this sense Marx's analysis of the capitalist system and his theory of alienation remain perhaps the model which better enables a critique of a productive system in which continuous virtuosity is found in the reification of the social relations ingrained in objective totalities – such as labour and capital – thereby making invisible the exploitation and human costs associated with it. While some authors have pointed out that *Capital* represents the 'mature' Marx in opposition to his early writings concerning alienation (Althusser [1965] 1979) I argue that they are in fact dialectically related. That is, while in *Capital* Marx starts his analysis with the commodity in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* the emphasis is on the individual but what is continuous in both works is the emphasis on how objective totalities (such as wage-labour, capital and labour) come to be seen as things instead of social relations of

exploitation. Commodity and individual – or object and subject - do not represent two opposite poles (one material and the other immaterial), as Mészáros (1970) points out:

> Only in Marx's monistic materialism can we find a coherent comprehension of 'objective totality' as "sensuous reality", and a correspondingly valid differentiation between subject and object, thanks to his concept of mediation as ontologically fundamental productive activity, and thanks to his grasp of the historically specific, second order mediations through which the ontological foundation of human existence is alienated from man in the capitalist order of society (87)

The 'second order mediations' to which Mészáros alludes are, for instance, in the capitalist mode of production, capital, labour and machines. Through them the capitalist mode of production continuously reproduces one fundamental form of inequality of which other forms of inequality are a consequence. Thus, I hope to have shown by using the Portuguese call centre sector as a case-study that, as Wolf (2001) accurately pointed out:

> Marx's model may thus be thought of as a set of relations created among historically developed elements - capital, labour, and machines - that continuously create, recreate, and widen the field of force directing and constraining social relations. Among the social relations thus set in motion is the vaunted and segmented labour market of modern society that continuously recreates real and invidious distinctions among the labour force (345).

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