A Workers' Inquiry in a UK Call Centre:
the Labour Process, Management, and Resistance

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Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for another degree at Goldsmiths or any other institution.

Jamie Woodcock, September 2014

Acknowledgements

Abstract

This thesis contributes to an understanding of the labour process, management techniques, and the possibilities for resistance in a call centre. The research uses ethnographic methods to focus on a workplace inspired by the different moments of workers inquiry – from Marx, the Johnston-Forest Tendency, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, to the *Operaismo* – and a sociological approach like Burawoy's (1979) extended case method. The study combines a theoretical analysis of the development and organisation of call centres with a detailed ethnographic account. It focuses on the specific features of the labour process and the application of Taylorist principles, developing Taylor and Bain's (1999:109) research on call centre work as creating the experience of 'an assembly-line in the head.' It discusses the implications of the shift towards the exploitation of emotional and affective labour.

The research considers the role of management and supervision in the call centre, detailing the electronic surveillance, "buzz sessions", and motivational methods. The analysis re-applies the metaphor that Fernie and Metcalf (1997:3) used to conceptualise call centres as an 'electronic panopticon', through a return to Bentham (1995) and Foucault (1991). However, the central argument of this thesis is the ability of workers to resist in call centres, rather than the victory of management. The research uncovers a 'repertoire of resistance strategies' similar to those identified by Mulholland (2004) in an Irish call centre: '*Slammin' Scammin' Smokin' an' Leavin'*.' These moments of resistance are conceptualised as expressions of the refusal of work, a key theme developed in the thesis. The problem of worker retention is therefore understood as the culmination of these different moments. The analysis of the case study at *Trade Union Cover*, a private company that sells insurance to trade union members, provides an important insight into the shift towards service unionism and its implications for workers and organisation.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis is an investigation of the experience of working in the non-unionised service sector in the UK. It is an inquiry into the conditions of call centre work. Call centres have become emblematic of the shift towards a post-industrial service economy. This transformation of work has not been accompanied by a new wave of worker self-organisation or the development of successful trade union initiatives. The figure of the call centre worker is often presented as isolated, lacking agency and faced with precarious contracts and intense surveillance and control. Enda Brophy succinctly summarises how 'working in a call centre tends to include a well established mix of low wages, high stress, precarious employment, rigid management, draining emotional labour and pervasive electronic surveillance' (Brophy 2010:471). The lack of workplace organisation or trade unionism has left the 'frontier of control' (Goodrich, 1975) firmly in the hands of management. However, wherever power is exercised there is the potential for resistance. The main aim of the thesis is to uncover the extent and form of that resistance by call centre workers.

The central argument of this thesis is the ability of workers to resist in call centres. The aim of the thesis was to develop a detailed exposition of the experience of working in a high-volume sales call centre. The use of ethnographic method used provides a narrative account of what it is like to work in a call centre. While it is not possible to generalise directly from one empirical example, there are a number of common features shared across call centre work. The prevalence of low-paid and low-quality call centre jobs was identified internationally by Holman *et al.* (2007b:41) who found that 67% of call centre workers were in 'low to very low quality jobs' of which 36% were in 'very low quality jobs.' Alongside this the application of technology to the labour process and intensive performance monitoring techniques paint a general picture of post-industrial work that 'become not Daniel Bell's dream, but Harry Braverman's nightmare' (Brophy 2010:474).

There is a pressing need for research that focuses on the experiences and actions of workers themselves. Thompson and Ackroyd (1995:629) have argued that researchers need to 'put labour back in, by doing theory and research in such a way that it is possible to "see" resistance and misbehaviour, and recognise that innovatory employee practices and informal organisation will continue to subvert managerial regimes.' There has been a renewed interest

in the notion of a workers' inquiry, with special issues in *Viewpoint Magazine*[1] and *Ephemera*[2], to which I have contributed (Woodcock 2013; Woodcock 2014). This has opened up a number of potentially fruitful debates about the changing nature of work, forms of resistance, and organisational strategies. What is particularly interesting is that these are not being conducted on an abstract level; rather they are being clarified and argued through empirical research. This thesis is therefore intended as an intervention into both the theoretical and methodological debates.

The sociology of work is a rich academic tradition full of examples of workplace studies detailing the labour process and resistance in various contexts. For example, from the 1970s there were a number of studies that focused on the workplace, including Huw Beynon's (1973) *Working for Ford*, Anna Pollert's (1981) *Girls, Wives, and Factory Lives*, Ruth Cavendish's (1982) *Women on the Line*, and a number of studies by Michael Burawoy (1979) starting with *Manufacturing Consent*. However, there have been far-reaching changes since these studies were undertaken. The new context is that 'Fordism has definitely collapsed in Britain, and with it the sites around which the old politics were organized' (Fisher 2009:29) and in this wake a neoliberal orthodoxy has risen to prominence. The result has been programmes of 'deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision' (Harvey 2007:38). It is in this economic environment that call centres have flourished. The technologies and techniques developed in call centres 'represents an unprecedented level of *attempted* control which must be considered a novel departure' (Taylor & Bain 1999:109).

This research builds on the more recent studies of call centres, for example the work of Houlihan (2002), Taylor and Bain (2003), and Kolinko (2002). The argument that is developed in this thesis connects the empirical research in a call centre with an understanding of the impact of neoliberalism as an intensification of the capital/labour relationship. In this context the capacity for workplace resistance can seem diminished. As Marx argued, people:

> make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.
>
> (Marx 1852)

Therefore it is easy to draw the conclusion that this 'nightmare' combines with innovations in management technique and overpowering structural forces crushes the agency of workers into submission.

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[1] See: http://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/30/issue-3-workers-inquiry/
[2] See: http://www.ephemerajournal.org/issue/politics-workers-inquiry/

What this thesis seeks to do is reverse the polarity of this argument, to refocus the analytical lens on the activity of workers themselves. The challenge of the thesis is to identify the acts of resistance and tentative first steps towards new organisational forms that can emerge in the course of struggle. It poses the problem of working class organisation in concrete terms through the empirical investigation of a call centre. The thesis will articulate the obstacles that contemporary precarious workers face and consider the kinds of tactics and strategies necessary that can overcome them.

1.1 *The call centre in popular culture*

The popular conception of call centres is based on the negative encounters that most of us experience. The unsolicited sales call has become a regular and frustrating occurrence in day-to-day life. This negative association of the call centre is often only expressed with anger to the worker on the other end of the phone. It adds an additional dimension to the stressful experience of the labour process. The thesis begins by considering *The Call Centre* (BBC 2013), a documentary which highlights a number of key themes that will be discussed in this thesis[3]. The publicity describes it as a 'fly-on-the wall documentary series following the ups and downs of Swansea call centre CEO Nev Wilshire and his staff of extraordinary characters.' The first episode introduces the call centre with the narrator describing how 'over 1 million people now work in UK call centres with an average age of just 26. They are the factories of our time. But here at the 3rd largest call centre in Swansea the only thing being made are the cold calls we dread.' The camera pans over a familiar scene: row upon row of desks with workers speaking through headsets, supervisors at the end of each row, and whiteboards scrawled with targets. The documentary is clearly designed for entertainment, rather than being a theoretically robust inquiry into the conditions of work. However, what is interesting is that the production illustrates a number of issues that offer insight into the experience of work.

The CEO of the company, Nev Wiltshire, is introduced in the first episode. The narrator explains how Nev 'has developed a unique approach to keeping his young workforce on their toes.' The camera cuts to Nev: a man in his fifties with balding hair, wearing a suit with a loosened tie. He says: 'what sums up my management style? Hmm...' The camera cuts to a shot of Nev standing on a table shouting at a worker, then to Nev leading a training session. Nev shouts: 'are you yawning at the back? Get down!' He then proceeds to throw a board marker at the worker in question, which hits the wall above them. The camera cuts back to Nev describing his management style, concluding that his inspiration is 'probably Napoleon . . .

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[3] See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03mtjjh

a dictator', followed by a shot of Nev summarily sacking a worker. Nev returns to his analogy explain that 'his troops loved him', while the camera moves to a shot of a worker saying 'he's awful, absolutely awful', and another of a worker pretending to hang herself with the cord from a headset.

The 'frontier of control' (Goodrich, 1975) in the call centre seems firmly in the hands of management. There is, unsurprisingly, no mention of trade unions or organised struggle in the call centre. Nev's self-confessed management style not only alludes to factory despotism, but even involves an approving reference to an actual historical despot. This pop-cultural glimpse into the experience of the call centre floor provides a dim view of the potential for class struggle, offering only an opportunity for amusement. The narrator summarises this at one point as the camera pans across the office: 'with a sales floor simmering with stress, sex, and success . . . there's never a dull day when you work at this Swansea call centre.' The camera moves back to show the bland industrial park, nondescript buildings with rows of parked cars. As the shot continues back to include roundabouts and grass verges, it is easy to think that this could be anywhere in the country.

The emotional content of the labour process is illustrated during a scene in which Nev meets a new batch of trainees. Nev, speaking to a room of new workers, explains that 'happy people sell, miserable bastards don't. Isn't that right?! Happy people sing don't they?! It lifts your spirits. You don't sing sat on your arse, you sing standing up to project your voice.' The projector lights up with a karaoke style display and Nev signals to start: 'Ok – Mr Brightside, the Killers, C sharp! Here we go – on your feet!' The trainees look embarrassed – both in front of the camera and at the prospect of singing – while Nev pushes on: 'Now we go for this – no messing!' And in a mixture of different tones, abilities, and levels of commitment, the music starts playing and the whole room begin to sing:

> I'm coming out of my cage / And I've been doing just fine / Gotta gotta be down / Because I want it all / It started out with a kiss / How did it all end up like this? / It was only a kiss / It was only a kiss . . .

> (BBC 2013)

This is the first indication of the specific challenges of the indeterminacy of labour power in relation to the labour process in the call centre. The embarrassed workers are being forced to sing karaoke because, as Nev puts it, 'it is a challenge to motivate seven hundred people.' Again Nev's despotic management style is illustrated as he claims, 'I would sack somebody for not singing – I have sacked somebody – two people – for not singing. We have a motto here: happy people sell.'

The call centre is a high volume sales operation. The narrator explains how 'Nev's sales team makes roughly one and half million unsolicited calls a year, with each agent making up to two hundred calls per day.' The camera focuses in on one particular example, a familiar phone call that many receive: 'umm, just a quick call, it's in regards to a refund you may be entitled to now for payment protection insurance . . .' The narration continues to explain against a backdrop of unsuccessful calls, 'the most effective way to guard against the barrage of cold calls that many of us hate is to register with the telephone preference service.' However, Nev has a different view on this:

> well anyone has got the right to register with telephone preference services. And, er, we would totally respect but, er, why would they? They'd miss out on our wonderful range of money saving opportunities and products that can enhance their living and they'd miss out on speaking to chicken head.

<div align="right">(BBC 2013)</div>

The worker in question – given the nickname 'chicken head' by Nev – explains his experience of rejection on the phone: 'I think it's quite funny when they hang up, I had an old lady once saying that I hope I die and I hope I get killed and that.' But despite the amusement of this worker, or Nev's insistence on the wonderful service the call centre offers, the regulators took a different view. After the programme was aired, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) fined the company £225,000 for over 2,700 different complaints they had received. The director of the ICO pointed out that 'while the activities of Nev and his call centre employees have provided entertainment for many, they hide a bigger problem within the cold calling industry' (Osborne 2013). This illustrates two points: the drive for profit in some call centre operations breaches norms about social behaviour – and sometimes even the law – and the penetration of sales calls into the daily lives of many people. This is a theme that will come up a number of times in the thesis, a negative experience of a labour process – both for the worker and the customer – that does not provide a social benefit, and therefore complicates the struggle for control at work. Unlike other forms of work where it is possible to conceive of a self-organised workplace, in the call centre a flight from work seems more plausible.

The other side of the over-observed call centre worker is the customer who is calling or being called. Mark Fisher (2009:63) argues that 'the closest that most of us come to a direct experience of the centrelessness of capitalism is an encounter with the call centre.' The gaze of managers, corporations, and the state is one-way. Trying to find out information or resolve a problem requires plummeting into:

> the crazed Kafkaesque labyrinth of call centres, a world without memory, where cause and effect connect together in a mysterious, unfathomable ways, where it is a miracle that anything happens, and you lose hope of ever passing back over to the other side, where things seem to

function smoothly . . . the repeating of the same dreary details many times to poorly trained and badly informed operatives, the building rage that must remain impotent because it can have no legitimate object, since – as is very quickly clear to the caller – there is no-one who knows, and no-one who could do anything even if they could.

<div align="right">(Fisher 2009:63)</div>

Fisher draws on Franz Kafka's (2000) novel *The Castle* which details K's struggle to gain access to the bureaucratic authorities. In one passage Kafka describes K's encounter with the telephone system in the castle:

There is no specific telephone connection with the castle, no exchange that puts our calls through; when you call someone in the castle from here, it rings on all the telephones in the lowest departments there, or rather it would ring on all of them were it not for the fact, which I know for certain, that on nearly all of them the bell is switched off. Every so often, though, a overtired official feels the need for a little distraction – particularly in the evening or at night – switches the bell on, then we get an answer, except it's just a joke. And that's very understandable, after all. Who has any right to ring in about his private little troubles in the middle of the most important jobs, which are invariably being done in a tearing hurry.

<div align="right">(Kafka 2000:65)</div>

These prophetic lines seem to capture the experience of ringing a modern call centre. The impenetrable, confusing and often frustrating experience is one more akin to engaging with a 'decentralized, market Stalinist bureaucracy' than 'a central authority.' The term Kafkaesque, often used to understand totalitarianism, is more fitting in this circumstance (Fisher 2009:65).

The workers at the call centre were able to understand this frustration in two ways. They felt the power of the management gaze constantly at work. The fear of a recorded conversation coming back to haunt a worker – or worse deny them of their monthly bonus – kept behaviour in check. The gaze was not fleeting as digital recording meant every encounter with a customer would be stored away, able to be recalled at a moment's notice. There was no way that all the calls could be listened into, but the presence of supervisors on the call centre floor could be used to direct further attention onto particular recordings. In one instance I spoke with a group of workers about receiving unsolicited calls from call centres. All of us had been called from withheld numbers and told that we could be entitled to a Payment Protection Insurance refund. The conversation involved angry responses from workers about the intrusion of these phone calls: "how did they get my number", "why do they always ring at the worst time", "I always ask for my number to be taken off, but I still get called!" The anger that the person feels 'can only be a matter of venting', as Fisher (2009:64) argues, 'it is aggression in a vacuum, directed at someone who is a fellow victim of the system but with whom there is no possibility of communality.' Even in a call centre, moments before starting a shift of calling people who mostly do not want to be bothered, it is difficult to feel sympathy or identification with the disembodied voice on the other end of the phone.

It is this context that makes call centre work particularly interesting. It is held by many in low regard, both as a job and as a phenomenon encountered in various ways. As a form of employment is gendered and considered unskilled, the poor conditions rewarded with low pay, and lacking in union organisation (Brophy 2010:471).

The thesis will address the widespread rejection of work in call centres, something well understood by managers when trying to motivate workers before each shift. The experience of not only having to perform at work, but having to enjoy working, is a theme that will reoccur throughout this thesis. The difficulty for management is how to identify the elusive qualities that make a successful sales call. At one point in the BBC TV programme a young Welsh woman explains that she has 'to put a phone voice on the way I speak', and dropping her Welsh accent she enunciates in blander tone: 'Phone, Don't, Calling . . . so I change my voice completely when I go on the phones.' Yet as the narrator points out 'sometime even a posh voice isn't enough to bag a sale', as the woman is shown getting cut off on the phone a number of times. This illustrates the further indeterminacy of labour power in the call centre, something that Nev identifies in the call centre.

As the workers finish the song during the training session: 'Open up my eager eyes / 'cause I'm Mr Brightside.' A satisfied Nev justifies this approach by explaining that 'there are a lot of unhappy people and it's my duty to get their heads up – to get them a bit enthusiastic – to get things back in perspective.' Yet Nev does not limit his managerial intervention into how workers feel at work, as the Narrator explains, his 'passion for keeping his workforce happy doesn't stop at their professional life, it extends into their private life too.' In an astonishing scene – and again it is important to note that part of this could be explained away as a performance for entertainment – Nev approaches a downtrodden looking worker. He explains to her that: 'bottom line, you've been a miserable bastard for the past couple of days.' Her relationship has recently ended and she explains how she was cheated on and that it is 'not my fault, but yes.' Nev explains to her how she's 'going to get your happy head on. You're going to accept the boot up the arse that I'm going to give you.' He proceeds to take her around the office, telling her: 'shoulders back, tuck your arse in, let's go!' As they walk through the office Nev shouts, 'any single blokes here? I've got a desperate female . . . any single blokes need a hug . . . want a date?' Yet the woman seems unable to protest, simply saying 'I can't believe you're doing this.' The management of workers in this call centre extends from the labour process into their lives; not only in the call centre but also outside of work, as bizarrely Nev arranges a speed dating evening for his workers too.

The wage paid to a worker does not guarantee the full use of all their emotions and affective abilities all of the time. The notion of traditional labour is therefore extended with the new demand to align affects with profit. Yet there is no single recipe for how workers can successfully perform these affective dimensions of the labour process. While the standardisation of scripting and the application of technology to the calling process follow in the footsteps of Taylorism, there is an affective dimension that creates problems for management. Taylor & Bain (1999:109) identify the contradiction between the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the labour process – in terms of the number of sales and the quality of the phone calls – that cannot be resolved, which creates 'an assembly-line in the head' for the worker.

The problem of retention of call centre workers is a theme that will be addressed throughout the thesis. Nev's company runs a recruitment drive with a local radio station to encourage interest. As one of the team leaders explains live on radio, 'once they've filled out an application form they'll be interviewed by Nev.' This leads to a unique process that sees Nev once again in his element. The camera cuts to a shot of Nev walking through the call centre with an applicant in toe. He barks out across the call centre floor: 'good looking Welsh girl coming through, can she have a job?' A number of workers respond by shouting 'yeah!', with one leering over who says, 'there's a seat right here for her.' The parade continues with Nev asking her, 'do you fancy this team?' Nev introduces her to a team leader. He asks 'how old are you?', she responds 'eighteen', 'what's your name?', 'Charlotte.' He shakes her hand and replies 'my name is Steve, nice to meet you. Don't worry about him [Nev] he's just trying to, er, assess your confidence levels by walking you up and down.' This sexist and wholly inappropriate behaviour is met with a splutter of nervous laughter. Nev interjects, '. . . and to see if any of the boys fancy you.' As if to signal the lack of options for a worker in this position, the team leader awkwardly comments, 'ah, um, where's HR.'

There is no mention of a trade union or any hint of collective organisation in the call centre. Instead, HR – Human Resources – is identified as the force restraining the management style of Nev. He explains how 'The HR dept they don't sometimes despair of me, they totally despair of me. They're trying to do their job, trying to cover my arse (laughter) bless their hearts.' The camera moves back to Charlotte, the job applicant. Nev asks her, 'fancy working here? Bunch of nutters ain't they?' Charlotte responds that she would 'fit in', to which Nev offers her the job. In another gem of managerial knowledge, Nev explains that, 'as easy as that, you know they go through all this interview process, when all they've got to do is walk up and down the sales floor asking if she can have a job.' The camera focuses on an awkward moment between Nev and Charlotte. 'You ok?' he asks, to which she responds 'yeah I'm fine.' In a moment

reminiscent of *The Office*, Nev then tells her to leave, and starts loudly shouting 'go on get out!' The young woman looks caught in the headlights, 'this is torture', she mutters. Following this Charlotte talks to the camera: 'oh what a character (laughter) that's all I can say really. Such a character. Yeah, he's a great guy. Seems pretty cool . . . unless it carries on.' The camera lingers for a few seconds before moving on to more scenes of Nev repeating his behaviour.

The programme is clearly intended for entertainment. It constructs a perspective on call centre work for popular consumption. In this process it reveals certain structures of power. The workers in the call centre have little or no power in the workplace and outside of it are exploited as a figure of amusement. The presentation of the call centre floor is problematic; it contains not only the work performance but also performance for the TV cameras. It is a representation created to fit into the certain expectations of reality TV. There is no glimpse of resistance, hardly surprising given it would be captured on camera. It is not clear what the day-to-day experience of working in this Swansea call centre is really like. However, the performances they choose to make are interesting. Nev appears proud of his management style, even going on at lengths to explain and justify it. If this is the call centre that a manager and the producers want the outside world to see, it would be interesting to know what did not make the editing cut. I contacted one of the producers to try and find out more about the programme. The BBC, as a publicly funded broadcasting company, often provides academic access to its programmes. In this case it took a considerable search to even identify the producers and the only way to contact one was through Twitter. After a brief discussion he agreed to talk about the programme, but after receiving a number of questions, never responded. The programme was never intended as an empirical source, yet it would have been interesting to have further insight into the motivations behind producing it. It is one of the only representations of call centre work, a major form of work in the economy, stripped back and reduced to comedy performances. The programme illustrates a number of key points and themes that will be developed throughout this thesis.

1.2 *Aims and research questions*

The aim of the thesis is to investigate a call centre in detail examining the themes of the labour process, management and resistance. The research questions for the thesis are as follows:

- How is the labour process organised in a call centre?

16

- What are the emotional and affective components of the labour process?

- What is the class composition of workers in call centres?

- What techniques of supervision and control do management use?

- What is the role of technology in the call centre?

- Is there resistance in the workplace?

- What are the possibilities for organisation?

These research questions guide the empirical research and inform the theoretical discussions that follow.

1.3 *Thesis outline*

The thesis is divided into eight different chapters, each of which addresses and develops a particular theme of the research. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 focuses on the development of call centres and forms the literature review for the thesis. It begins by charting the origins and growth of call centres, situating this within the development of contemporary capitalism. This has entailed an environment of deregulation, innovate use of cost cutting measures, and profit maximisation. This is contextualised further by examining the trends internationally (Holman *et al.* 2007a, 2007b) and in the UK (IDS 2012). This presents a general picture of low paid and insecure work, with staff retention identified as a serious issue – a theme that will be returned to throughout the thesis. The chapter introduces two further important themes. The first is emotion labour, drawing on the research of Hochschild (2012) and discussing how it can be applied to call centres. The second is the development of technologies of control. This is connected to the problem of managing emotion labour in the call centre, yet has significant potential due to the integration of the telephones with computers systems.

Chapter 3 forms the methodology for the thesis. It begins with an analysis of different moments of workers' inquiry. It starts with Karl Marx's (1867) *Capital* and his later call for a workers' inquiry (Marx 1880). The contributions of the Johnson-Forest Tendency and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* are examined, drawing out the most important considerations for a contemporary inquiry. The chapter discusses the in more detail the *Operaismo* in Italy, in particular highlighting the debates around inquiry 'from above' against 'from below' and the

concept of 'co-research' (Rieser 2001:4). This leads into a section on the concept of class composition, a theoretical development that is then applied in the thesis. The chapter considers similar forms of the method in academic research and introduces Michael Burawoy's (1979) extended case method as a sociological example to develop the insights from the previous attempts. The chapter poses an argument for how the different moments of workers' inquiry can be combined with certain sociological methods to construct a method for the thesis.

Chapter 4 is the first ethnographic chapter of the thesis. It provides a narrative account of getting a job at the call centre *Trade Union Cover*, covering the training and initial experiences of work. It moves onto a detailed ethnography of the workplace focusing on the specificities of the labour process, the supervisors "buzz sessions" and coaching, and examples of sales encounters. The chapter theorises the labour process with a discussion of Harry Braverman's (1999) analysis of Taylorism and the concepts of emotional and affective labour. The negative effects of the labour process are conceptualised in terms of an estrangement rather than traditional alienation. The chapter then develops the notion of the refusal of work in the call centre, both from the workers and the various methods deployed by management to try and motivate them. The chapter concludes with a narrative account of my – slightly earlier than planned – exit from the call centre.

The ethnographic focus shifts onto management in the call centre in Chapter 5. It details the unexpected discovery of another undercover researcher in the call centre, comparing the consultant to the characters in the *Undercover Boss* (Lambert 2010). This leads into a consideration of management's imperative to develop knowledge of the labour process, also found with Frederick Taylor's (1967) study at Midvale. The chapter interrogates the role of managers in the labour process and different methods of supervision and control. These are analysed further by considering the metaphor of the Panopticon, referring to both Jeremy Bentham (1995) and Michel Foucault (1991). The demands that this places on workers are considered, both in terms of the physical aspects of the labour process and the use of "buzz sessions" and "1-2-1" meetings to motivate workers. This involves a demand not only to deploy the correct emotions but to actual feel them too. The chapter develops the metaphor of the panopticon to consider the broader changes taking place in society and the impact.

Chapter 6 shifts the focus of the thesis on to worker resistance in the call centre. Through the use of a visual analogy the difficulties of searching for deliberately hidden resistance is articulated.The chapter examines forms of resistance from indentured workers and slaves, considering the connection between the history of slavery and the development of modern

management techniques. This is not to try and equate doubly-free workers and slaves, but rather to inform an analytical perspective that is attentive to searching for covert forms of resistance. The chapter focuses on the importance of the similarity between running away – expressed in the call centre as a high turnover – and the withdrawal of labour in a strike as discussed by Marcel van der Linden (2008:137). The resistance found at *Trade Union Cover* is analysed using the 'repertoire of resistance strategies' identified by Kate Mulholland (2004) in an Irish call centre: '*Slammin' Scammin' Smokin' an' Leavin'*.' These moments of resistance are conceptualised as expressions of the refusal of work, a key theme in the thesis. The implications of this are developed by considering anti-work politics and the contributions of Paul Lafargue and C. L. R. James – also highlighting the connections between the *Operaismo* and the Caribbean, linking back to the discussions at the beginning of the chapter and the methodology.

The challenges for organising in the call centre are address in Chapter 7. The chapter focuses on contemporary trade unionism in the UK, analysing the changes that have taken place since the 1970s and the rise of service unionism. It makes a contribution to these debates by examining the complex relationship between trade unions and *Trade Union Cover* that the shift towards service unionism has entailed. The obstacles to organisation that precarious workers face are explored through an in-depth interview with a worker involved in a struggle in call centre similar to *Trade Union Cover*. It details the challenges of victimisation and strategies the workers used to overcome it. The interviewee argues for a combination of detailed work and the importance of tangible victories, providing examples of specific interventions in the workplace. The chapter supplements this with further examples from other workplaces and considers the importance of geography to workers in London.

Chapter 2

The development of call centres

It is necessary to understand the development of call centres generally before moving to the specific case study. This chapter will examine the theoretical literature and the pertinent academic debates. As Miriam Glucksmann has noted:

> Call centres represent not only one of the most rapidly expanding forms of work and of business organization but also one of the most researched. A wealth of empirical data detailing the internal workings of call centres, managerial strategies and labour process, the gender, age and national profile of call workers and their conditions of employment provides material for debates about 'surveillance versus resistance', work degradation and the relevance of an electronic panopticon analogy.

> (Glucksmann 2004:795)

This provides a strong starting point for conducting an inquiry and the key themes and issues will be identified in this chapter. Despite the claim that call centres have been the focus of much research, there are still a number of important questions relating to how call centres are developing, the changing nature of work, and forms of resistance. This chapter aims to discuss the general empirical trends and tendencies, providing the backdrop to the ethnographic research that follows in subsequent chapters.

There is one particular book that is worth examining before moving onto to discuss the academic literature as it illustrates a number of important points. *Call Centres for Dummies* by Réal Bergevin *et al.* (2010:1) claims to be 'a road map that can help you lead and manage a call centre.' The authors 'make some assumptions' about who is reading the book and suggests that they might be 'a hotshot MBA tracking through your career, and you find yourself running a call centre' (Bergevin *et al.* 2010:2), which is perhaps ironic considering the title of the book. The authors themselves are quite vague about the history of call centres. Bergevin *et al.* say that**:**

> Although we can't really tell you when the first call centre opened, we imagine that call centers started around the time that the telephone became a common household device . . . the evolution of call centers just makes sense.

> (Bergevin *et al.* 2010:11)

This common sense point about the development of call centres is useful; however, like many phenomena it is important to go beyond concluding that it 'just makes sense.' A logical starting point is the invention of the telephone. This point can be traced back to the patent applied for in 1876 by Alexander Graham Bell. There is dispute around exactly who should be credited with the invention, in a similar manner to other inventions like radio. The early telephones

were rudimentary and required separate connections to each person the user might want to speak to, but later that same year telephone switchboards were invented which paved the way for exchanges and networks. The next major development was the invention of the transistor in 1947 followed by electronic switching systems, which meant that by the 1960s there was a proliferation of infrastructure allowing near-instantaneous telecommunication (Fischer 1992).

2.1 *Where did call centres come from?*

The invention of the telephone is one of a number of technologies – alongside the automobile, the television, the computer, etc – that have had a far reaching social impact on modern society. Claude S. Fischer (1992:23) argues that the telephone 'captures most cleanly the magnification of social contact.' For example, in 1909 an advert by AT&T – the dominant telephone company in the US – claimed the Bell System was 'A Highway of Communication' that passed 'every home, every office, every factory, and every farm in the land', quoted in Fischer (1992:255). This over a hundred year old advert signals the huge potential of the telephone. However, like other examples of modern technology there is also a danger of collapsing into technological determinism, particular in a context of advertising and media hype. Technology is not neutral and emerges in particular social contexts. For example, argued that 'it would be possible to write quite a history of inventions, made since 1830, for the sole purpose of supplying capital with weapons against the revolts of the working class.' However, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1848) also argued that workers struggle can be:

> helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralise the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes. But every class struggle is a political struggle. And that union, to attain which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their miserable highways, required centuries, the modern proletarian, thanks to railways, achieve in a few years.
>
> (Marx & Engels 1848)

While railways would have seemed revolutionary at the time they were writing modernity is furnished with many more examples: broadband and wireless internet, instantaneous messaging, social media, etc. The question is therefore how to understand the dialectic of technology: how has class struggle shaped its introduction and what effect technology has had in turn. There are many possibilities in technology, yet many of them are not realised under capitalism. This applies not only to what kinds of technology is invented, but also extends to a struggle over how technology is utilised. Or, to put it in more specific terms, Fischer concludes that:

telephony, of course, has its serious frustrations. Aside from annoyances, such as sales people and abusive callers; aside from problems of service, pricing, and equity; and aside from the harassment some people feel from receiving too many calls – a key drawback of the home telephone is that very same expanded sociability. To have access to others means that they have access to you, like it or not. Increased sociability can be a mixed blessing.

<div align="right">(Fischer 1992:268)</div>

The development of technology in call centres created the possibility for a great intensification of the process that Fischer described. In particular, the introduction of the Automatic Call Distributor (ACD) by Rockwell International in the mid-1970s was 'one of the most significant advancements.' Before this 'airlines and major retailers used *phone rooms* – the precursors of call centers.' The ACD made 'large, centralized call centers practical and efficient by providing a way to distribute large numbers of incoming phone call evenly to a pool of call center staff' (Bergevin *et al.* 2010:12). Similarly, Miozzo and Ramirez (2003:69) pinpoint the introduction of the ACD system as the most important innovation in the growth of call centres. This allowed the further application of information networking technology, which Phil Taylor and Peter Bain (1999:102) argue has led to call centres becoming characterised by the 'integration' of telephone and computer technologies. The implication of this is a move from the individual worker manually dialling phone numbers to outgoing calls being automatically dialled and connected, with incoming calls queued and distributed, vastly increasing the volume of calls that can be handled.

The advent of the internet – at first dial-up connections utilising the existing telephone networks, then later on cable and fibre optic broadband infrastructure – brought significant changes. It led to the development of a number of new methods of communication: from email to various forms of social media. The impact on telephony itself is a huge reduction in costs. Instead of paying tariffs to access the telephone network, VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) can be used to make phone calls instead. In call centres this has gone alongside the integration of computers and telephones which opens up the potential for detailed supervision and data collection. The introduction of mobile phones has further increased the penetration of this technology. The limitations of physical cables are removed, meaning that people can be possibly be contacted wherever they are.

2.2 *The exchange of commodities*

The introduction of the new methods of communication like the telephone provides important opportunities for capitalists. The combination of telephones and computers in the call centre allows the reconfiguration of different labour processes into concentrated sites. These include

customer services (which are needed for retaining customers, particularly in instances where there are ongoing contracts or subscriptions), technical support and information, and sales. This section will focus on the sales call centres that are used to realise the exchange value of different commodities. As Marx argues in *Capital*, 'the commodity-form is the most general and the most undeveloped form of bourgeois production', yet 'commodities cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right' (Marx 1867:176-178).The need for communication in this process is not limited to the production of commodities themselves – although of course it is deployed in various ways to expedite the productive process itself. The role of communication comes to the fore in the transportation and sale of commodities. In the 19th Century Marx and Engels described how:

> Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.
>
> (Marx & Engels 1848)

The modernity that they describe was one without the near-instantaneous communication methods, containerisation of freight transportation, and computerisation of finance and payment methods. In comparison the 21st century could appear as though the sorcerer had invoked an apocalyptic future, constantly shifting vast quantities of physical commodities and transmitting values across the world in pulses of light down fibre optic cables.

In addition to the sites and networks established for the production and distribution of commodities, there needs to be ways of selling them to consumers in order to realise their value. As Marx argued the process of exchange requires that money is exchanged for a commodity, but 'that money, however, is in someone else's pocket. To allow it to be drawn out, the commodity produced by its owner's labour must above all be a use-value for the owner of the money' (Marx 1867:201). In order to overcome this simple problem there has been the growth of complex marketing industries and increasingly novel ways of convincing people to part with their money. Commodities can be sold directly to consumers or they are sold to some other capitalist venture to sell them on. There are a number of problems have to be overcome in this process: the first is how to make the potential customer aware that the commodity exists, convince them that they want to purchase it, and finally exchange it for payment.

At its most basic this can take the form of a physical shop. The commodity can be stored until sale and displayed to customers, while a salesperson can facilitate the process of exchange in various ways. The scaling of this endeavour requires more physical premises which include

numerous additional expenses: paying more workers, rent for the extra space, utility bills, taxes, and so on. This is the role that is replaced in many call centres. It is 'no longer obligatory to situate the loci of servicing in close proximity to customers', so 'economies of scale can be realised through the concentration of functions that would otherwise be decentralised' (Ellis & Taylor 2006:5). This can drive down costs, whether the call centre becomes the only outlet for selling commodities, or in addition to other means. It is now possible to 'buy a computer from a company that doesn't have a retail store, for example, or do your banking from a company that doesn't have physical branches' (Bergevin *et al.* 2010:12). This reduces the geographical problem of reaching customers to close a sale and greatly increases the number of potential customers that can be contacted. The material products still need to be delivered to customers, and the impact of the growth of call centres has had an effect on the organisation of distribution and logistics. The fact that a consumer 'can purchase almost anything from the comfort of [their] home, office, car, or wherever [they] can get to a phone (or access the internet)' is a sign of the penetration of capitalism into people's daily lives. The continuing development of technology intensifies this process, adding sophisticated methods of data collection and algorithms to provide new ways of selling to customers. This could be seen as giving 'agents the best way to approach each customer as an individual' (Bergevin *et al.* 2010:13), or it could be seen as a pervasive intrusion into people's lives.

The role of call centres also needs to be considered from the specific perspective of capital. Within sales call centre there is concentration and combination of various preceding labour processes and the most important of those is the sales person. Regardless of what commodity is being sold – whether vacuum cleaners, broadband subscriptions, or insurance – the task of the call centre worker is to convince the people they are calling to complete the purchase. If the call centre is in-house, the intention is to find new ways to reach customers and increase sales. It is a result of the pressure to increase profitability; a desperate search to realise even more value through exchange.

The processes involved can be illustrated further through the example of out-sourced call centres. In particular, cold calling operations are a clear example of the tendency illustrated above. An out-sourced call centre bids for contracts to sell products or services on behalf of another company – or indeed to provide customers services or technical support in other cases. The capitalist who decides to establish a call centre like this needs four components. The first is a contract for their services, which entails the capitalist being able to deliver on quantitative and qualitative targets set by the contract and being able to do this for less than the competition while remaining profitable. The second is a database of potential customer details, which can be achieved by either gaining access to the pre-existing records or by

purchasing these from a third party. In a sense these become one of the key raw materials used in the call centre, the aim being to convert these contact details into sales. The third is a workplace stocked with appropriate capital: working telephones with an ACD and other call centre technologies. The fourth is people willing to become call centre workers and actually make the sales.

When the capitalist employs workers in the call centre they are entering into a relationship characterised by exploitation. This labour process, created when 'the capitalist consumes labour-power,' Marx (1867:291) argues, 'exhibits two characteristic phenomena.' The first is that 'the labourer workers under the control of the capitalist to whom his labour belongs', which means that the capitalist will seek the greatest productivity from their purchase. The second is that 'the product is the property of the capitalist and not that of the labourer, its immediate producer' (Marx 1867:291-292). The capitalist therefore purchases labour-power in order to achieve the sales targets in the call centre. If considered in terms of Marx's (1867:293) example of the production of yarn, this requires certain conditions are met. The capitalist will not employ a worker to only make enough sales to pay for their own wage. Instead they must produce more than their wage: surplus value, or profit. The workers are employed for a set period to call through contact details trying to make sales. It is difficult to increase profit through increasing absolute surplus value – very long shifts are likely to result in marginal returns, partly due to there being ideal windows of time to sell (for example, in the evening after most people finish work but before it becomes too late) and partly because of the demands of this type of labour (which will be discussed in detail later). Instead, methods of increasing the relative surplus value are a possible route to increasing profitability: the reducing wages or increasing productivity. Examples of these, like performance bonuses and methods of supervision and control, have become characteristic of call centre operations.

The difference with the production of yarn that Marx describes can be found in the distinction between the production of surplus value and the realisation of profit. While commodities like yarn may contain surplus value – achieved through the process of production – the selling of that output and the realisation of the surplus value as profit is not guaranteed. Therefore ensuring ways to increase profitability, whether through starting a call centre division to increase sales or tendering this process out to contract, is necessary for capitalists – something that is particularly important given the falling rates of profit in contemporary capitalism.

It is worth pointing out it is not the case that all call centres sell commodities – whether physical products or services – nor that all sales of commodities can and will be organised along a call centre sales model. The bias of the Bergevin *et al.* (2010:12) book, in assuming the

reader is a 'hotshot MBA,' is clear in its focus of how call centres can be used to make money. In a brief moment reflection Bergevin *et al.* admit that 'not everyone thinks that call center changes and evolution are positive.' They locate this in part due to 'the impact of call centers on everyone's daily lives, and partly because some call centers had bad management and used bad business practices.' The workers in call centres are completely absent from their analysis, instead focusing on how call centres 'have raised the ire of consumers and caught the attention of legislators,' something they blame on 'overly aggressive business practices.' This is quite a revealing phrase, suggesting that if managers had relied on regular forms of aggressive business practices, call centres would be seen in a more positive light.

The growth of technology has also brought in a number of new methods of telecommunication which could have the potential to make call centres obsolete in their current form. For example, 'they're increasingly being call *contact centers* to reflect the fact that they handle more than just phone calls' (Bergevin *et al.* 2010:10). Recently the 'University of Exeter has had to employ social media operators to deal with inquiries, because increasing numbers of students will not use email, considering it too slow and unwieldy' (Fogg 2014). The prevalence of smart phones has meant that a variety of different forms of communication are available at people's fingertips. With new forms there are new attempts to make profit. For example, Amazon have recently partnered with Twitter to allow users to purchase items directly through social media with the hashtag #AmazonCart – although they still have to visit Amazon's website to pay for the product (Hern 2014). Despite the search for new ways to make sales there is a continuing demand for social interaction – albeit a distorted and commodified version – that is possible when workers are employed to make sales, whether in person or over the telephone.

2.3 *International call centre trends*

The Global Call Centre Network conducted the first international study of call centres, covering Asia, Africa, South America, North America, and Europe. The summaries produced by David Holman, Rosemary Batt, and Ursula Holtgrewe (2007a, 2007b) contain a number of important findings. The survey found a number of important similarities and differences in the operation of call centres. The report's findings identify how the sector 'looks quite similar across countries in terms of its markets, service offerings, and organisational features.' The most notable trend is that 'call centres have experienced phenomenal growth in virtually every country around the world' (Holman *et al.* 2007b:1)**.** The idea that call centres are the 'new factories' is misleading in terms of their spatial distribution, because the spread of call centres

is 'different from that found in manufacturing . . . while call centres are geographically mobile, their spread is quite uneven, shaped particularly by language and culture' (Holman *et al.* 2007b:5). The international relationships are less varied than those involve with the production of commodities and the linguistic demand highlights the continuing importance of imperialism. Therefore, despite the fact call centres are often viewed 'as a paradigmatic case of the globalisation of service work', the report found that the 'workplaces take on the character of their own countries and regions, based on distinct laws, customs, institutions, and norms. The "globalisation" of call centre activities has a remarkably national face' (Holman *et al.* 2007a:1). Therefore it is necessary to first understand the trends internationally, and then narrow the lens to examine the UK specifically, before moving on to the case study of a call centre in the UK.

The report found a number of similarities between call centres in different countries. Call centres emerged at approximately the same time in different countries and it is a 'common feature' that 'the lead actors in each case have been the telecommunications and financial services industries' driving their development (Holman *et al.* 2007b:7). The typical call centre in the survey employed 49 workers, but 'the majority of call centre agents (75%) work in call centres that have 230 total employees or more.' This means that in general call centre workers are employed in workplaces that centralise relatively large numbers of workers in one place, despite the individualised nature of the labour process. The gendering of call centre work is signalled by the statistics that 71% of the workforce is female. The question of gendering call centre work and the processes involved will be addressed specifically later in this chapter, but Holman *et al.* (2007b:9) found that 'managers have often reported similar reasons for hiring women: they have a nonthreatening customer service demeanour and voice; there are cultural assumptions that women can be trusted; and they have good keyboarding skills.' The average number of workers on part-time or temporary contracts is 29%, however the number of temporary workers rises to 60% in South Korea and 50% in Spain, while in India 100% of the workforce is fulltime. The continuing importance of having workers available to communicate by phone is highlighted by the frightening statistic that 20% of call centres are open 24 hours every day and that there is little variation by country (Holman *et al.* 2007b:9).

The action of management on the call centre floor, rather than just during recruitment, is far from uniform. There is a pattern of the widespread use of performance monitoring, including calls being listened in to and feedback on the quality and performance. The difference occurs in the average frequency, with these activities happening 'on a monthly basis in coordinated countries, on a fortnightly basis in liberal market countries, and on a weekly basis or more in industrialising countries', and additionally that 'monitoring activities in Indian call centres are

the most intense of any country' (Holman *et al.* 2007a:3). The regularity of these distinctions is an interesting result which also signals a connection between the weak position of labour and the increase use of managerial strategies of intensification. The overall average combined figure for collective representation is just over 50% – with a high of 70% in EU countries, excluding Poland. Within the significant variation of collective bargaining coverage – for example the high of 70% in Brazil, 46% in the UK, down to a low of 10% in South Korea and Poland – there is no detail of what the collective bargaining involved or how it was won (Holman *et al.* 2007b:21). The collective bargaining could cover higher rates of pay or health and safety regulations. They could have been won through a militant rank-and-file campaign, high level union negotiations, or even be the legacy of arrangements preceding outsourcing. The lack of information and the variation of what could have been involved means it is difficult to use these figures as an indicator of class struggle in call centres.

Holman *et al.* (2007b:40) attempt to understand job quality in call centres across the world. They measured job quality with two dimensions: 'the extent of discretion at work' and 'the intensity of performance monitoring.' These both relate to the questions of control at work, the first about the level of autonomy that the worker retains in the labour process, and the second is to do with the level of managerial control. In call centres the prevalence of scripting and computerised surveillance means that many jobs are susceptible to low scores in both dimensions. To develop the analysis across different countries job discretion was divided into: 'low to very low', 'moderate', and 'high to very high', while monitoring was divided into 'low' (less than monthly), 'moderate' (monthly to once a week), and 'high' (more than once a week to daily) (Holman *et al.* 2007b:40). On this basis it is possible to compare job quality internationally. The report found when considering the two variables only 2% workers had very high quality jobs. There were 12% of workers in high to very high quality jobs. The largest proportion was 67% of workers in low to very low quality jobs, while 36% worked in very low quality jobs (Holman *et al.* 2007b:41). What this shows is that a large proportion of workers face poor conditions at work, yet there are small groups of workers that have a very different experience of call centre work.

Many of these features are reproduced in a specifically UK context. The ubiquitous use of surveillance technology has resulted in similarities across different countries in the way that the labour process is supervised and controlled. There are however some important differences. The call centres that are organised internationally along linguistic lines (that trace the history of imperialism) involve different pressures. As Kiran Mirchandani (2012) has argued in a study of Indian call centre workers, this form of transnational customer service work involves further complexities in terms of identity and race. The workers have to perform to

their Western clients, engaging in 'authenticity work', in addition to the affective performances required from workers in the UK.

When trying to examine the UK in particular, it is difficult to ascertain the overall statistics. Call centres have been integrated into a wide variety of different industries, so the total number of workers can become obscured as they become aggregated into other categories. For example, the Office for National Statistics labour force survey has at least five different categories that could directly include call centre workers, a number of categories that particular kinds of call centre work could fall into, and also an additional category for 'not elsewhere classified' (Office for National Statistics 2013a). This problem has been noted by Miriam Glucksmann (2004:797) who cites how 'official occupation classifications' are 'too aggregated', but also 'exacerbated by such rapid change that categories are likely to be out of date or unable to keep pace with reality.' While Glucksmann provides figures for 2004, these are ten years out of date now. A total figure can be found with research conducted by the trade union UNISON (2014) which claims that there are as many as 1 million workers employed in 5,000 call centres in the UK. Despite the problems of accuracy, this still means that call centre work has grown to become a significant portion of overall employment in the UK.

It is possible to gain an insight into the general conditions of call centre work in the UK. There is a 'relatively flat picture for pay' in call centres. The:

> low pay growth across core roles such as entry level call advisor has more in common with the general picture since the 2008 recession than last year's higher levels of growth for roles towards the bottom of call centres' pay structures. This is perhaps unsurprising given the return to recession in 2012 and continued high levels of unemployment across the economy (especially among the youth/graduate population).
>
> (IDS 2012)

This explanation of the pay and conditions in call centres has much in common with other similarly low-paid and insecure jobs in the economy, exposed to the current economic crisis and operating against the backdrop of austerity. Despite these economic conditions, the IDS (2012) report found that 41 percent of call centres had expanded this year, with 70 percent reporting that hiring staff was not a problem.

The wage for an entry level call advisor in the lowest quartile is £13,200 per year (it should be noted that part time workers would of course earn less annually). Team leaders – the first tier of supervisors – can earn up to £28,000 per year and team managers – the second tier of supervisors – can earn up to £34,000. Earnings can increase up to £78,000 per year for senior call centre managers (IDS 2012:9). Therefore the wage differential means that a senior call centre manager can earn 6 times the basic wage of one full time equivalent, whilst supervisors

earn between 2 and 2½ times. The pay differential increases vastly in the South East, with an entry level agent/advisor earning £12,000 per year, while an Operations Manager can earn up to £102,500, over 8½ as much (IDS 2012:116). There is widespread use of rewards for individual performance, with 90 per cent of companies reporting that they operated a bonus scheme. The use of bonuses was most likely in the privates sector, with bonuses in the public services and not-for-profit organisations being comparatively 'rare' (IDS 2012:63).

The issue of casualisation is signalled by the problems of worker retention. Although it was reported as 'not a problem' by 68.5 percent of companies, falling to 60 percent in London, the IDS (2012:56) report suggested that 'the current economic climate could be playing a part here as high levels of unemployment could factor into call centre employees' decision to stay in their roles.' These figures allude to retention being more of a problem. The average staff turnover was 19 percent, with ranges from 0 to 68 percent, but this excludes agency staff. In London specifically, the average rose to 28 (IDS 2012:59). Even with the removal of the temporary agency staff in some cases the permanent staff turnover could reach very high levels. In an insightful moment the report details some of the responses that companies have introduced to deal with retention. The most common was 'better internal career development opportunities', but additionally others cited 'team involvement in department', 'less stressful environment', 'revised absence management', and 'recruit[ing] suitable people' (IDS 2012:59). The list of response indicates a number of grievances that could trigger workers leaving a call centre. In particular the question of absence management is important as it is tied to that of turnover: going absent without permission is leaving the job temporarily. 55 percent of companies reported that absence is a 'moderate concern', 16 percent 'said they thought absence is a major concern', with only 29 percent stating that it is 'not a problem' (IDS 2012:59). In another interesting admission the companies reported thirty-four different responses to try and deal with absence problems. The rejection of work therefore appears to be a common phenomenon in call centres.

The findings of the IDS (2012:2) survey relating to trade unionism raise a number of issues. In their sample:

> half (58 per cent) of employees covered by the survey are represented by trade unions. This highlights the fact that trade union recognition is more commonplace in larger organisations . . . as in previous years, trade union recognition is far more widespread in the public sector than the private sector . . . This equates to a recognition level of 83 per cent, compared to a rate of just 40 per cent in the private sector.
>
> (IDS 2012:2)

These statistics appear to paint a positive picture of worker organisation in call centres in the UK. However the figures should not be taken at face value. The recognition of a trade union by

an employer is not necessarily the same as a workers' self-organisation. There is no data about what the density of trade union membership is in the workplace or what the trade unions are actually doing. This more complex picture is highlighted by the fact the report notes that Unison, Unite, GMB, USDAW, and even staff associations are present in the companies. Strangely there is no mention of CWU – the communication workers union – which would have been expected. The only data that could shed some light on this is what the report calls the 'established trend for higher pay for call advisors at organisations in which trade unions are recognised.' However, upon further inspection this trend is 4.5 per cent higher wages for entry level customer service advisors, qualified with the note that 'it is a question of debate as to whether the premium is a direct result of collective bargaining pushing up pay rates.' The higher wages could be a result of the fact that 'unions are more common in larger organisations, such as public sector organisations and utilities providers, and that these workplaces may be more likely to pay higher rates for reasons unrelated to trade union density' (IDS 2012:3).

2.4 *Understanding call centres*

There has been a widespread academic interest in the growth of call centres. From the mid-1990s the 'most dynamic area of growth in white-collar employment internationally has been in call centres' (Bain *et al.* 2002:4). This expansion in the number of call centres has been met with the growth of relevant literature and a number of theoretical debates. In the context of the UK there is extensive literature on the development of call centres. Peter Bain *et al.* (2002:4) summarise the position in a convincing argument that 'call centre work needs to be viewed not as some ephemeral deviation from, or corruption of, the general course of development of white-collar employment, but rather as a significant step in its evolution.' Therefore in the UK call centres 'are now integrated into organisations' customer servicing structures, not as 'stand-alone' operations, but as one of a number of means of enhancing the quality of their interaction with the customer base.' This means that call centres should not be treated as an independent sector, because in fact they have 'spread to embrace every industrial sector, affecting occupational groups from retail assistants and booking clerks to IT engineers and financial advisors.'

 The importance of understanding the development of call centres in context is stressed by Vaughan Ellis and Phil Taylor (2006:3). They argue that often call centres are treated as a 'normative phenomenon' not taking into account the conditions in which they emerged. For example, analysis of call centres located in the banking sector must therefore consider 'the

profound transformations' in financial services 'following the path-breaking innovation of branchless, 24-hour, customer servicing by First Direct and Direct Line, in banking and insurance respectively' (Bain & Taylor 2002; Taylor & Bain 1999).

In order to provide a theoretically robust analysis of the growth of call centres the focus needs to be extended from the workplace itself. This argument is put forward by Paul Thompson (2003) that focussing on the workplace alone cannot uncover all the components of organisational change. Therefore it is necessary to pose the question as to why the call centre has become 'the preferred mode of customer contact, servicing and sales, throughout diverse industrial sectors,' while 'particular importance must be attached to innovation and price reduction' of technology, there has to be an awareness of the risk that an analysis can tend towards technological determinism (Ellis & Taylor 2006:3). One of the biggest risks is that it obscures the workers themselves generally and the possibilities for resistance specifically.

It would be 'inexplicable' to understand how call centres proliferated as an organisational form from the 1980s 'without reference to the broader political and economic environment of neo-liberalism, deregulation, restructuring and the financialisation of markets' (Ellis & Taylor 2006:5). This process began in 1984 with the opening up of state monopoly over telecommunications in the UK. This was 'indicative of a trend to de-regulation which accelerated in the 1990s' (Ellis & Taylor 2006:5). This forced former monopolies like BT to compete with new companies (Fransman 2002). The continuation of this process into further public utilities in the 1980s saw increasing areas becoming subjected to the pressures of competition (O'Connell Davidson 1993). It is therefore necessary to understand that, as Ellis and Taylor argue:

> The explosive growth of the call centre is as much the product of political economic factors; the impact of the policies of deregulation and privatisation, restructuring at the levels of industry and/or firm, the intensification of economy-wide and sectoral competitive pressure, the growth of the 'new economy', and underpinning everything the compulsion to maximise profits and reduce costs.
>
> (Ellis & Taylor 2006:3)

The significance of the 1986 Financial Services and Building Society Acts was that it accelerated the changes taking place. This meant the 'inter-penetration of the hitherto discrete markets' (Marshall & Richardson 1996:1848) of banking, insurance, and financial services. This led to an increasing level of competition between firms tied up with the continuing advancements of technology. The changes in banking were started by the Royal Bank of Scotland's Direct Line in 1988 and Midland Bank's First Direct call centres in 1989 (Bain & Taylor 2002:246). The importance of this rapid process of change is signalled by the senior manager of a Scottish

Bank interviewed by Taylor and Bain (1999:102), who stated that 'once First Direct had done it, the rest of us had to follow.'

From the 1990s onwards there was 'a rush to catch-up with these patently successful innovators and to capitalise on the demonstrable cost-cutting and profit-maximising opportunities offered by the call centre' (Ellis & Taylor 2006:6). However, as Ellis and Taylor (2006:6) show in their case study of British Gas, the 'emulation took place not just in financial services,' but across the economy in sectors like 'retailing, telecommunications, leisure and entertainment, and travel/holidays' (IDS 1999). The finance and telecommunications sectors appeared to have produced a 'lean efficient and profitable model of customer contact,' and for companies under the pressure of competition in other sectors, it's 'attractions seemed irresistible' (Ellis & Taylor 2006:6).

The drive for profitability spurred companies to innovate new methods and technologies to create call centres in the form they are found in today. Those companies that adopt the methods first 'gain competitive advantage through technical innovation and the enhanced creation and realisation of value, imitation by others can see this advantage eliminated as the benefits are shared by all.' This signals the beginning of a new phase of competition, as the 'only way to continue to compete is to use the, now established, work system more intensively' (Ellis & Taylor 2006:6). It is therefore useful to consider that 'the introduction of the call centre does not constitute an end point but part of a process that can not be abstracted from the dynamic of capitalist accumulation' (Ellis & Taylor 2006:6).

2.5 *Call centre variations*

An understanding of the emergence of call centres across different industries, rather than as an industry in itself, requires a consideration of the differing roles for call centres in contemporary capitalism. In order to do this they must be understood as 'one phase in an integral process of production or provision through to consumption, that relates upstream to production and distribution, and downstream to delivery and consumption.' Therefore it is clear that there is no single type of call centre as they can play differing roles within these processes. What is important is the 'intermediary function they perform' (Glucksmann 2004:796). The approach taken by Miriam Glucksmann (2004:798) builds on the idea of 'total social organization of labour' which allows for an exploration of 'the nexus of interconnections existing between work of different kinds performed in differing socio-economic spaces, or the linkages between different sorts of work and occupations undertaken at the different stages of

a process of production considered in its entirety.' Glucksmann (1995, 2000a, 2000b) has also used this approach in various studies relating to gender and work.

This approach broadens the analytical lens outward allowing for a more thorough understanding of the role that call centres play in the contemporary economy. This moves from a consideration of the call centre 'as an autonomous unit (though it may be just that in the case of outsourced call centre providers)', to something which Glucksmann (2004:799) argues 'could not be accomplished by a labour process approach alone.' Glucksmann (2004:801) provides five different variations of call centres to aid the analysis based on 'the nature of the transaction undertaken' to distinguish between them, but it is not intended as 'a comprehensive or fixed list.' There is an acknowledgement that call centres may be involved in more than one variation and that it might be mediated in different ways, for example being part of a company or independent, or even private or public sector. The understanding of the different variations is achieved through contrasting 'the call centre with the previous mode of operation, to map the position of the call centre in the overall operation, and to place the call operator in the wider occupational structure' (Glucksmann 2004:802).

The first variation is call centres that provide information to callers. There are a variety of examples, from directory enquiries, transport timetables, NHS Direct, or relating to local authorities – so can therefore be either private or public sector. In particular the relationship is direct rather than intermediary (Glucksmann 2004:802). The development of this variation is straightforward, with technological advancement from the switchboard operators to the modern call centre. This process has involved centralisation which has also allowed outsourcing to different locations. One example is NHS direct which introduced new technologies to put experts – in this case nurses – into contact with patients. The call itself is the only contact between the caller and the organisation which means that the processes involved are relatively simple, and confined to inbound calls. The additional steps in the supply chain involve the preparation of the information and the scripting, and therefore take place before the call. The inputting and coding of information, alongside the script writing, are important in this case. The skills required by the call centre workers relate directly to the kind of information involved, for example transport inquiries require significantly less skill than the medical advice provided by NHS Direct (Glucksmann 2004:803).

The second generally relate to the provision and repair of utilities or services like car breakdown assistance. The call involves the organisation of an agent of some kind to attend to the request of a customer. The role of the call centre worker is to act as an intermediary between the customer, the organisation, and other agent who will carry out further work. The

development is the consolidation of several previous instances – this may have been phone calls, letters, etc – into one single 'call encounter.' This compresses the amount of time required for a response to the customer. The call centre worker may take on additional administrative tasks, for example booking and dispatching other workers. The requirement of the role is to act as an intermediary and is therefore not the end point of the operation (Glucksmann 2004:803). An interesting dynamic is established in this variation. While the call centres have become increasingly centralised, the 'trend for engineers is the diametric opposite: to become independently located.' They increasingly rely upon the call centre as 'depots have disappeared, and engineers rarely see each other, the analogy of node and spokes becomes an increasingly apt characterization of call operators' and engineers' relationships between themselves and to each other' (Glucksmann 2004:804).

The third variation is call centres that sell goods and products. The processes involved are closely linked to the supply chain of the organisation. Preceding the call is the production process involved in creating the commodity and storing it until sale, then added to this are the various advertising and marketing schemes. Following the call the commodity must be distributed and delivered to the customer. The actual good or product being sold can vary but the call centre worker is required to complete a sale with the customer. The development of this variation is an advancement of the sales assistant in a shop, now not limited to a single shop or waiting for customers to visit. The process therefore involves not only taking the order, payment details, and forwarding on the information for delivery, but also answering questions about the product and in some cases the deployment of sales techniques (Glucksmann 2004:804). The expansion of telesales has an effect on the overall structure of organisations. The logistical side of the operation increases in importance and complexity, as the goods are no longer bought in store. The product catalogues, whether online or offline, also increase in importance which has implications for advertising and marketing (Glucksmann 2004:805).

The fourth variation is call centres that sell services. There are a number of different services that can be sold, from financial, banking, insurance, transport, hiring, holidays, or even tickets for events. There is a similar connection in the supply chain to the previous example, with the differences of provision or production and delivery or consumption. While the supply chain of services tends to be more complex than the production of commodities, the call centre worker remains the point of contact trying to complete a sale with the customer. This variation of call centre has become a particular target for outsourcing, so much so 'that a considerable proportion of call operators are employed by stand-alone outsource companies rather than directly by the company whose services they are selling' (Glucksmann 2004:807). Furthermore

service provision has also been outsourced extensively in geographical terms. There is the common stereotype of British call centres being outsourced to India, or in western countries similar shifts to preferred cheaper locations (Huws *et al.* 2001). However in addition to the physical relocation of call centre operations, 'firms routinely reroute calls from UK to Indian centres when UK operators are busy, at night or weekends, or when overtime rates apply at home' (Glucksmann 2004:807).

The fifth variation is call centres that act as emergency services and help-lines. There is some similarity with call centres that provide information, but they are distinct from telesales of various kinds because they are non-profit, either funded by the state, charities, or provided voluntarily. The additional distinction from the transaction or exchange type call centres is that 'both centre and operators must comply with externally regulated standards and assume responsibilities that might be of a life-or-death nature.' For example, 999, Samartians, or ChildLine (Glucksmann 2004:808). The 999 call centres connect calls to police, fire, and ambulance services. While the workers play an intermediary role between the caller and the service, they also require both 'urgency and accountability' which 'distinguish such operations from that of a straightforward information provider.' Other services like help-lines connect callers to legal or social services and bear similar responsibilities and requirements of confidentiality. Whilst there are a number of distinctions that set these kinds of call centres apart, there is a similar trend for centralisation (Glucksmann 2004:808).

There is a useful distinction that can be made with the five different variations of call centres. The call centres that provide information (the first), the provision and repair of utilities or services (the second), and emergency services or help-lines (the fifth) tend to be inbound call centres. These involve particular pressures relating to resolving queries and ensuring that there is no backlog of calls waiting – or at least seeking to minimise this. The employment of workers therefore tends to involve trying to meet demand; there is no need to have an abundance of idle workers waiting to provide information. The labour process can be more specialised and has the potential to be less uniform, for example, involving problem solving skills in different contexts.

The call centres engaged in selling goods and products (the third) and services (the fourth) are arranged differently. In sales call centres, particularly those engaged in cold calling, it is relatively easy to calculate the performance of each worker. The computer enabled telephone system can log each sale and note how long is taken between calls. The extraction of surplus value in the labour process (although complicated by the role of the worker in realising profit from other commodities, as discussed earlier) is far more straightforward then in the other

variations, as has been discussed earlier in the chapter. The significance of this for the analysis that follows in subsequent chapters is that cold calling sales type face sharper pressures and is susceptible to the more aggressive forms of surveillance and control. However, the innovations that are tested and developed in the sales call centres are likely to be adopted in other variations over time due to the general competitive pressures to reduce costs.

The five different variations highlight the kinds of roles that call centres can play in contemporary capitalism. The growth of call centres has been 'instrumental in the disappearance or decline of some occupations, it is also associated with the growth of others and with the emergence of entirely new ones' (Glucksmann 2004:800). In particular, Glucksmann (2004:800) identifies the occupations of warehousing and distribution as particular targets that have undergone significant transformations. There are also global implications for the divisions of labour involved in the development of call centres. The phenomenon of outsourcing or off-shoring is often associated with call centres. In part this is because it is immediately visible – or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say audible – in popular culture and in most people's day-to-day lives. This process is not only 'organizational' but also 'spatial' as call centres can be relocated to different parts of the world. This involves 'industrial and organizational divisions of labour' which 'enmesh with global divisions of uneven development' (Glucksmann 2004:801). The trend of relocating call centres to India 'should be regarded as an extension, however dramatic, of the spatial dynamic that is inherent in the call centre project' (Taylor & Bain 2004).

2.6 *Emotional labour*

The concept of emotional labour is important for understanding the labour process in all of different variations of call centres. The worker is able to bring more to the call encounter than simply reproducing information. The additional qualities that workers provide are difficult to measure: it can involve utilising emotions to bring the script delivery to life, deploying emotions outside of the script, or managing the customer's emotions. The complexity of this process is that emotions are experienced relatively; emotional labour involves the gauging of different emotions and the responses which vary based on the encounter. The difference to other kinds of work in which emotions feature is that in the call centre they are limited to sound only: tone, pacing, emphasis, choice of words, and so on.

The questions of emotions and service work were taken up by Arlie Russell Hochschild (2012). In her study of airline attendants, Hochschild noticed that during the training they would be

told to 'smile like you really mean it.' Hochschild (2012:ix) explains that it 'was was that "pinch", or conflict, between such feelings and the pilot's call for authenticity that led' her identify 'emotional labour.' The growth of the service sector has seen an increase in workers engaging 'gladly or reluctantly, brilliantly or poorly' in emotional labour, from: 'Day-care centers, nursing homes, hospitals, airports, stores, call centers, classrooms, social welfare offices, dental offices' (Hochschild 2012:ix).

The implications of emotional labour are explored by Hochschild. She develops C. Wright Mills notion that:

> The one area of her occupational life in which she might be "free to act," the area of her own personality, must now also be managed, must become the alert yet obsequious instrument by which goods are distributed.
>
> (quoted in Hochschild 2012:3)

The requirements of emotional labour bring novel forms of management control. Hochschild (2012:5) explains this with a comparison between Marx's subject of the industrial worker and a flight attendant. The difference is that in a factory the completion of the job can be measured by the finished product. However, for the flight attendant providing a service it is more complicated. Instead, the '*emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself*' in a way that loving or hating a produced commodity is not (Hochschild 2012:7). In addition to the physical and mental labour required from flight attendants, Hochschild (2012:7) specifies and details the emotional component. She defines emotional labour as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*.' Hochschild continues to explain how:

> This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others – in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place. This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality.
>
> (Hochschild 2012:7)

Hochschild's conception of emotional labour can be applied to the labour process in call centres. As Taylor and Bain (1999:103) argue the demand to 'smile down the phone' fits with Hochschild's notion of 'outward countenance.'

The emotional content of labour is not a new phenomenon. At the time Marx was writing there were a vast number of domestic servants, outweighing the number of industrial workers. These Victorian domestic servants would have encountered the experience of displaying outward emotions that differed to their own in the course of their job, whether it was understood as emotional labour or not. The distinction between productive and reproductive

labour has undermined the importance of emotional labour and devalued the skills involved. The development of capitalism involved a sexual division of labour: wage labour for men and domestic labour for women. Although the gendered history of capitalism is not as straightforward as this distinction, the creation of the household under capitalism had important ramifications. As Mariaosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1971:10) argued in relation to women's oppression and the role of the housewife, *'where women are concerned, their labor appears to be a personal service outside of capital*.' The growth of production under Fordism, with the application of new technological innovations held the possibility – although unfulfilled – to reduce the necessary amount of labour time, but:

> the same cannot be said of housework; to the extent that she must *in isolation* procreate, raise and be responsible for children, a high mechanization of domestic chores doesn't free any time for the woman. She is always on duty, for the machine doesn't exist that makes and minds children.
>
> (Dalla Costa & James 1971:11)

This experience of always working, of constantly putting emotions to work, is important. For the housewife this work is devalued, both in the sense that the labour is not remunerated with a wage, but also that it is not considered to be *real* work. Dalla Costa and James conclude that women:

> have worked enough. We have chopped billions of tons of cotton, washed billions of dishes, scrubbed billions of floors, typed billions of words, wired billions of radio sets, washed billions of nappies, by hand and in machines.
>
> (Dalla Costa & James 1971:34)

To this could be added: handled millions of disagreements, counselled millions of people, managed millions of emotions.

The entry of large numbers of women into the labour market has changed the dynamics of the sexual division of labour, rather than removing it. Dalla Costa and James (1971) argued for 'wages for housework', but also issued a clear warning that the fight against women's oppression could not be confined to trading oppression in the household for oppression in the workplace. The growth of the service sector has entailed 'many reproductive activities formerly performed within the family' becoming 'services available on the market: food preparation; laundry work; house cleaning; care for children, elderly people, the disabled, and the ill.' This '"salarization" of domestic labor' has commoditised reproductive labour in increasingly intensified ways (Marazzi 2011:75). Christian Marazzi argues that the question of measuring domestic work as it becomes commodified is far from straightforward. For example, he identifies a hypothetical disagreement between a man and woman on whether socks have been put away in the correct place. This 'notion that women have of the "proper place for the

socks" has a long history. An infinity of sexual and social classifications are preserved in the housewife's simple gesture' (Marazzi 2011:77). Therefore Marazzi (2011:77) argues that 'the silent gesture that condenses thousands of years of sexual role distribution.'

The gendering of emotional labour has a similar basis in sexism to the questions of domestic work posed by Marazzi. Lisa Adkins and Celia Lury argue that there is an important gendered difference between men and women performing emotional labour. They consider how 'women airline attendants present aestheticized – stylized, desirable – selves and attend to customer's emotional desires', yet note how 'women do not gain and retain jobs because of the particular occupational resources they possess, rather they are employed as "women" with an assumed responsiveness.' This stands in stark contrast to 'men workers because they are not hired or retained on the basis of being men but rather on the basis of what skills or resources they possess' (Adkins & Lury 1999:605). Therefore it possible to say that emotional labour is not considered as a skill when performed by women, whereas, on the other hand, men gain additional benefits.

Airline attendants have become a classic example of emotional labour. Call centres are another example, but the marketing industry in general is another significant growth sector. Jennifer Pan (2014) identifies that publicists now outnumber journalists four to one. Publicists have become a target as 'spin doctors' and constituting 'an insidious and growing threat to journalism and democracy.' Yet behind this characterisation the question of gender is rarely considered. For example, in newsrooms 'women have never exceeded 38 percent', but public relations is 'over 85 percent female' considered as 'a solidly pink-collar sector.'

The labour process of PR workers covers a range of activities: press releases, social media, and planning events, but the key is building relationships with the press. Therefore, 'in PR, a certain overlap of professional and personal relationships is not only likely, but ideal.' The basis for the job is the 'expression of enthusiasm for a product because of pay rather than passion' (Pan 2014). It therefore involves the creation and conveyance of emotions – and given the vast range of products that need to be sold – that likely were not the views of the publicist before receiving the job. Thus the criticism levelled at their 'phoniness' should not come as a surprise (Pan 2014). This is similar to the enthusiasm that call centres workers are being paid to create when they try to sell something over the phone. Workers do not pick a job based on which commodity they would love to sell, rather they try to learn how to create that impression to close a sale.

The critique of publicists and their press releases is similar to the anger vented at call centre sales calls. However, unlike cold calling, the fact that 'an increasing portion of news is made up

of PR is naturally cause for concern' (Pan 2014). The problem is that publicists become the focus of that criticism, which 'obscures another insidious component of the neoliberal work environment that guides the creative industries.' When journalists launch an attack on bad PR, 'the unspoken heart of their criticism is the failure on the part of the publicist to adequately conceal that she is performing emotional work for money' (Pan 2014). Whereas the artist or cultural producer follows their passions seemingly regardless of money, those who perform passions or emotions for money are degraded and undervalued. The tendency for increased requirements of emotion labour, from PR, call centres, to the infamous – and now removed from their website – requirements of the 'Pret Behaviours' (Kinniburgh 2013) The conclusion that Pan (2014) reaches is that not only journalists but 'people in every profession should recognize and confront the demands of affective labor as their own, rather than setting them up in opposition to "real" work.'

This highlights the importance of understanding the gendered construction of emotional labour in call centres. The typical call centre worker in the UK is young and likely to be female. This is due in part to the assumption that employers recruit on the basis of perceived 'feminine' characteristics relating to communication and inter-personal skills (Belt *et al.* 2002, Stanworth 2000). As Fernandez and Lourdes Sosa (2005:860) have argued that 'numerous studies have found that men earn more than women . . . this earnings gap, however, virtually disappears when men and women do the same job.' Therefore 'understanding the mechanisms driving gender segregation of jobs has become a key focus of research on gender inequality.' In the conclusions of their study of call centres, Fernandez and Lourdes Sosa (2005:892) find that the 'recruiters' and hiring managers' preferences—perhaps unconscious— significantly contribute to the gendering of the CSR [Customer Services Representative] job.' The electronic surveillance allows for detailed analysis of performance measures which show there is no significant difference between male and female call centre workers (Castilla 2005). Moreover, in India or the Philippines there are different associations, not just 'between femininity and communication skills' but between 'masculinity and technical competence' that genders the job in alternative ways (Glucksmann 2004:801). What this highlights is that the construction of gender in call centres is not uniform, nor is it tied to some kind of innate biological characteristic that means workers of a particular gender are suited to working in call centres. However, it does signal the importance of understanding the role of emotional labour in the call centre, attempting to unpack the gendered assumptions in its use.

The emotional aspect of the labour process often involves dealing with negative emotions, as anyone who has got frustrated while on the telephone to a call centre can likely relate to. Therefore call centre workers are likely to encounter anger throughout the working day (Deery

et al. 2002). This complicates the process of displaying the emotions required by the organisation. The requirement of workers is not only a controlling the displays of their own emotions, but also a sensitivity to the emotions of the person they are speaking to, with only the audio clues available over the phone. The problems associated with this can be understood through the concept of emotional dissonance (Morris & Feldman 1996). It refers to the experience of having to express an emotion that is not actually felt. The resulting effects of emotional dissonance is increasing emotion exhaustion and stress (Morris & Feldman 1997).

The experience of emotional dissonance and stress stands in contrast to the picture painted by Nev in *The Call Centre* (BBC 2013) discussed in the introduction. Nev explains to trainees how 'happy people sell, miserable bastards don't. Isn't that right?!' Yet he neglects to mention why workers might not be happy in the call centre. Instead of focusing on the range of emotions – many of which are likely to be negative – that workers are going to have to manage, the problem is reversed. The responsibility for emotion is placed on the worker: either they are 'happy' and sell or 'miserable' and they do not. This ignores the fact many of the encounters will involve absorbing the anger of customers, something that is clearly prevalent in the Swansea call centre with frequent shots of workers receiving abuse. This shift of responsibility is one part of the management gambit in organising the labour process. It has developed alongside technological methods of surveillance and control which are a common feature across different types of call centres.

2.7 *The development of technologies of control*

The requirements of emotional labour have entailed the development of new methods to ensure that the commodification is being maximised. At the core of labour process theory is the attempt to understand how capitalists manage commodified labour power – which is indeterminate – to ensure both valorisation and continued accumulation (Thompson 1989). Therefore, the 'indeterminacy of labour power is the problem, control is the solution, and deskilling is the most fully realised form of control, resulting in subordination, and involving erosion of both autonomy and task complexity' (Hampson & Junor 2010:529). It should be noted that the ease of parallels between 'technologically controlled factory production' has 'made areas of retail and telemarketing a focus of LPT [Labour Process Theory] analyses of service work.' However 'these are a minority of service jobs' and so the extent to which they represent service work more generally is perhaps limited. Another similarity is that 'entry to them requires uncharacteristically low level of educational qualifications and life/work experience.' This does make access to such workplaces relatively straightforward.

Nevertheless, 'much customer service call centre work undoubtedly demands uncodified "skills of experience"' (Hampson and Junor 2010:530).

It is in this vein that Taylor and Bain (2004:17,28) argue that the labour process in call centre is 'repetitive, routinised, and dominated by short cycle times' but at points it does require 'deeper skills.' Callaghan and Thompson (2002:248) point out that although the terminology is lacking in ways to describe this, call centre workers are 'active and skilled emotion managers' that are attributed a 'low-level' status. They suggest that the term 'knowledgeability' could be used to describe the way in which service workers show an awareness of their social skills and ability to use them in the labour process. However, Hampson and Junor (2010:530) warn that 'knowledgeability' requires 'elaboration, less it become a "carpet sweeper" term for capacities, the basis of whose differentiation from skills is incompletely defined.' There have been disagreements within labour process theory about the role of skills within service work. Historically, the notion of skills has been deployed by workers to retain control over aspects of the labour process. Therefore trade unions have focused on skill recognition as part of a struggle against capital (Thompson 1989:46). This has been considered specifically in relation to emotional labour by Payne (2009) who rails against the notion that 'we are all skilled now', criticising these attempts to define 'non-technical' activities, regardless of their complexity, as skilled. However, it is worth considering why emotional skills are undervalued – or rather underpaid – in the process of capital accumulation. The gendering of work occurs in the context of a sexist society and that sexism plays a part in the assessments of what is skilled and how much should be paid. Hampson and Junor (2010:541) argue that there is a tension within the analysis that is both 'interesting as well as troubling.' Clearly if workers are using particular skills they should be recognised in order to be properly paid for the work they do. However, 'making "invisible" work process "visible" is a two-edged sword.' The visibility can 'facilitate employer control.'

The diversity of the different call centres can be obscured by the focus of the literature 'both empirically and conceptually by the high-volume mass production call centre model' (Batt & Moynihan 2002). However the levels of managerial control exerted in these call centres are a clear attempt to reduce workers autonomy, to the extent that 'the normative pattern of low discretion work design is pervasive' (Houlihan 2002:69). Kate Mulholland (2002:301) points out that 'what is unique about the expression of emotional labour in many call centre contexts, is the appropriation, intensification and the expenditure of the emotional aspect of human labour on an unprecedented scale.'

The computerisation of white collar work was initially heralded by some theorists, like Charles Handy (1984), as heralding a new kind of flexible and rewarding work. However, there have also been more Orwellian implications since Handy's book was written, as it has become 'feasible to attain total knowledge, in "real time", of how every employee's time was being deployed, through the application of electronic monitoring equipment' (Bain *et al.* 2002:3). The literature on call centres ranges from perspective put forward by Fernie and Metcalf (1997) that the use of technology has 'rendered supervisory control perfect', to others, like Bain *et al.* (2002:3) who argue that the processes of supervision and control in call centres is complicated by the contradiction between quantity and quality in the labour process. The questions of control and surveillance are 'dominant themes' in the call centre literature, but it must be remembered that 'such methods are not uniformly applied' in practice, 'nor do they rule out reaction, whether union activity or informal sabotage' (Glucksmann 2004:797).

The possibilities of control and supervision in call centres are linked to the specific kind of technology deployed in the labour process. The first component is the Automatic Call Dialling System (ACD) which due to its integration with the computers systems allows for the collection of various pieces of information: the number and length of calls, the time between calls, and any breaks from making calls. The second component is remote accessing of telephone calls which can either be recorded or listened to live. However it is important to note that 'it may be all too easy to assume that the availability of a technology will lead automatically to its deployment.' Furthermore, in their research Lankshear *et al.* (2001:598) point out that 'most agents claimed they knew, or could work out, when they were to be recorded.'

The implications of technologies control is a theme that will be focused on throughout following chapters. It is important to contextualise this within management strategies and workers resistance. Bain *et al.* (2002:18) compare four different call centres and find that 'target-setting lies at the heart of management strategy' in each example. This target-setting applies not only to what they call the '"hard", orthodox Taylorist measures' – the quantitative targets – but also to the '"soft" aspects deemed essential to the task like "rapport"' – the qualitative targets. The importance of target-setting structures the labour process in call centres. Throughout different examples 'a range of practices are utilised which are consciously designed to reinforce the centrality of target attainment – intra-company competition, company promotion criteria, and the universal use of whiteboards amongst others.' The prevalence of this is 'not a temporary re-alignment – but a paradigmic shift in the ordering of the customer inter-face across the entire economy' (Bain *et al.* 2002:18).

2.8 *Conclusion*

This chapter has discussed the development of call centres and identified a number of key themes to engage with in subsequent chapters. The evolution of call centres has been charted, identifying the introduction of the Automatic Call Distributor (ACD) as a key moment. The ACD allowed the integration of telephony with computers which has developed to become an important feature of call centre operations. Although new technology holds new possibilities, particularly widespread use of the internet and social media, there remains a reliance on call centres with workers on the other end of the phone. This is particularly important with call centres that sell commodities or services. The growth of telesales provides an important method for facilitating exchange, significantly shrinking the geographic barriers to reaching customers and closing sales.

The next part of the chapter considered the similarities and differences between call centres internationally. The findings of the Global Call Centre Network (Holman *et al.* 2007a, 2007b) highlight how call centres have spread in a different pattern to manufacturing, following common language ties. While they are often considered as a phenomenon of globalisation call centres nevertheless take on a national character. The differences emerge from the kind of economy that call centres emerged from. This means that the levels of trade unionism and the extent of collective bargaining vary significantly between countries. The similarities between countries include: the growth being led by the telecommunications and financial services sectors, the organisation of work and the use of technology, the young and predominantly female composition of the workforce, the widespread use of performance monitoring, the prevalence of low quality jobs, high levels of outsourcing, and temporary work arrangements.

The general picture of international trends was then focused to consider call centres in the UK specifically. It is estimated that there are over 1 million call centre workers UK, the majority of whom are subjected to low paid and insecure work. The report by Income Data Services highlights a number of key themes that will be the focus of this thesis: there are high levels of casualisation, both in-house and agency workers. The number of workplaces covered by collective bargaining is over half those surveyed, yet there are few details about what this means in practice. The retention of staff is identified by management as a problem, even going as far as to suggest 34 different ways to try and remedy it (IDS 2012). This is the first indicator of the widespread refusal of work in call centres, a phenomenon that will be returned to and developed throughout the thesis.

The following part of the chapter sought to contextualise and understand the development of call centres in the UK. The general features are that call centres developed as a method for

customer contact, covering both sales and services, and the growth was spurred on by a deregulated environment – particularly in financial services. Call centres operations have become a site of innovative cost cutting and profit maximisation which has led to their generalisation into new areas. It is worth noting that not all call centres are engaged in telesales however. Miriam Glucksmann (2004:802) identifies five different variations of call centres by comparing them to the previous mode of operation. The call centre that is focused on in the thesis is of the third variation: a call centre that sells services.

The chapter then moved on to consider the labour process in the call centre. The quality that workers bring to the call encounter – other than repeating a script – can be encapsulated with Hochschild's (2012) concept of emotional labour. Drawing on her study of airline attendants, emotional labour is understood as part of the service provided and subsequently becomes commodified. The demand to 'smile down the phone' fits with Hochschild's understanding (Taylor & Bain 1999:103). The use of emotion in the labour process entails differences to physical labour. The first is that gendered conceptions of the importance of emotional labour means that it has been consistently undervalued. This can be illustrated with reference to the marginalisation of reproductive labour, first in the home and then in new marketised sectors. The second is that the negative effects on the worker. In addition to physical exhaustion emotional labour can involve further stress in the form of emotional dissonance – the result of having to express emotions in contradiction to those actually felt.

The use of technologies of surveillance and control by management is another key theme identified in this chapter. The indeterminacy of labour power is amplified by the additional difficulties of quantifying emotion. As Nev extols in *The Call Centre*: 'happy people sell', but how can a manager ensure that their workers are really being 'happy'? (BBC 2013). There has been a concerted attempt to deploy technological methods, spurred by the possibilities that integrated telephony and computer systems allow. While these methods allow vast quantities of statistics and real-time call listening and recording, management is still faced with the contradiction between qualitative and quantitative objectives: how the call encounter is conducted versus volume of sales, for example.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter discusses a methodological approach for studying a workplace. The first part examines what can be learned from a number of different attempts at workers inquiries, while the second considers Michael Burawoy's (1979) extended case study and a number of ethnographic studies, including Kolinko's (2002) call centre inquiry.

The first part is intended as an argument for the adoption of theoretical perspectives developed by different groups seeking to understand changes in the labour process and the organisation of the workplace. The survey of the different attempts will be neither an exclusive nor an exhaustive study, but examines particularly moments of interest. It begins with Marx in *Capital*, and in particular chapter ten on the working day (Marx 1867:340). It may not be the first example of the methodological approach as it is an implicit component of working class organisation – there has to be knowledge of the conditions that people are trying to overcome. However what is notable about Marx's (1880) contribution is the attempt to go beyond *Capital* with the use of postal surveys as a method. The next examples are the groups that broke from Trotskyist orthodoxy in the 1950s. This is of particular interest because of the period that these groups were attempting to understand and organise in. The first example is the Johnson-Forest Tendency in the USA and their development of the method, looking in particular at *The American Worker* (Romano & Stone 1946) and its influence. The second example is *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France, which although the break was different, also informed the use of the workers' inquiry as a search for new organisational forms.

The next moment that will be discussed is the growth of *Operaismo* (Italian Workerism). This took place in a different period but involved a similar rethinking of Marxism and an attempt to grapple with a new and changing situation. There was a rediscovery of Marx's inquiry and the republishing of both the American and French studies. The inquiry conducted at the FIAT plant is of particular interest as there was a debate within the group about methods, something that reach a more developed stage than in the previous examples. The arguments relate to the combination of Marxism and sociology in the project of an inquiry and are therefore particularly relevant. The chapter will discuss the importance of the concept of class composition to an inquiry.

The second part of the chapter will discuss how these moments can be used to inform a contemporary inquiry. This requires a rethinking of the link between sociology and Marxism,

especially considering the recurring theme of political organisation that emerges from the tradition. The extended case method detailed by Burawoy (1998) and the framework he introduces for conducting research will be discussed with reference to the Kolinko (2002) study into call centres. This allows for a method to be detailed that draws on the experiences and theory of the previous examples, but is methodologically robust enough to produce the results required for this project.

3.1 *Marx*

The theoretical inspiration for the workers' inquiry begins with the work of Karl Marx (1867) in *Capital.* Of particular importance is chapter ten which represents a shift in form from the previous chapters in its ethnographic character. This involved the 'massive use of empirical evidence' (Kincaid, 2008:388) to document the conditions of workers in factories in the nineteenth century. It draws on the same kind of documentation that Frederick Engels (1844) used in the *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. In the chapter Marx (1867:344) argues that 'the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the limits of that day, a struggle between collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e. the working class.' This is a significant step in *Capital*, summed up by David Harvey's (2010:137) exclamation that 'finally, after 344 pages, we get to the idea of class struggle. Finally!'

The chapter on the Working Day is made up of a number of different voices. The empirical investigation carried out in the chapter relies on the evidence supplied by the bourgeois factory inspectors. Marx 'would not have been able to write this Chapter without the abundant information they supplied' (Harvey 2010:141), and this is evident in Marx's comments: 'the "ruthless" factory inspector Leonard Horner was again on the spot' (Marx 1867:397) and that 'his services to the English working class will never be forgotten' (Marx 1867:397). In the reports compiled by the factory inspectors the exploitation of workers in the factory is detailed at length. The inspectors highlight the process by which the working day is extended by capitalists through a variety of means; however, their starting point was to treat workers in the same way that the quality of soil was important for agriculture. The use of these reports allowed Marx insights into the conditions of workers, but without drawing on their experience directly.

The fact that the reports Marx draws upon are compiled by factory inspectors, civil servants drawn from the professional bourgeoisie who acted on the orders of the capitalist state, might

appear methodologically problematic. In a sense this first moment is more of a non-worker workers' inquiry, drawing on research already conducted to try and find insights into working class conditions. Harvey (2010:142) argues that the factory inspectors came about due to a combination of 'bourgeois morality and the military concerns of the state.' At the time the reports were compiled, 'in nineteenth-century Britain, there were strong currents of bourgeois reformism,' which meant that despite the class position of the factory inspectors they saw an interest in understanding the exploitation of the factory workers. There are of course a variety of advantages for the type of secondary analysis that Marx is conducting. It allows access to data 'for a tiny fraction of the resources involved in carrying out a data collection exercise' (Bryman 2008:297). The reduction in resources, particular in terms of the time required, means that the 'approach to the analysis of data can be more considered than perhaps it might otherwise have been' and can allow for new interpretations, even such that 'may not have been envisaged by the original researchers' (Bryman 2008:299).

This chapter also introduces a series of concepts and indicates the importance of inquiring into the actual conditions of workers. However it is necessary to draw attention to what Michael Lebowitz (2009:314) has called the 'silence of *Capital*.' These exist because *Capital* is fundamentally an attempt to explain the 'logic of capital but not the logic of wage-labour' (Lebowitz 2009:310). The subject of *Capital*, as the name perhaps implies, is capital – rather than workers. This can result in a 'one-sided Marxism that fails to recognise that *Capital* presents only one side of capitalism' (Lebowitz 2009:310). This understanding is critical when considering *Capital* as an inspiration for a workers' inquiry. If the silences in capital are not taken into account there can be a resulting failure to 'investigate the worker as subject', leaving only the 'Abstract Proletarian' which is 'the mere negation of capital' (Lebowitz 2009:311).

The correction to this has to begin with the fact that workers produce for, and are produced by, capitalism. The worker 'acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature' (Marx 1867:283). This 'coincidence of the changing of circumstances and self-change' is crucial for understanding how the 'old subjects, the products of capital, go beyond capital' (Lebowitz 2003:180). Harry Cleaver (1979:20) stresses that in reading *Capital* it is important to keep in mind 'Marx's original purpose: he wrote *Capital* to put a weapon in the hands of workers.' Therefore *Capital* was written, and rewritten, over and over again precisely because of the 'inherent mystification of capital, *demystification* is a necessary condition for workers to go beyond capital' (Lebowitz 2009:314). So in order to re-emphasise the role of the worker in this argument it is necessary to focus on an 'examination

of workers' actual struggles: their content, how they have developed, and where they are headed' (Cleaver 1979:58).

In order to understand Marx's contribution to the workers' inquiry, it is therefore necessary to move beyond *Capital,* and in effect, speak to the silences. A direction for this is signalled in Marx's (1880) own call for a workers' inquiry published in a newspaper in France in 1880. Although it achieved circulation to some extent at the time, it remained relatively unknown for fifty years. In the introduction to the survey Marx outlines the aim of the inquiry:

> We hope to meet in this work with the support of all workers in town and country who understand that they alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes from which they suffer, and that only they, and not saviors sent by Providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies for the social ills to which they are a prey.
>
> (Marx 1880:379)

This introduction clearly spells out the aim of the inquiry: understanding the exploitation of workers from their own perspective. The workers are not considered as passive subjects to be researched; instead they are positioned as the only people who can describe their own conditions, and moreover as the only ones who can transform them. Marx continues to argue that those conducting such surveys:

> Must wish for an exact and positive knowledge of the conditions in which the working class – the class to whom the future belongs – works and moves.
>
> (Marx 1880:379)

For Marx the postal survey was also intended as a method to make contact with workers. He states that 'it is not essential to reply to every question', and emphasises that 'the name and address should be given so that if necessary we can send communication' (Marx 1880:379). This is important because a postal survey of 101 questions is likely to further decreases the methodological problem that 'surveys by postal questionnaire typically result in lower response rates' (Bryman 2008:219). The workers are not being considered as passive subjects to be researched; instead they are being positioned as the only people who can describe their own conditions, and moreover as the only ones who can transform them. This attempt to uncover the actual experience of workers and their struggles was a novel step. It has similarities with the approach of subaltern studies that begins from an 'insistence upon the subaltern as the subject of history' (Spivak 1988:16). This radical re-reading of a history from below focuses on the masses rather than the actions of the elite. In a similar vein, Sheila Rowbotham's (1977) *Hidden from History*, placed women as the subject. These insights, alongside those from radical anthropology, provide examples of other ways in which the silences – whether of the oppressed or exploited – can be spoken to, drawing much needed attention to their self activity.

There are no records of the results that were gained from the survey, nor is there a discussion of either its successes or failures. The example remains an important first step towards a workers' inquiry. It is difficult to build any forms of organisation without an adequate knowledge of the conditions of those affected, thus these forms of knowledge production are in a sense part of trade union organisation. What is novel about this outline for a workers' inquiry is that it is laid out in a formal manner. The example provides a possible outline for conducting research, but it is more a methodological approach than an actual method. An investigation of a call centre with a postal survey would hardly be a novel or particularly fruitful undertaking.

The lack of results or further elaboration from Marx means that it is necessary to continue on to further examples of workers' inquiries. As Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi (2013) argue, Marx 'established a fundamental epistemological challenge' with the short introduction to the inquiry. What is less clear is the nature of the 'relationship between the workers' knowledge of their exploitation, and the scientific analysis of the "laws of motion" of capitalist society' found in *Capital*. The workers' inquiry received little attention for almost seventy years since Marx first posed this 'challenge.' Therefore the next step is to move onto later examples which developed in response to the distortions of Stalinism and the application of Marxism to new conditions. This survey of the different approaches will draw out the salient points and arguments that will be used to inform a contemporary investigation of a call centre.

3.2 *The Johnson-Forest Tendency*

The workers' inquiry was developed theoretically through the debates in the Trotskyist movement about the impact of Taylorism and the emergence of Fordism. This combined with a new analysis of the class basis of Stalinist Russia. The proposal of alternative positions led to splits from the Fourth International between 1948 and 1951 and the creation of three new independent groups. The first group was the Johnson-Forest Tendency in the USA. This was formed primarily by C.L.R. James with the pen name (common in the Trotskyist movement) Johnson and Raya Dunayevskaya, who had been a secretary of Trotsky, under the name Forest (Dunayevskaya 1972). The second was the Chaulieu-Montal Tendency in France, with the pen names of Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort (Kessler 1978). The third was the International Socialists in Britain – which did not solidify into a group until later on – led by a Palestinian Jew called Ygael Gluckstein, also known as Tony Cliff (Kuper 1971, Cliff 1999). The groups maintained regular contact with each other, with Castoriadis and Dunayevskaya still working together into the 1960s (van der Linden 1997:11).

The break for the Johnson-Forest Tendency hinged on the analysis of the USSR as a degenerated workers' state. The new position was put forward in full in *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (James, Dunayevskaya, & Lee 1950) which involved a re-reading of Marx. This Hegelian perspective informed the analysis of the USSR, which can be seen in works like *Notes on Dialectics* by C.L.R. James (1980) and *Philosophy and Revolution* by Raya Dunayevskaya (1973b). They argued that the rise of Taylorism, followed by the developments of Fordism, had resulted in significant changes to the organisation of production and laid the basis for totalitarianism, not just within the capitalist heartland of the USA, but also Germany and the USSR. The production regime of Fordism 'before unionization' is 'the prototype of production relations in fascist Germany and Stalinist Russia (James *et al.* 1950:40).' This analysis led them to argue that the USSR was state capitalist, and that the 'Stalinist bureaucracy' was effectively the 'American bureaucracy carried to its ultimate and logical conclusion, both of them products of capitalist production in the epoch of state-capitalism' (James *et al.* 1950:42).

This new analysis was an attempt to reclaim Marxism, not just from the potential one-sided reading of *Capital*, but also from what they saw as the distortions of Stalinism. The emphasis 'grew out of studies and contacts with factory workers' and 'was the hallmark of the political tendency' (Cleaver 1979:62). As George Rawick (1969:23) points out in his discussion of labour history, 'Marxists have occasionally talked about working-class self-activity, as well they might, given that it was Marx's main political focus.' One part of the project was to understand that behind observable institutional phenomena are the actions of an actually existing working class. Instead of studying these formal aspects – membership figures or the number of newspaper subscriptions – what Rawick argued was needed instead is:

> The figures on how many man-hours were lost to production because of strikes, the amount of equipment and material destroyed by industrial sabotage and deliberate negligence, the amount of time lost by absenteeism, the hours gained by workers through slowdown, the limiting of the speed-up of the productive apparatus through the working class's own initiative.
>
> (Rawick 1969:29)

This argument shows the possible utility in drawing on different kinds of quantitative data to understand the realities of struggle from the perspective of workers engaged in it. The choice of what sources of statistics to use is loaded with political implications; taking only the official statistics from union sanctioned industrial actions could obscure a significant part of the working conditions. In a sense what Rawick (1969) is arguing for is an attempt to discover the unrecorded or difficult to excavate figures of class struggle, perhaps analogous to the distortion created by unreported figures in official crime statistics referred to as 'the dark figure' by Coleman and Moynihan (1996), if it is possible to shed the negative connotations.

52

The methodological approach of the workers' inquiry is therefore an attempt to follow in the footsteps of Marx by focusing on 'the actual life of workers' while 'never' losing 'sight of the revolution which would transform labor into human activity' (Stone 1947:32). As Marx insisted:

> If you proceed from production, you necessarily concern yourself with the real conditions of production and with the productive activity of men. But if you proceed from consumption, you merely declare that consumption is not at present "human", that it is necessary to cultivate true consumption and so on. Content with this, you can afford to ignore the real living conditions and the activity of men.
>
> (quoted in Stone 1947:32)

This perspective can be found in *The American Worker*, a pamphlet by Paul Romano and Ria Stone (1946), which aimed to document the conditions and experience of rank-and-file workers in an American car factory. It is a two part study, the first part is a workers' inquiry written by Paul Romano, who worked in the car factory; the second part contains the theoretical analysis, written under the pen name of Grace Lee Boggs. Romano worked in a car plant during the research for the study and describes how he had spent most of his life in various industries of mass production amongst many other workers. Romano was very much an insider, arguing that in terms of the workers:

> Their feelings, anxieties, exhilaration, boredom, exhaustion, anger, have all been mine to one extent or another. By "their feelings" I mean those which are the direct reactions to modern high-speed production.
>
> (Romano 1947:1)

The pamphlet was distributed to workers across the USA. Romano (1947:1) describes how workers were 'surprised and gratified' to see their experiences in the pamphlet. This is in direct contrast to the response from 'intellectuals.' Their view is summed up as 'so what?' and Romano (1947:1) argues that this 'was to be expected' as 'how could those so removed from the daily experiences . . . expect to understand the life of the workers as only the worker can understand it.'

The analysis of the workers' inquiry by Romano (1947) is conducted by Stone (1947:2) who introduces the report as 'a social document describing in essence the real existence of the hundreds of millions who constitute the basis of our society.' Stone (1947:2) argues that 'only by understanding the actual conditions and the actual strivings of an actual working class at a certain stage of its development, can the problems of humanity as a whole be understood.' The description of the factory provided by Romano is steeped in rich detail and Stone (1947:10) argues that its strength lies in fact that 'never for a single moment' does it allow the reader to 'forget that the contradictions in the process of production make life an agony of toil

for the worker, be his payment high or low.' As the description unfolds it details in 'shocking clarity how deeply the alienation of labor pervades the very foundation of our society.'

A key theme that runs through the analysis is hostility to academia and the intellectual. Stone (1947:29) argues that the 'petty-bourgeois intellectuals' seek 'universality', but 'in an alienated fashion because they are themselves the production of the division between manual and mental labor.' This division of labour is seen as 'the culminating point of the inhumanity of class relations because it deprives both poles of the division of one essential aspect of human existence' (Stone, 1947:29). The intellectual is affected by this division between manual and mental labour, which Stone (1947:31) argues is the 'basic philosophic reason for the incapacity . . . to develop the concept of the social individual.' Glaberman (1947:4) argued that the group fought for a perspective that 'the worker understands the complexity of modern production but sees directly its integration, its social character.'

The method set out in *The American Worker* became a format for a political intervention. There were further inquiries: *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal* (Denby 1989), focusing on the journey of a black worker from the American south to militancy in car factories, and *A Women's Place* (Brant & Santori 1953), on housework, reproductive labour, and women's struggle. The aim of the inquiries in the workplace was to proceed 'by learning to seek out in the daily life of the workers in the factory the expression of their instinctive striving towards their liberation' (Glaberman 1947:1). This locates the worker, or more specifically groups of workers or oppressed, as the focus for empirical research. Glaberman (1947:1) argued that the group 'based our politics in large part on Trotsky's conception of the instinctive urge to socialism of the working class.' The form of analysis required for this type of investigation tried to follow Marx's method. Glaberman (1947:2) states that they 'learned to analyze the thought, the speech, the actions of the workers – not at face value, superficially – but rather fundamentally, in its innermost essence, in a word, dialectically.'

These inquiries documented the experience of workers and the oppressed in a particular form. Haider and Mohandesi (2013) point out that this development opened up Marx's call for an inquiry to allow 'workers to raise their own unique voice, express themselves in their own language' rather than responding to formulaic, closed questionnaires. This does complicate the original intentions as the 'openness of the narrative form exaggerates a tendency to slip from measured generalization to untenable overgeneralization.' For example in *The American Worker* the individual worker's experience is put forward as a voice for all factory workers. However, *The American Worker* was explicitly intended as a political intervention in struggles in the USA. This can also be found with examples like *Punching Out* (Glaberman 1952) and

Union Committeemen and the Wild Cat Strike (Glaberman 1955), which detailed and analysed the struggles of workers against both their management and the union bureaucracy. The methodological approach they articulated was an attempt to follow in the footsteps of Marx by focusing on 'the actual life of workers' while 'never' losing 'sight of the revolution which would transform labor into human activity' (Stone 1947:32).

The members of the Johnson-Forest Tendency believed that resistance to both capital and the Stalinist bureaucracy was not only a theoretical possibility, but would develop with new forms of organisations. James (1974:i) argued that the struggle against new forms of control would require a rejection of old forms of organisation, as 'the proletariat always breaks up the old organization by impulse, a leap . . . the new organization, the new organism will begin with spontaneity, i.e. free creative activity, as its necessity.' This intensified the focus on the action of workers themselves, on a rank and file level, as a way of discovering the new forms that can emerge to challenge capital. The argument draws on a variety of examples from the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Soviets of 1905, to contemporary workers struggles, while reasserting that 'however high they soar they build upon shop floor organizations and action on the job (James *et al.* 1950:11).' The role of the workers' inquiry is therefore a crucial component in the process of building political organisation, but a flexible form that stems from the changing circumstances and needs of the current period.

The publication of *The American Worker* also had an effect in other countries and with other groups, as will be discussed in the following parts. The Johnson-Forest Tendency itself split in 1955 with Raya Dunayevskaya and others leaving to form a new group, and then again in 1962 with C.L.R. James and Grace Lee Boggs leaving for a new organisation (Cleaver 1979:62). The details of the splits and the trajectories of these groups are not the focus of this chapter. This is not to minimise the importance of what happened to the organisations that chose this particular methodological approach, rather that it would require a significantly larger undertaking – both in terms of time and the length of this chapter – to do this justice.

The importance of the contribution made by the Johnson-Forest Tendency is the insistence of focussing on the self-activity of workers. The application and development of Marxist theory was closely linked to examining the experience and actions of workers at the point of production. The narrative approach has limitations for the generalisation of particular findings, yet it provides a compelling attempt to speak to the silences of *Capital*. The group 'relied heavily on what Dunayevskaya terms the "full fountain pen" method of writing.' This method 'involved having members of the group interview workers and then allowing these workers to edit their comments for publication' (Worcester 1995:125). The approach is therefore a form

of co-research, drawing on the traditional interview method, but seeking to foreground the experience of workers. This has a clear application for the investigation of a call centre; attributing importance to the workers actually making the calls and seeking to engage them in the research project itself. In order to clarify this further, the next part of the chapter will consider the contribution of a similar organisation in France.

3.3 *Socialisme ou Barbarie*

The formation of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, like the other Trotskyist groups that broke away from the Fourth International, began with a rejection of the orthodox analysis of Russia. The two key theorists associated with the group were Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort. Their new analysis confronted the growth of the bureaucracy in Russia and argued that it was no longer a degenerated workers state but in fact had become a form of bureaucratic capitalism (Castoriadis 1975:131).

The analysis of Russia as 'bureaucratic capitalist' shifted the focus of the group onto the role of bureaucracy in society, and in particular the bureaucratization of social movements. It posed the questions of whether 'it is an iron law that movements opposing the existing order either fall apart or change into rigid hierarchies?' and 'how can militants organize themselves without being absorbed or rigidified into a bureaucratic apparatus?' (van der Linden 1997:7). This involved furthering the analysis of the trade union bureaucracy as an independent layer, mediating between the workers and the bosses, that is careful not to lose support from either side. The group's interventions aimed to test new forms of organisation, the basis of which was the use of 'direct democracy' driven by a 'lengthy search for a new relationship between spontaneity and organization, between practice and theory' (van der Linden 1997:7). These theoretical positions informed the attempts at workers' inquiries that the group would carry out in the factories (Carrier 1949, Mothé 1954).

Castoriadis and Lefort took inspiration from *The American Worker* (Romano & Stone 1946) and reprinted it in the first issue of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Romano 1949). Like those in the Johnson-Forest Tendency, they were interested in understanding how the 'new structure of the labour process' was leaving 'its mark on the daily life and the consciousness of the workers' in order to understand 'the consequences . . . for the self-organization of the workers' (van der Linden 1997:19). The inquiries were built upon with factory based newspapers. For Claude Lefort the daily experiences of workers had within them:

> Prior to any explicit reflection, to any interpretation of their lot or their role, workers have spontaneous comportments with respect to industrial work, exploitation, the organization of production and social life both inside and outside the factory.
>
> (Lefort 1952)

Therefore the newspapers aimed to solicit testimonies from workers in order to analyse and publish them as political interventions. This raises a problem posed by Lefort (1952): 'who had the right to interpret these accounts?' The conclusion was that the members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* could take on this role if it would allow workers to reflect further on their own experiences.

The members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* embarked on their own version of the workers' inquiry project. They conducted investigations into the factories in France, for example Georges Vivier's (1952) 'Life in the Factory.' This work was continued by Daniel Mothé and Henri Simon, following in the footsteps of Paul Romano in the Johnson-Forest Tendency. The General Motors car factory is replaced with the Renault Bilancourt factory for Mothé and an insurance company for Simon (Cleaver 1979:64). This was the first instance of inquiries into a white-collar workplace and not only mass production. The attempts at leafleting and inquiry in the Renault factory had a degree of success; in 1954 the first issue of the factory-based, independent monthly newspaper *Tribune Ouvrière* was published (Mothé 1955). This factory work – some of which was initiated by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* but not all, was mostly built upon the previous struggles that had taken place – led to a flourishing of newspapers in France: from Paris to Nantes, Bordeaux, and Toulouse, which by the start of 1958 had begun to work together (van der Linden 1997:20).

The workers' inquiry formed the basis for factory organisation. It allowed for the particular issues of the workplace to be uncovered and build links between different workers. The forms of organisation that developed were based on the 'fundamental critique of social hierarchy' that Marcel van der Linden argues was one of the 'main achievements' of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (van der Linden 1997:32). It allowed the organisation to focus on the actual experience of workers in France and construct a perspective from the bottom up, despite the limitations that 'this "view from below" was male and factory centred' (van der Linden 1997:32).

The early part of 1958 saw the circumstances in which *Socialisme ou Barbarie* operated in change drastically. The De Gaulle coup spurred some of the group, including Castoriadis (Chaulieu 1958), to argue for the formation of a revolutionary party that could aim to coordinate action across the country with a national newspaper (van der Linden 1997:21). However, the view put forward by Castoriadis was 'certainly not commonly shared in

Socialisme ou Barbarie' and in September 1958 the organisation split (van der Linden 1997:22). Castoriadis would subsequently break with Marxism, and then continue to reject historical materialism as a whole (Cardan 1964). At the time, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* received little attention outside the French speaking world; but this changed after the outburst of student and worker struggle in 1968. The remaining copies of the journal 'became a hot-selling item' (van der Linden 1997:7) and it had an influence on 'important figures of the "workers' autonomy" wing of the Italian New Left in the 1960s and 1970s' (Cleaver 1979:64).

The experiments with workers' inquiry by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France developed in a way to the Johnson-Forest Tendency. There was a move from the critique of Stalinist Russia to the development of new methods to investigate the workplace, usually the factory, but also for the first time an office too. Stephen Williams Hastings-King argues that the project was 'rooted in a vision of the worker and of worker experience that is derived from reading and interpreting "proletarian-documentary literature"' (Hastings-King 2014:105). However, due to Claude 'Lefort's position on organisation' there was:

> a strict separation between what working people could write about, from "inside", about their experience of production and what revolutionary militants, who are outside of that experience, could otherwise access. From this follows the centrality of worker-autobiographical narratives.
> (Hastings-King 2014:106)

This presents a problem for academic researchers seeking to adopt the workers' inquiry as a methodological approach: how to gain access to workers and then how to negotiate the insider/outsider binary. Moreover the group encountered a serious difficulty in basing their approach on these writings: 'workers simply did not write' (Hastings-King 2014:106). Although this attempt sheds interesting light on the workers' inquiry, it also highlights potential challenges of beginning from workers' self-activity. If there is no activity – or documentation of activity – to refer to the research will be severely limited. In order to clarify this further the chapter will now move to consider the contribution of the inquiries by the *Operaismo*, which took inspiration from Marx, the Johnson-Forest Tendency, and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.

3.4 *Operaismo*

The next part of this chapter will focus on the use of the workers' inquiry in Italy. This involved at first inquiries into Italian car factories, which 'were informed by a reworking of some of the best Marxist analysis of earlier periods' and, in particular with the work of *Quaderni Rossi*, the rediscovery of ideas of the Johnson-Forest and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* groups (Cleaver 1979:65). The break with orthodoxy that took place with the early *Operaismo* differs from the

examples examined so far, as it did not involve a new analysis of Russia. Nevertheless, it has been described as 'a veritable "Copernican revolution" against the Marxism derived from the Third International' which involved a 'reassessment of aspects' of Marxism (Turchetto 2008:287). The context of this new approach was an attempt to understand the use of Taylorism and the new forms of supervision and control in the factories of Italy. It required the development of new analytical tools which were sought through a radical re-reading of Marx. The work of *Quaderni Rossi* in the early 1960s signalled the beginning of the *Operaismo*.

These analytical tools were used to search for resistance against the new forms of capitalist organisation. The position of workers' autonomy developed through the journals informed the methodological approaches that followed. The research focussed on the form and content of workers self-activity. Steve Wright (2002:32) argues that 'most were guilty, in the words of Lelio Basso of "positing the centre of gravity of struggle within the factory".' The focus on the factory led to a series of further developments of the workers' inquiry as a methodological approach. Marx's (1880) workers' inquiry was rediscovered and republished in *Quaderni Rossi* (Lanzardo 1965). There were studies of historic struggles of the working class like Sergio Bologna's (1972) research on examples of workers' councils and the struggle for workers control. Mario Tronti and others focused on 'retracing and going behind the rise of Fordism,' with an examination of the 'relation between class composition and working class organization' (Cleaver 1979:67).

Romano and Stone's (1946) *The American Worker* was translated into Italian (Romano 1955), alongside Daniel Mothé's writings from *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and 'the Italians were influenced by and drew on this Franco-American experience of the direct examination of workers' struggles' (Cleaver 1979:66). The American example in particular was 'an important reference point', and the translations of the Johnson-Forest Tendency's work 'probably received wider circulation and discussion in Italy than in the United States (Cleaver 1979:66).' Wright (2002:24) argues that both the American and French examples 'provided corroborative evidence of what they took to be the most important of their own discoveries.'

The first concerted attempt at a workers' inquiry took place at the FIAT car factory in Turin. There had been a series of industrial conflicts in the car industry at the end of the 1950s, 'with the glaring exception of FIAT' (Wright 2002:35). Vittorio Rieser (2001:1) illustrates in an interview how those involved wanted to conduct an inquiry in a factory where struggles were actually taking place, but Raniero Panzieri argued against it saying: 'No! We have to take up the questions and issues in FIAT, and the only means of doing this is enquiry (Inchiesta).' The choice of FIAT as a subject for the inquiry was deliberate. To those on the left in Italy, 'FIAT

evoked images of poor working conditions, company unionism, and a docile workforce besotted with consumerism' (Wright 2002:47). Therefore the choice of the firm represented the opportunity to test the theory that it would be possible to uncover the processes that were taking place at FIAT and understand the potential for future conflict in the factory.

The inquiry involved an investigation into the subjectivity of the workers at the factory. The local trade union provided access to the factory and the opportunity to conduct a study in contact with the workers themselves (Wright 2002:35). The inquiry was therefore able to proceed with interviews with FIAT workers and union activists at the factory. The results were detailed in the report by Romano Alquati (1975), which although Wright (2002:46) argues was 'somewhat impressionistic and rudimentary', posed important questions. In the interviews the workers would move from criticising their individual job to broader questions in the factory. The criticisms put forward – 'despite its often confused and naive form . . . revealed a preoccupation with "the problem of workers' management, even if these young workers have never heard the expression"' (Wright 2002:50). The study builds on the concepts of workers self-management, a theme that runs through much of the work of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. The report aimed to use the workers' inquiry as an organising tool, gaining contact with workers and attempting to understand the processes taking place, specifically to understand how and why the factory had not seen industrial conflict in the previous wave of struggle.

The methodological component of the workers' inquiry was elaborated further in *Quaderni Rossi* and the theorists around it than in either the Johnson-Forest Tendency or *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. There was one particular issue, the difference between inquiry and co-research, which resulted in debates in the journal. A distinction was drawn between the inquiry 'from above' and inquiry 'from below', of which 'the latter was favoured by Romano[4] and others.' For the group at the time, 'this was an abstract dispute between two sociological approaches' (Rieser 2001:4). Although the distinction between 'from below' and 'from above' is useful, Vittorio Rieser was argued that 'co-ricerca' or co-research:

> is a fundamental method, but it requires being in a condition where you are pursuing enquiry with workers that you are organizing or workers that are already organized and therefore in either case strictly related to political work. As a small group we were not in the position to do this and neither were the unions that were able to organize workers in FIAT.
>
> (Rieser 2001:4)

In the case described by Rieser it is therefore necessary to use traditional research methods. It is described as being abstract because the conditions for pursuing co-research were not present. However, 'if the conditions are there, this is clearly the best method.' Traditional

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[4] referring to Romano Alquati rather than Paul Romano.

research methods can be used to 'acquire knowledge of the situation', and that includes the use of 'quantitative questionnaires (of which data must nevertheless always be approached with a critical eye).'

This debate opened up the question of how to approach the use of sociological tools, however, the 'search for a meeting point between Marxism and sociology' (Wright, 2002:23) encounters a series of difficulties. Marxism contains within it a political suspicion of certain forms of sociology, whereas sociology contains a suspicion of politics – especially in terms of a political conception of the working class. This creates an instability combining the two, something that can be seen in the tension between the continued use of sociological tools in the inquiries and the search for other ways to inject the political component into the project.

The hostility towards sociology is evident in the example of Alquati's attempt at an inquiry at the Olivetti factory. Although initially the militants who were members of the PSI (*Partito Socialista Italiano*, the Italian Socialist Party) were prepared to participate, the rest of the workers were 'more cautious' because of the 'contributions made by previous left sociologists to the intensifications of labour', and were not prepared to take part (Wright 2002:54). This highlights the risk of uncritically using methods developed in industrial sociology. To clarify this, it is worth considering that management use techniques – at least similar in parts – to gain a better understanding of the processes of production:

> The managers assume . . . the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then the classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulae.
>
> (F. Taylor 1967:36)

As Braverman (1999:60) has argued, these kind of investigations – starting with Taylor's own project at the Midvale Steel company – not only laid the groundwork for the intense supervision of modern production, but also involved 'a theory which is nothing less than the explicit verbalization of the capitalist mode of production.' Sociological tools can therefore be used in the process of knowledge theft, gaining an understanding of production from the point of view of the worker, and using it to extend the methods of control in the workplace.

The politics of knowledge plays an important role in the understanding of how to use sociological tools in a workers' inquiry. For Tronti (1966:18) 'the weapons for proletarian revolts have always been taken from the bosses' arsenals', but the question of which tools and how they are used requires attention. Wright (2002:24) argues that the conclusion of the debate about sociology in *Quaderni Rossi* was that there were 'insights offered by certain sociological techniques' and that these 'could indeed play an important part in the

reinvigoration of Marxism.' But as Cesare Bermani and Sergio Bologna (1977:31) have argued, the interview and questionnaire methods used in *Quaderni Rossi*, were 'even if it passed for sociology, at bottom oral history.' As Wright (2002:24) has pointed out, 'the uncritical use of these tools has frequently produced a register of subjective perceptions which do no more than mirror the surface of capitalist social relations.'

The kind of partisan knowledge that the workers' inquiry has the potential to produce begins from a very specific starting point. This approach starts with an understanding of a unique working class perspective linked to a political position rather than the experience of work. In doing so it forms a political epistemology which differs from the sociological conception. This is asserted by Tronti (1966:53) in his claim to 'ferocious *unilaterality*', and that this 'Class science was to be no less partial than that of capital; what it alone could offer, however, was the possibility of destroying the thraldom of labour once and for all' (Wright 2002:38). This new form of inquiry held important differences to that of the Johnson-Forest Tendency or *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Haider and Mohandesi argue that:

> No longer was the goal . . . to discover universal proletarian attitudes, or even the content of socialism, but to access a specifically *political logic* which emerged from the *working-class view-point* – a consequence of the difficult relation between strategy and science represented by Marx's theoretical practice.
>
> (Haider & Mohandesi 2013)

Therefore the inquiry aims to uncover the composition of the working class at particular points or in different contexts to understand how struggle will develop. The political component has been summarised by Alquati in a straightforward way 'political militants have always done conricerca. We would go in front of the factory and speak with workers: there cannot be organization otherwise' (quoted in Roggero 2010:3). The method itself becomes a way to develop strategies for the working class to overthrow capital through its own self activity. This is clarified further by Gigi Roggero:

> Alquati taught us that the problem is to grasp the truth, not to describe it. For the capacity to anticipate a tendency is not an intellectual artifice but the compass of the militant and the condition for the possibility of organization.
>
> (Roggero 2010:4)

The basis of the workers' inquiry is therefore rooted in the movement of the working class. The inquiry forms the basis for an understanding of the new contexts in which the workplace is organised and requires an investigation of the current conditions upon which new forms of organisation can be built. Tronti (1964:9) forcefully argued that 'theoretical research and practical political work have to be dragged – violently if need be – into focussing on this question: not the development of capitalism, but the development of the revolution.'

To understand the significance of Tronti's argument it is necessary to return briefly to the discussion of chapter ten of Marx's (1867:340) *Capital*. The 'worker emerges from the process of production looking different from when he entered it.' Starting as a seller of their own labour power, the workers come to the conclusion that they 'have to put their head together . . . as a class' so 'they can be prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contract with capital.' For Tronti (1966:202) this is '*a political leap*', and 'it is the leap that the passage through production provokes in what we can call the *composition of the working class* or even the *composition of the class of workers*' (quoted in Haider & Mohandesi 2013).

The contribution of the *Operaismo* to the method of workers' inquiry is substantial. They developed the ideas put forward by Marx, the Johnson-Forest Tendency, and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. The method moved on from the questionnaire and the worker narratives towards a method for the co-production of knowledge and organisation. The nuances of inquiry 'from above' and 'from below' allow the construction of a research project that can begin with certain traditional methods, while aiming to go beyond the simple outside/insider division. It is important to note that the workers' inquiry was not seen as an academic method; instead it formed an important component of a political project. The next part of the chapter will examine the concept of class composition which forms a key part of the theoretical framework for conducting a workers' inquiry.

3.5 *The concept of class composition*

The introduction of the concept of class composition represents an important step forward for the workers' inquiry. The starting point for understanding the concept is Mario Tronti's (1971:89) claim that 'we have to invert the problem', instead of starting with capital, 'change direction, and start from the beginning – and the beginning is working-class struggle.' This is an attempt to overcome the silences of *Capital* discussed earlier in the chapter (Lebowitz 2009:314). By beginning instead with labour rather than capital, the analysis seeks to understand how capital attempts to 'incorporate the working class within itself as simply labour power', while the 'working class affirms itself as an independent class-for-itself only through struggles which rupture capital's self reproduction' (Cleaver 1979:66). Class struggle is understood as the driving force of change, but that the 'relation is asymmetric. It is the ever visible movement of the working class that explains capital and capitalist society, and not the inverse' (Matheron 1999).

The idea of class composition signals a possible way forward, connecting the insights from the previous moments of workers' inquiry into a project for today. The different attempts at inquiry do not form a continuous or coherent tradition. However, each of the different moments can be drawn upon to inform a contemporary methodology. To illustrate this it is worth considering the contribution of Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2003). He opposed the use of the term 'operaismo' to refer to the movement that emerged in Italy in the late 1960s, 'because it reduces the complexity of the social reality to the mere datum of the centrality of the industrial workers in the social dynamics of later modernity.' Despite the limitations of using the term *Operaismo* that Bifo discusses, it does retain an analytical use when considering the particular contribution from this period. What is important about Bifo's contribution is he argues the strength of Tronti, Alquati, Panzieri, and Negri, lies in the 'emancipation from the Hegelian concept of subject.' This move is summarised as introducing a process of 'subjectivation' to replace 'the conceptual place of subject.' Therefore the 'concept of social is not to be seen as an ontological concept, but rather as a vectorial concept.' Therefore Bifo suggests using the term 'compositionism' instead (Berardi 2003).

The concept of class composition is therefore central to the workers' inquiry project. The concept is broken down into two interrelated components: the technical and political composition. Technical composition refers to the 'analysis of the labor processes, of the technology, not in sociological terms but rather as sanctions of the relations of force between classes' (Matheron 1999). An inquiry can therefore seek to understand this by examining the labour process and the particular organisation of the workplace. This is not something that is only possible to study through this method, although a general attentiveness to the workplace can identify components of the labour process of the specificities of different management techniques. Francois Matheron (1999) argues that 'it makes sense' to focus on this 'in order to understand what "class struggle" means: there has never been more Marxist "evidence".'

The political composition of the working class is related to, but not determined by, the technical composition. The working class 'is not content with reacting to the dominion of capital, it is continually immersed in the process of political recomposition, and capital is obliged to respond with a continual restructuration of the labor process' (Matheron 1999). Therefore the political composition involves the specific forms and relations of struggles as the change over time. Again, Matheron (1999) argues that 'it makes sense' to interrogate the 'political recomposition, the cycle of struggles.'

The approach can identify emerging struggles in workplaces but is also useful for situations in which there is no open struggle. As Gigi Roggero argues,

> Our challenge is to begin once again from the blockages experienced by the struggles of the precarious . . . to use *operaismo's* classic terms, the political composition of the class is crushed within the sociological mold of its technical composition.

> (Roggero 2011:23)

These 'blockages' are therefore the result of the technical composition of the working class at particular point, preventing sustained precarious struggles and giving the impression of calm in many workplaces. For example, the limitation of most trade union demands to the questions of wages can results in the abandonment of struggle over the labour process itself. By failing to contest control over the organisation of work by management, workers themselves are left in a difficult structural position. The drastic shift in the frontier of control in the workplace means that it no longer appears as something that can even be contested, leaving significant power in the hands of management. The concept of class composition therefore presents a schema that can be used to guide the analysis of a workers' inquiry.

The concept of class composition will be used in the examination of the call centre to focus the research. It leads to a conceptual approach that aims to understand the technical and political composition of a workplace. The next two chapters will focus on the technical composition: the labour process, technology, and management's use of supervision and control. The two chapters that follow will discuss resistance and organisation, considering the political composition and possibilities.

3.6 *Contemporary inquiries*

The notion of studying the workplace from the perspective is not limited to these different moments of workers inquiry. There is a tradition of conducting similar research in academia. There have been studies involving 'primary material of academic researchers, first-hand accounts marshalled by journalists and autobiographical testimonies of workers themselves' (P. Taylor *et al.* 2009:7). From the 1970s there were a number of critical studies that sought to understand the workplace. These included Huw Beynon's (1973) *Working for Ford*, Anna Pollert's (1981) *Girls, Wives, and Factory Lives*, Ruth Cavendish's (1982) *Women on the Line*, or a number of studies by Michael Burawoy (1979) starting with *Manufacturing Consent*. However, as this article has sought to argue there is an important difference between studies in a workplace and workers' inquiries, the first seeks only to research and the second is also a political project.

There are a number of studies in the USA, for example Roy (1958) and later Burawoy (1979) which will be focus of the following section, that had a significant impact. The use of the

workers own experiences can be found in Ronald Fraser's (1969a, 1969b) UK studies and Terkel's (1972) in the USA. There are also interesting examples of accounts written by workers themselves which can be found in the pieces by Georgakis and Surkin (1975), Hamper (1992), and Theriault (1995). This wave of ethnographic research was not limited to Anglophone countries either, with studies of factories by Herzog (1980) in Germany, Haraszti (1978) in Hungary, and Kamata (1982) in Japan.

This highpoint of the production of this form of research did not last however. Phil Taylor *et al.* (2009:8) argue that 'multiple factors combined to arrest the proliferation of these ethnographic accounts.' This included the political economy of the 1980s, whether that was the relative decline in manufacturing, the weakening of workplace trade unions, or the growth in the service sector. This did not result in a complete abandonment of the method, with studies by Burawoy and Lukás (1994), Darr (2006), Delbridge (1998), Garrahan and Stewart (1992). Furthermore there have been a few notable attempts to deploy this method to understand service work. In particular there have been studies into call centres by Houlihan (2002), Taylor and Bain (2003), and Kolinko (2002). This highlights the possibilities of producing research into this sector using methodology derived from the workers' inquiry.

The tradition of participatory action research has the potential to go beyond the limitations of pure academic research. The orientation aims 'to create participative communities of inquiry' and encourage 'a practice of participation, engaging those who might otherwise be subjects of research or recipients of interventions to a greater or lesser extent as co-researchers' (Reason & Bradbury 2008:1). This seeks to move research out of the ivory tower of academia to engage in the world outside it. The project, Reason and Bradbury (2008:5) argue must contain a 'liberating and emancipatory dimension' otherwise it will be 'a shadow of its full possibility and will be in danger of being co-opted by the status quo.' Paul Brook and Ralph Darlington (2013:240) discuss the possibilities of developing an 'organic public sociology of work' basing itself in this tradition, but highlight how 'the ebb and flow of struggle 'from below' obviously affects the opportunities.' It is worth drawing on these traditions in academia, especially those starting from this perspective, as they can inform the initial stages of inquiry.

An attempt to take theory out of the academy and directly into the workplace was undertaken in the *Hotlines* project; a workers' inquiry into call centres in Germany. The introduction states that they wanted to combine their 'rage against the daily exploitation with the desire and search for the struggles that can overcome it.' The project aimed to 'understand the class reality at this point, be part of the conflicts and intervene' (Kolinko 2002). This introductory statement is clear in its intentions, following in the footsteps of the previous examples

discussed in this article, with specific reference to *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and *Quaderni Rossi*. The difference in this case was the small number of people involved which limited the scale of the project. This is not to claim that any of the groups discussed before were mass parties, but it also means the project outlined is easier to reproduce with limited resources.

The project involved a group of militants engaging in discussions, working in a call centre, and collectively writing up the experience over a period of three years. They worked in ten different call centres and included discussions with other groups in Europe, USA, and Australia. The explicit nature of the inquiry was detailed as an attempt to understand 'the context between the daily cooperation of the workers and their forms of struggle and finding the new (communist) sociality within' (Kolinko 2002). The writers argue that similar projects 'in all areas of exploitation, not just those of "wage labourers"' are worth undertaking, but that for it to be a workers' inquiry workers must be the subject. For the workers' inquiry to be viable, they argue that there are two criteria. Firstly exploited people need to meet collectively, something which is a problem with people outside of the workplace, particularly with the unemployed. Secondly whether the struggles impact on other workers and in doing so interrupt the accumulation of capital. They point out that this is a problem with catering workers, or other workers whose 'strikes have little effect on the creation of capital overall.' This applies to other sectors, 'universities, cleaning and... most call centres' (Kolinko 2002). However, these workers do have an impact on other workers and other processes under capitalism.

The workers' inquiry itself was divided into different stages. The first stage was called the 'pre-inquiry.' This involved research the workplace: academic and news articles, information from trade unions. These would then be used in theoretical discussions amongst the group aiming to collectively develop 'theoretical knowledge' which could be compared with 'our everyday life experience at the call centre.' The next stage would be conducting interviews, both with themselves and other workers in the call centre to develop further insights. The interviews were intended as the opening stage of a discussion about the possibilities of struggle. A further aim was to encourage other militants to take part in further workers' inquiries so that experiences could be shared (Kolinko 2002).

The possibility of resistance and organisation was of particular interest for the Kolinko (2002) inquiry. Searching in the call centre for struggles to intervene in was an explicit aim of the research. It blurs the distinction between the workers' inquiry as an organisational tool and as a method of knowledge production, an issue which emerged in the previous part of this chapter. Although the researchers did not find struggles to intervene and engage in, their often frank and honest analysis of the project they undertook is revealing. They conclude by

saying that 'the absence of open workers' struggles limited our own room for "movement".' In terms of intervention this created a complication they describe when they pose the question: 'what is the point in leaflets and other kind of interventions at all if there is no workers' self-activity to refer to?' (Kolinko 2002).

3.7 *The extended case method*

The work of Michael Burawoy (1979) in *Manufacturing Consent* contains within it a thorough methodological consideration of how to conduct a workers' inquiry type investigation. For the research Burawoy works on the shop-floor of a factory in Chicago, which as he discovers during the investigation was the same factory that Donald Roy (1952) had conducted a study at thirty years previously. Although Roy's (1952) project was based on industrial sociology and concerned with the 'restriction of output', Burawoy's (1979) interest lay in the ideas of consent and coercion in production. It drew on the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971) and the essay *Americanism and Fordism*, the only piece in which Gramsci discusses the labour process itself, and Burawoy (1979:xii) begins by stating that he proposes 'to demonstrate how consent is produced at the point of production.' This investigation involved working at the factory for ten months and detailing the experiences, relations, and processes that involved the workers and managers.

The question of the relationship between Marxism and sociology is explicitly raised by Burawoy (1979:xiii) who argues that 'just as sociology has borrowed much from Marx and emerged in part through a debate with him, so Marxism cannot afford to dismiss sociology.' This meant moving beyond the previous study by Roy (1952), who was influenced by the Chicago School and whose 'study stopped at the factory gates' (Burawoy 1979:34). This was further limited by the closed – or secret – nature of participant observation method that Roy chose. Burawoy's (1979:34) method involved 'explicit consent and knowledge of management' which allowed for access to the workplace but also to records kept by management. This meant that formal methods could be deployed, like interviews, as the subjects were aware of the research and the status of the researcher. Elaborating this further, Burawoy (1979:4) explains how the research aimed to 'move beyond' the findings of industrial sociology by 'placing and sometimes incorporating them into a broader perspective.'

The method that Burawoy begins to detail in this example is developed further in the concept of the 'extended case method' (Burawoy 1998:5). In addition to the study in the factory in Chicago and Gramsci, there was also the study of the Zambian copper industry and Fanon's

theory of postcolonialism (Burawoy 1972) and the attempt to understand production under state-capitalism (Burawoy 1985). This method is an attempt to apply 'reflexive science to ethnography.' For reflexive science, Burawoy (1998:5) explains that it is a model of science that focuses on 'engagement' rather than 'detachment' as the method of creating knowledge. It takes as a starting point that researchers are also participants in the social world and instead of finding a way to minimise this effect and strive for objectivity, to critically embrace it. It involves three kinds of dialogue: between the observer and participants, between the processes that are local and those that are beyond it, and that this can only be understood through a dialogue of theory whereby it is further developed.

This conceptualisation of the method requires a move beyond ethnography that is limited to understanding only the immediate surroundings of the subject. Burawoy (1998:5) describes this as 'extending out' and cites the work of the School of Social Anthropology, which he credits with coining the term 'extended case methodology.' Examples of which can be found with Gluckman (1958) and Garbett (1970). The tradition of workplace ethnographies tended to be limited to 'plant sociology', however there are studies which move to consider other factors, for example on race and ethnicity (Lamphere *et al.* 1993), citizenship (Thomas 1985), markets (Smith 1990), and local politics (Blum 1991).

The methodological approach is elaborated further by comparing the reflexive and ethnographic method of extended case method to the quantitative, positive method of survey research. Burawoy (1998:6) suggest that there is the 'possibility of two coexisting models of science.' This is developed by applying the '4Rs' detailed by Jack Katz (1983). The first 'R' relates to 'reactivity', that sociologists should aim not to alter the world that they study. 'Reliability' refers to the need to develop a way of selecting cases. 'Replicability' requires a method that could be repeated by a researcher to achieve the same results. 'Representativeness' involves being able to infer from the part studied to the whole. Burawoy (1998:10) argues that both the survey and extended case method violate the '4Rs', and that Katz's attempt to align participant observation with it is inappropriate. Instead he argues that the move from 'positive science' to a 'reflexive science' is necessary.

The idea of a reflexive sociology can be found in the writing of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990), and specifically in Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. However what Burawoy (1998:14) is arguing for is not a new, singular model of science that requires reflexive awareness – although this has potential advantages – but a 'methodological duality.' Essentially it is the 'context effects that pose as impediments to positive science' which provide the basis for a reflexive sociology. The extended case method itself is elaborated

with four concepts by Burawoy which can be used to develop a specific method for conducting an inquiry. These points are going to be developed with reference to the inquiry into call centres conducted by Kolinko (2002) to specify a method that can be used in this project.

The first concept is 'intervention.' It is considered, in view of the reflexive approach, not to be an element that needs to be minimised, but as a benefit to the research. The intervention forms an important component of the inquiry:

> It is by mutual reaction that we discover the properties of the social order. Interventions create perturbations that are not noise to be expurgated but music to be appreciated, transmitting the hidden secrets of the participant's world. Institutions reveal much about themselves when under stress or in crisis, when they face the unexpected as well as the routine. Instead of the prohibition against reactivity, which can never be realized, reflexive science prescribes and takes advantage of intervention.

(Burawoy 1998:14)

This is an area of particular interest for the Kolinko (2002) inquiry. Searching in the call centre for struggles to intervene in was an explicit aim of the research. It blurs the distinction between the workers' inquiry as an organisational tool and as a method of knowledge production, an issue which emerged in the previous part of this chapter. Although the researchers did not find struggles to intervene and engage in, their often frankly honest analysis of the project they undertook is revealing. They conclude by saying that 'the absence of open workers' struggles limited our own room for "movement".' In terms of intervention this created a complication they describe when they pose the question: 'what is the point in leaflets and other kind of interventions at all if there is no workers' self-activity to refer to?' (Kolinko 2002:23).

The intervention envisaged by those in Kolinko (2002) took the form of working in the call centre and distributing leaflets. These ranged from economistic issues related to the workplace, to political issues in broader society. This kind of political intervention creates tensions for a sociological project. Burawoy (1998:17) does discuss this however when he details how 'even the most passive observer produces ripples worthy of examination', and that 'the activist who seeks to transform the world can learn much from its obduracy.' What this consideration does raise is the issue of the role of the researcher in relation to Marx's statement that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the workers themselves' (Marx and Engels 1875). This position complicates the issue of intervention, as it tries to guard against the minority – and in this case an individual – acting on behalf of workers. This does not rule out intervention; rather it means that the interventions have to be aimed at raising the self-activity of workers, not substituting for them.

The second concept is 'process.' There has to be a point at which there is a reduction of the data collected in the inquiry. Burawoy (1998:15) argues that this reduction should be 'the aggregation of *situational knowledge into social process*.' Similar to the process of selecting cases from statistical data upon which causal inferences can be made, this method requires a 'move from situation to process' which is 'always reliant on prior theory.' The research is not aiming for a grounded theory, rather an attempt to further elaborate and understand theory in the concrete. For Kolinko (2002:15) this meant constructing the workers' inquiry in three parts. The first stage was the 'pre-inquiry', which involved a detailed literature review which collected all the relevant material for understanding call centres. The second stage applied this by 'comparing (and further developing) "theoretical knowledge" with our everyday life experience at the call centre' (Kolinko, 2002:15). This was complemented with 'interviews with ourselves and other call centre workers' to try and understand the realities of 'the everyday life of exploitation and the possibilities of struggle' (Kolinko, 2002:15). This provides a framework that can be followed for conducting a workers' inquiry that produces an academic document as the end result.

The third concept is 'structuration.' This aims to consider the external context in which the research takes place. This step involves moving beyond the '*social processes to delineate the social forces* that impress themselves on the ethnographic locale.' Given that the social forces are the result of social process that lie outside the view of the participant observation, the research must involve 'studying the everyday world from the standpoint of its structuration', and therefore understanding it as 'simultaneously shaped by and shaping an external field of forces' (Burawoy, 1998:15). For the call centre this means considering the organisational form and methods of control that are used in the workplace. It also requires attempting to understand the role that call centres play in capital accumulation. This has to involve an analysis of the composition of the working class in contemporary society, the processes that are taking place, and the significance of this form of labour.

The fourth concept is 'reconstruction.' The difficulty of representation with this method means that there has to be a consideration of how to move from the specific to a generality. This cannot be done from the data collected or the single case, instead starting 'with our favourite theory' the research seeks 'not confirmations but refutations that inspire us to deepen that theory.' The research is not concerned with the 'uniqueness' of the case, its 'representativeness', but with 'its contribution to "reconstructing" theory' (Burawoy 1998:16). This perspective 'regards the parts as an expression of the totality, that is, each part contains within it the essential principles of the whole' (Burawoy 1979:xv). The study of the Chicago factory allows for an understanding of the labour process under advanced capitalism to be

reached through the concept of consent. This is followed by 'the complementary notion of the totality as composed of mutually interdependent parts' by which Burawoy (1979:xv) moves to consider other institutions – for example the state or the trade union – and forge an understanding of society as a whole.

These four dimensions: intervention, process, structuration, and reconstruction, guide the formulation of the extended case method. Burawoy (1998:22) warns that they are threatened by 'domination, silencing, objectification, and normalization', which each require an understanding of how they can be overcome in the specific case. What combines the four together is the idea of a 'dialogue', not just within each dimension, for example between observer and participant in the intervention, but between each of the dimensions (Burawoy 1998:16). This methodological approach can be applied to the tradition of the workers' inquiry inherited from the Marxist tradition. It takes a theoretical position and attempts to test its understanding in a concrete example, after all 'theory is not something stored up in the academy but itself becomes an intervention into the world it seeks to comprehend' (Burawoy 1998:21). The theoretical framework chosen for understanding the labour process in call centres is that taken from Braverman's (1999) theories about the analysis of Taylorism and the methods of control used in production. This theory is referred to by Burawoy (1979:xiv) as important, as his approach was formed 'in opposition' to many of the themes it introduces.

3.8 *Conclusion*

This chapter has discussed a methodological approach to studying the workplace. The renewed interest in the workers' inquiry as a method has the potential to open up an interesting and fruitful debate about how to address questions of contemporary work. The moments chosen here are not the only possible sources of inspiration, as in some ways a form of the method is implicit in any attempts at organisation. However it is necessary to make the method explicit in order for it to play an active role in understanding what organisational forms can emerge and succeed in new contexts. The focus on the Marxist tradition in this article aims to draw out the debates around the use of sociology in this endeavour, and recognise the tensions between the two.

This chapter has covered different moments of the use of workers' inquiry to draw out a number of inspirations that can be used to inform the method and theoretical approach for this research. While there is no similar state capitalist moment today to provide a clear point of differentiation from an existing orthodoxy, there is a pressing need to develop new ways to

critically engage with the changing world. In particular this method allows a focus on the questions of new forms of work, the impact of neoliberalism, the possibilities for resistance, what forms of organisation can be successful. All of these pose serious challenges for Marxists and the left more generally.

This chapter began by discussing Marx's *Capital*. In particular chapter ten on the working day is important, brimming with ethnographic details of the conditions of work. However it is necessary to move beyond *Capital* and the non-worker workers' inquiry that relied on the factory inspectors. In a sense Marx signalled the need to do this, as Lebowitz (2009:314) has argued, to move beyond the 'silence of *Capital*'. The postal survey points in the direction needed and highlights the importance of trying to make contacts with groups of workers themselves; however there are no details of the responses. Despite this, the intention and justification for the project is important.

In order to develop this, the chapter moved on to examine further examples of the application of the method. Those chosen are not intended to be either exclusive or exhaustive; it is instead that the moments they relate to are of particular interest. The break from the orthodoxy of the Fourth International and the growth of *Operaismo* both relate to specific historical conjunctures. This involved the post-war period of high growth and the relative ebb of the revolutionary movement. In the USA this meant a political circumstance in which there was effectively no alternative left and in Italy the PCI and trade unions pushing for a productivity pact. It was in this context, one in which the working class was still considered as a given but integrated and depoliticised, that these groups attempted workers' inquiries.

The contribution of the Johnson-Forest Tendency stemmed from the analysis of state capitalism in Russia and Fordism in the USA. This involved a renewal of Marxism through an analysis of the actions of workers. *The American Worker* (Romano & Stone 1946) – which would go on to influence the other groups – is one example of the worker narrative method that the group developed. It combined the first hand experience of a worker on the shop-floor with a detailed Marxist analysis. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* developed a similar approach, categorising Stalinist Russia as a form of bureaucratic capitalism. This led to a focus on the question of bureaucracy in the workers movement. The group conducted inquiries in factories but also in an insurance company. The approach was limited by the problem of eliciting writing from workers from which to develop their analysis.

The next part of the chapter discussed the contributions of the *Operaismo*. While the break from orthodox Marxism occurred in a different context, they took inspiration from both the Johnson-Forest Tendency and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. The experience of conducting workers'

inquiries at workplaces like FIAT led to a number of debates in the journal about the use of the method. Of particular importance is the debate on inquiry 'from above' and 'from below' (Rieser 2001:4). This conceptual difference emphasises the strength of co-research methods but highlights the difficulty in achieving research of this type. The critical use of traditional research methods to begin a project signals the tension between Marxism and sociology, but also questions of the politics of knowledge. The assertion of the workers' inquiry as both a form of knowledge (co-)production and an organisational project is key to understanding the contribution of the *Operaismo*.

The project of a workers' inquiry poses the problem of revolutionary theory in a distinct and different way. It is an organisational tool that can be used to try and make sense of the new and shifting context and crucially be used to make contact with groups of workers. It combines the idea of the self-emancipation of the working class with the construction of knowledge, something that is not part of orthodox Marxism. However it also contains a tension in its political application, the forms of organisation that are developed are not stable, especially considering the hostility toward the party. The concept of class composition provides one way to go beyond the 'silences of *Capital*' (Lebowitz 2009:314). It requires a reversal of the understanding of capitalist development, emphasising the autonomy of the working class. The combination of the technical and political composition provides a framework for studying the workplace which will be used in this research.

In order to develop a robust sociological method appropriate for a thesis the next part of the chapter examined similar examples in academic research. This includes workplaces ethnographies and participatory action research. A contemporary attempt at a workers' inquiry benefits from a consideration of Burawoy's (1998) conceptualisation of the extended case method. By attempting to grapple with the tension between Marxism and sociology through a combination of reflexive science and ethnography, Burawoy formalises a methodological schema that can be used to inform the method for a workers inquiry. It has four dimensions: intervention, process, structuration, and reconstruction, which detail how existing theory can be used to guide a workers' inquiry. At this stage the inquiry would have to begin 'from above' (Rieser 2001:4). This means starting as a participant observer working in the call centre itself. The intervention would involve the kind of techniques that Alquati outline, the basic tools of political organisation: speaking to and relating to workers.

The attempts at an inquiry into call centres by Kolinko (2002) show how a form of participant observation – by actually working in the workplace itself – can provide an opening for further research. The three part structure that was used by Kolinko (2002:15) can be replicated. First

beginning with a 'pre-inquiry', engaging with the theoretical debates around the labour process and call centres in particular. The next phase involves testing those theories out in practice on the call centre floor and searching for ways to deepen the understanding. The final phase requires a reflection and writing up of the inquiry, and if possible comparing to other examples.

The specific contribution to the methodology of the workers' inquiry made in this thesis is the attempt to apply this method of co-research to a contemporary workplace. The application of this method is shaped by the demands of the PhD: it is limited by the completion period and the requirement to produce a thesis by the end. The aim of studying call centre work makes it difficult to conduct an inquiry in the same way as the other moments of inquiry – part from Kolinko (2002) – as the high turnover created serious difficulties for maintaining contact. Instead, the inquiry starts with the researcher seeking employment undercover, something that is made easier by the comparatively low barriers to entry. Through this, the labour process and the tensions with management can be detailed by actually engaging in them, providing a rare opportunity to produce a detailed ethnography of the experience. This forms the beginning of the inquiry – starting 'from above' – trying to develop theoretical insights and gaining access to the workplace.

This on its own is not a particularly novel method in sociology, but the explicit aim of the project to move towards an inquiry 'from below' through intervention is. It is an experiment in both data collection and analytical method. The distinction with the political or organisational uses of workers' inquiry relates to the historical conjuncture it is taking place in. The Johnson-Forest Tendency, *Socialisme ou Barbarie,* and *Operaismo* sought to understand different changes that were taking place in different contexts. The aim here is to return the critical lens to focus on the changing nature of work. There is no active workers' movement to relate to, instead a long backdrop of defeats. It is therefore a contemporary academic experimentation, searching for the possible meeting point between sociology and organisation.

Chapter 4

The workers' inquiry in the call centre

I chose the site for my workers' inquiry the way most people find casual employment: by responding to a generic internet advertisement. The adverts contained few details other than pay and hours, and a number of them led to pre-interview screenings. The advert for the job that I eventually got directed applicants to ring a voicemail number that instructed them to leave a message with their name, number, and why they would be good at the job. I received a call the following day and was invited to come in after the weekend for an interview.

It became clearer at the interview what kind of call centre I would be working in. The introduction explained that the company sold insurance to trade union members. The group interview involved a series of ice-breaking games to learn each other's names, and team building exercises. One involved building a tower out of straws, something which does not seem a key skill to be used in a call centre. At one point the trainer asked the applicants: "does anyone know what a trade union is?" This is not a common job interview question. What followed was an extended awkward silence, punctuated by semi-encouraging comments for people to have a guess. We then moved onto fairly straightforward individual interviews, with questions about previous experience and skills. There were also questions about how we deal with the fact that "it is a really boring job"; we were warned that we would frequently get rejected while making calls. I got a call by the end of the day to say that I had got the job.

4.1 *Training*

The first few minutes were spent filling in a variety of different forms. The contract included the clause: the 'terms and conditions of employment are not subject to the provisions of any collective agreement.' There was no option to complain about the inclusion of this phrase and presumably refusing to sign the contract would have meant not getting the job. While begrudgingly filling out the forms I overheard other callers laughing and joking about a pay rise but settled on the agreement that all they wanted was the heating fixed. One said they could join a union, another pointed at the display of all the different trade unions the company worked with on the wall and joked that they could: "but which one?" again met with laughter, before they all went back to work.

The operation of the company was explained in more detail. *Trade Union Cover* has "partnership" deals with ten different trade unions.[5] It effectively acts as the insurance broker, arranging various policies from different insurance companies and then selling them to union members. This involves handling sales, customer service, and claims, but not paying out the policy. The basic premise of the business was to call union members to market a free insurance offer with a low payout, and then attempt to up-sell additional paid options. The trainer pointed out that because the marketing material included the union logo, the "customer will think it is from the union." She then awkwardly added: "but, um, we never lie about who we are."

At this point it was explained that callers would begin in the "academy" and once they had met their targets they would "graduate", and there would be plenty of training provided after the initial week. The trainer pointed at that "because this is an insurance job it will look really good on your CV." This meant if you were a student "after you graduate you could go on to a top company" or progress on a career inside the company but in a different department. For example, the current head of outbound calls had started on the call centre floor. The obligatory company values were detailed: "focused, dynamic, pro-active, and committed." Although these four terms appeared throughout the office they did not mean anything in practice. The trainer stated that "we want a culture with these! This is not like other places where they are stuck up on the walls – I mean they are stuck on the walls here too – but we also have them run through everything we do!" Bizarrely this extended to demanding that workers dressed in a smart/casual uniform in the call centre. Considering none of the customers would ever see one of the call centre workers the stipulation to wear black trousers and smart shoes appeared punitive.

The next part of the training attempted an explanation of trade unions. The trainer showed PowerPoint slides and launched into a cumbersome presentation. The first two examples were campaigns about "the eight hour day" and "health and safety." Both of these had the potential to conjure up arguments reminiscent of Marx's (1867) discussion about the working day in chapter ten of *Capital*. Instead a sanitised and bureaucratic version of events was outlined by the trainer. Two particular events were described: the Miners' strike in 1984 – which ended in defeat – and the Royal Mail workers strike in 2009 – which has now been privatised. The trainer suggested that people might remember the latest one because "maybe you lost post?"

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[5] *Trade Union Cover* is a pseudonym for the call centre company. I had to change it from the first pseudonym I used for the call centre half way through the research. In a moment of negative serendipity the company changed its name to the generic one I had been using thus far. While I had chosen the pseudonym to be as bland as possible, it appears I had underestimated its appeal to management at the call centre.

It appeared as if there had been no trade union struggle in the period in between, and that the only way the trainer thought that people could relate to this was through a negative experience. The trainer then explained that "trade union members are working class. So you're dealing with working class people like you – not top-shots – they will speak to you on the bus or on the way to the tube."

The nature of the product being sold in the call centre meant that it came under the jurisdiction of the Financial Services Authority (FSA). The trainer stressed that learning all the FSA regulations "could take months, so we are only going to focus on what you need to know." The FSA is an independent organisation that regulates all UK financial services. It has four main aims: maintaining confidence in the UK financial system, contributing to the protection and enhancement of the stability of the UK financial system, securing the right degree of protection for consumers, and contributing to reducing financial crime. These lofty aims led to a series of jokes about the financial crisis and a surprising level of cynicism from some of the trainees.

The implications of the FSA regulation were summarised in the acronym TCF. Treating Customers Fairly (TCF) applied to the script adherence, selling only on a non-advised basis (not providing financial advice to customers), and how to handle complaints. The impact of the 2008 financial crisis precipitated the splitting of the FSA into two new component parts. It became the Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA) and Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), the second dealing with brokers like the call centre. The trainer explained how the regulation would now be "involved from the very start." Previously they would "come at the end with a stick and say 'you haven't done this or that'" but now "we are regulation and compliance orientated." This change is indicative of the general media-led interpretation that the financial crisis was caused by a lack of regulation rather than understanding its system causes.

TCF was defined as a high level principle in the FSA framework. Although "It would avoid a lot of problems if we would be fair," the trainer agued, "this is a lot more than that." It was taken to mean that calls should be clear and easy to understand, the right product should meet expectations, customers should not be taken advantage of and have access to resources, and the company should "put thing right after human error." However, the trainer pointed out that it is not about being nice to customers, or all businesses offering identical services, nor should it be about the customer having no responsibilities. The common phrase: "the customer is always right" was rejected as a "lie", and that recording the calls is also done to prove that a customer agreed to purchase a particular product. The trainer stressed that "you will hear TCF a lot in this company." However, I never heard a mention of it again after the training.

The training process began with a probationary period called "The Academy." This phase was divided into three levels, each with sales objectives required for promotion. The pay was based on three levels: a basic pay rate of £7 per hour, a "Galacticos" bonus of £9 per hour, and "Super Galacticos" bonus of £11 per hour. In addition to the bonus pay there would be a commission of £3 per sale. It was not immediately clear how to reach the bonus pay levels. It was assigned on the basis of a certain level of sales per hour (which could change), having no more than one red call in a month, and at the discretion of the managers. After having seen a poster listing that months Galacticos and Super Galacticos (only six and four respectively), I asked why so few callers achieved it, given the trainer had stressed how achievable the targets would be. The trainer nervously attempted to claim that the poster only listed the new people to meet the targets. However, another trainee pointed out that a previous month's poster was still up in the office and it listed the same names, therefore disproving the answer. The trainer became quite evasive and suggested maybe it was in fact only the top sellers before swiftly moving on.

The training ended with a series of logistical details. The shifts had to be requested a month in advance, however you would only find out which you had been assigned for the week on the Friday night before. It was then explained that having a mobile phone on the call centre floor was a disciplinary offensive as the customer data is sensitive and would also be a distraction. Each caller received a padlock and was assigned a locker in the break room. The last comment of the day was that we would only be paid for half of the training, receiving the second half once we had "graduated." This was the first of many signals about how worried the company was about the high turnover of staff.

4.2 *Experience of working in the call centre*

"Smile down the phone, the customer can hear it!"

The call centre was located in the basement of an old factory which had been converted into office space. The entrance to the office was a nondescript door off to the side of the building, which descended down into the lower level. The environment was loud and busy, with numerous conversations blending into a general buzz of noise. Although there was the potential for natural light, the small windows located along the top of walls were covered with blinds, so instead fluorescent strip lighting beamed down from the ceiling. The individual computers were organised into rows of desks. The outbound sales teams had one half of the office, and other half has desks for customer services, quality control, and space for giving

feedback, with approximately one hundred desks in total. There were meeting rooms off the main office and a small kitchen with a break area and lockers. The IT and marketing teams were located in a separate room.

The main office was decorated with posters, some of them professing the values of *Trade Union Cover*. One wall had a display with the logos of all the trade unions the company works with. There were a number of whiteboards scattered around the office, with caller's names and sales targets, and two large flat screen televisions, one for customer service and one for sales. The customer service screen cycled between displaying what each person is currently doing and the number and type of inbound calls successfully answered. The sales screen displayed the total number of sales and then sales by team on one side, while the other side prominently displayed the top seller followed by each caller ranked by the number of sales.

The start of each shift at the call centre begins in the break room. The supervisors lead a "buzz session," which is essentially an opportunity for the company to remind callers of the different rules, stress the importance of quality, and then attempt to encourage some kind of enthusiasm for the upcoming shift. The content of these sessions varies, but most involve playing some sort of game. These range from competitions testing product knowledge (perhaps not the most exciting) to word games – for example, each person in turn shouting out the name of a country, following alphabetical order with no repetition until only the winner remains. Although being made to play children's games was somewhat demeaning, it did offer the benefit of stretching out the time before we had to be on the call centre floor. Some callers tried to extend these sessions by asking lots of questions and pretending they needed more help than they actually did.

The phone calls were structured by the computer script. The trainer had argued that "it is not just what you say," but that callers must think about their "pace, tone, conversation style, listening skills." This was particularly important when using a standardized script, as the trainers insisted that your own personality should come across during the call. Apparently the Managing Director's favourite catchphrase was that "people buy people"; he believed that the best sellers used similar techniques over and over again. If new callers had trouble with this, the trainer had some illuminating advice: "just use a bright and enthusiastic tone… and if you can't, three words: Put. It. On!"

The script was composed of five different hyperlinked sections, some with multiple pages. The trainer pointed out: "we need people to make the sales; otherwise we would just use an automated system." Callers were encouraged to build rapport with the customer, to learn additional details which can then be used as a basis for improvisation later on in the script. This

improvisation was primarily expected during the description of the features of the insurance, a process called "features-to-benefits." For example, one of the five main benefits was that the customer is entitled to a rebate at the age of seventy if they have not claimed. The caller was expected to go further than simply reading out the computer generated figure. This involves using hypothetical connecting phrases like: "which means that you could…" The caller should improvise a benefit for the feature, hopefully using some of the additional information gathered in the earlier rapport-building. The trainer described this as "painting a picture," which is apparently the way to make sales.

Jokes were also a fundamental part of elaboration on the script. At two points on the script, callers are encouraged to try joking with the customer. The first is on the confirmation of details. There are two eligibility questions to confirm: "that you spend 7 out of 12 months a year in the UK?" and "that this is where you pay your taxes?" These questions allow two jokes: "no long holidays planned this year then?" and "no escaping that is there?" On a couple of occasions I tried adding: "unless you are Vodafone" (See: Murphy 2010), but this was quickly discouraged by the supervisors. The second is later in the script, with the exclusion "that you won't be covered for death as a result of . . . participation in any illegal acts," to which almost every caller adds: "so if you were planning to rob a bank we wouldn't be able to pay out! [Fake laughter]." While this is presumably a new joke for the customer, the workers will enjoy it over and over again throughout the day.

The first full shift I worked ended with no sales. I managed to pitch the product in full three times, and reached the Direct Debit payment page of the script. The first time the customer objected, "isn't this just the free offer? Why do I need to pay anything?" The second got very defensive when asked for the bank details: "why would I give you those when I haven't seen anything in writing!" The third said they did not have their bank details with them. I asked whether it was on their card ("no, I've lost my card"), their chequebook ("don't have one"), online banking ("don't use it"). At no point did they say they were not interested in the insurance. These would become common objections that had to be handled over and over again.

The process for dealing with objections is called "Clarify and Reassure" or "C&R." It is not scripted on the computer program but remains semi-scripted nonetheless. In a similar manner to the features-to-benefits, with the C&R process is laid out on sheets of paper and handed out by supervisors. These are used as guides but allow a certain level of freedom in how to handle objections. A compliant sale can only contain three attempts and they therefore focus on probing the customer to gain more information about the objection to successfully overcome

it. During breaks, trainees often discussed these problems of closing. Time off the phone became an opportunity to vent about how difficult the phone calls are, and to swap advice about how to finish a sale. In one discussion we all agreed that none of us would ever give out our details to buy insurance over the phone.

Supervisors began coaching during the first shift. Every single call, whether a successful sale or not, was digitally recorded and stored for playback. Each sales call and a random selection of non-sales calls would be listened to and graded by the quality control team. They would be graded as either green (passing quality standards), green D/N (passed but development needed), or red (failing to meet standards and therefore no commission). The supervisors would regularly listen into calls, and analyze how callers could be more successful in future. During weekly "1-2-1" meetings with callers, supervisors would grade their performance and provide instructions on how they could improve. While the supervisors stressed that these were for training purposes, they produced printouts of the computer data which could also play a disciplinary role. Each week I was given a grading and a series of instructions about how to improve. These were always quite vague but in general involved remarks about being more "assertive," "give 110% to every call," or even parroting Alec Baldwin's rant in *Glengarry Glen Ross*: "remember your ABCs – Always Be Closing!" The "1-2-1" advice was always supplemented with the advice: "remember every 'no' is one step closer to a 'yes!'"

There was a constant pressure to make sales on the call centre floor. It began to feel like a contemporary version of Robert Linhart's various unsuccessful attempts on the assembly line, when he describes his initial feelings:

> And what about me, someone from the establishment, am I going to be able to cope? What will happen tomorrow if I still can't do that soldering? Will they throw me out? How ridiculous! A day and a half on the job . . . and then fired for being incapable!
>
> (Linhart 1981:27)

The television screen on the wall taunts workers with sales figures, acting as a constant reminder of how each individual worker compares to others. It was nerve-wracking as I struggled to get sales while watching the more established, Stakhanovite callers, constantly adding more sales. However, after a month or so I began to regularly make sales, not quite enough to "graduate," but enough to keep working at *Trade Union Cover*.

In a typical shift I would make approximately four hundred different phone calls. The majority of these calls would go through to answer phone, especially during the part of the shift that takes place during normal working hours. The calls that did connect often finished abruptly with the customer requesting a call back at a more convenient time, which is then sent

through the computer system. It is possible to leave notes for calls so that the next caller has some context, however most people either left short notes that were unhelpful or none at all. The history for each customer can be displayed, which often shows that calls that go through to answer phone have been called repeatedly over a period of a month. This means that the majority of the shift is spent waiting to connect to a customer. While this may seem easier than constantly talking to customers it is far from relaxing. The next attempt to pitch the product could be only five seconds away, so the moments of respite are brief and the pressure is constant.

The opportunities to take a break were usually exploited by workers. It was common to attempt to stretch out any time off the phone or try to alleviate boredom somehow while calling. There were a variety of different games played on the call centre floor. Most involved making the most out of the small intervals were it was not required to speak to customers. However one of the most popular games was finding a set of unusual words or a phrase that workers would have to fit into a call with a customer. Often this verged on the ridiculous and some of the phrases would require quite a creative approach to include in a call, for example "Spaghetti" or "Giraffe." These collective encounters of workers were separate from the attempted gamification of work that supervisors pushed during "buzz sessions" and throughout the shift.

4.3 *Examples of calls*

The need to escape the boredom of the phone calls was often exacerbated by the unpleasantness of particular interactions with customers. Although it would be possible to recount a series of these there are three examples that can illustrate the difficulty of making sales calls.

The first example is the first successful sale that I made in the call centre. I spoke to a woman with a thick accent on a bad quality phone line. She initially seemed interested in purchasing the insurance policy but was unsure of what level of cover she would need. Each time a customer requests a change to the lump sum on the insurance policy it is necessary to go back over all of the figures and ensure that they are making a decision based on the correct details. The customer changed her mind about the lump sum three times during the phone call and then decided that she wanted a joint policy with her partner and wanted to know how that would affect each of the lump sums. This meant that the breakdown of the figures and the full details of the policy had to be repeated six different times. Unsurprisingly the customer got

confused about the phone call and it required extensive C&R objection handling to continue the call. After almost an hour I managed to close the sale, which had required a number of call backs after the phone line dropped. The pressure of knowing that the recording of the call would be studied to ensure compliance meant that the experience was stressful and required constant attention.

The second example is an unsuccessful call. The customer began by confirming details for renewal of the free insurance offer and it appeared to be a fairly typical call. One of the rapport building opportunities follows the question about number of dependents. If they do it is encouraged to ask customers about their children, how old they are and so on. This is to collect information to strengthen the pitch for life insurance later on. For example, if they have young children asking what would happen to them if the customer died. At this point the customer burst into tears on the phone and asked to have the number changed as their young child had recently died of leukaemia. The customer was clearly distraught; however the rules in the call centre state that it is only possible to end a sales call if they explicitly request so. I attempted to gain this by saying: "I'm terribly sorry to hear that, would you like to continue with the call?" I was hoping that this would end the encounter; however, the nearest supervisor had started listening into my call and was now ordering me to continue to pitch the product. Without the withdrawal of the permission I had to keep reading the script with the customer becoming more and more upset. After a minute or so – which felt like so much longer – the customer started shouting about how insensitive this was. I broke from the script, much to the disgust of the supervisor, and apologised profusely before ending the call. I was taken aside by the supervisor and given a telling off: "you know, sometimes there are calls like this, but you need to pitch the product to every customer!"

The third example is similar if perhaps more sinister. The customer states that they are in a rush while completing the details for the renewals of the free insurance offer. I promise to be as quick as possible, completing the information section, before attempting to pitch the paid insurance product. The customer interrupts and explains that they are in a rush because they need to get to hospital for dialysis. They point out that the problems with their kidneys would prevent them from getting life insurance. In a flash the supervisor is stood beside my desk having picked up on what was happening on the call. The supervisor begins mouthing that "this person is sick! We offer guaranteed acceptance! This is your next sale!" I begin to explain to the customer that the company could offer them the insurance policy as there are no questions about their health. They respond by detailing exactly how sick they are and that they definitely would need to claim on the life insurance policy soon. Under pressure from the supervisor I continue to pitch the product, despite the customer becoming upset and

eventually hanging up the phone. Again I am taken aside by the supervisor and verbally reprimanded for not closing the sale with a customer.

These kinds of phone calls are particularly difficult. The treatment of people, regardless of their situation, as potential sales that need to be closed is an uncomfortable experience. The retort of the supervisor is that successful sales are made by people who are "resilient" or "don't get put off by hearing no", as if the responsibility for the sale lies entirely with the worker, disregarding whether or not the person on the end of the phone actually wants or needs to the product. However, there are also encounters on the phone that are quite enjoyable. A funny or talkative customer – or even just a customer that says "thank you" – can brighten up a shift. These are few and far between however, as the labour process demands instrumental sales pitches not compassionate interactions. The use of empathy is limited to understanding which sales techniques might work, rather than genuinely relating to the person on the other end of the phone.

There are two examples of unusual phone calls that I made that do not fit into the pattern described above. The first example was speaking to a full time union official. He explained how they knew all about the insurance offer and was not interested. However, he did not end the call but instead asked whether or not I was a member of a union. He started explaining the benefits of joining a union and how to go about doing it. I pointed out in a flat tone that "just to remind you all calls are recorded and may be listened to ensure accuracy or for training purposes, is that ok?" At this point it dawned on him that perhaps talking about joining a union might endanger my job so we had an amusingly coded discussion in which he wished me the best of luck. The second example is a call made to a customer whose first name was Stalin. The call itself was unremarkable, however it was the closest theories of state capitalism[6] came to being relevant in the workplace.

The quality of the leads changes the kind of customers that are spoken to. These vary due to a number of factors. The most obvious difference is that the sales leads are different according to the training level and whether or not the caller has graduated. The oldest leads are therefore used to train workers, whereas the best leads are reserved for those who have proven themselves as able sellers. Therefore being able to prove that you can sell on the worst leads allows access to higher quality leads.

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[6] The class nature of Russia was important point of distinction between the Communist Parties and Trotskyist groupings. The theory of State Capitalism was and the source of the break from the fourth international which spurred some groups to attempt workers' inquiries.

The leads were gained from different sources. The most common were those that started by offering free insurance. However the company, in an effort to gain more contacts, began offering various competitions to union members. The most common of these was the chance to win £200 of grocery vouchers. Unsurprisingly many of the people who answered these calls had forgotten about its connection to insurance and only wanted to be entered into the prize draw. This meant that it would be necessary to point out that: "on the form you filled out it did say that a representative from [company trading name] will call about other benefits we are offering." The vast majority of these calls ended abruptly with the customer refusing to continue. Those calls that did go ahead began with the stipulation: "don't try and sell me anything!" However the company policy was that workers still had to pitch the product regardless, which often ended in a confrontation with the customer.

The top of the script that is viewable while the number is dialling changes according to the type of lead. I came to dread the grocery competition leads as it was very difficult to make a sale while on them. When these leads became active there were lots of complaints from workers across the call centre floor. Occasionally the supervisors would agree to mix the competition leads with better quality ones as part of their job was to organise the flow of leads to the sales teams. In one particular example I had been complaining about the quality of the grocery vouchers and made a sale on the first kind of other lead I was given.

The computer system required to organise multiple leads with a large volume of workers making calls inevitably ran into problems. If the leads in the pool dried up the computer screen would display an error message and automatically check for new leads after two minutes or on request. The differentiation of teams meant that not every worker would run out of leads at the same time and it was not always possible for the supervisors to keep track of this. This created a situation where it would be possible to pretend that you were still receiving leads so long as other workers on your team also kept quiet. This disruption required a collective misbehaviour which most of the time workers were prepared to do. The computer system would also sporadically stop working altogether. During the week there was an IT department on call to carry out repairs, however at weekends this was not an option. The supervisors never let workers leave early when the phone system was not working as there was always training or "buzz session" games that could be used to fill the time.

4.4 Computerised Taylorism and the labour process

Control is ever present in the call centre. From the constant presence of supervisors, the recording of phone calls, to the automated electronic logs, methods of control and surveillance are common during work. The effect of this control on the labour process can be understood through an examination of the Taylorist management principles. This includes the computerized supervision, which is perhaps analogous to the technician in a white coat with a stopwatch, but also in the sense of Harry Braverman's argument that behind the technician 'lies a theory which is nothing less than the explicit verbalization of the capitalist mode of production' (Braverman 1999:60).The theory involves three principles: the first is 'the gathering and development of knowledge of the labour process,' the second is 'the concentration of this knowledge as the exclusive province of management,' and the third is the '*use of this monopoly over knowledge to control each step of the labor process and its mode of execution*' (Braverman 1999:82).

The third principle stems from the organization of tasks by management. For Frederick Taylor (1967:39) the 'task specifies not only what is to be done, but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it.' The process of reading from a script and then asking for pre-set amounts during the phone call is a clear example of the *separation of conception from execution*. The necessity of closely following the script was reiterated continuously throughout the training and first shifts. One of the supervisors suggested that if you stick to the script, "all the work is done for you!" The *conception*, in terms of the preparation of the script, is entirely removed from their execution on the call centre floor. Very little was said about how the scripts were developed, other than that *Trade Union Cover* spends a lot of time writing them. Braverman anticipates this process when he that argues that mental labour, after being separated from manual labour, 'is then itself subdivided rigorously according to the same rule.' The purpose of this division is 'to cheapen the worker by decreasing his training and enlarging his output' (Braverman 1999:79,81).

The use of a computer system linked to the phones allows for a significant degree of control. Callers have to sign onto the computer system in order to make phone calls. The computer system logs the exact time that the worker starts their shift. There is an unpaid hour break between the two half-shifts, and two fifteen-minute breaks half way through each half-shift. The computer system logs the start and end time of the break; if the break exceeds the limit, the system notifies a manager. During phone calls, the computer surveillance system will display three states: "Previewing/Dialling" for the time when the automatic dialling system is ringing through the list of numbers; "Connected," when the caller is talking to someone on the

phone; and "Wrapping," which provides an opportunity to record the outcome of the phone call and take any relevant notes. This is described as "non-productive" time, only to be used when needed, never exceeding five seconds.

The labour process in the call centre can therefore be understood as a kind of computerised development of Taylorist management principles. Phil Taylor and Peter Bain argue that the 'driving force' behind the growth of call centres – whether as the 'rationalisation of back office functions or as entirely new creations' – results from the 'pursuit of competitive advantage' (Taylor & Bain 1999:102). The call centre therefore comes under the pressure to minimize costs and maximize profits, which means that those running the call centres are 'under constant competitive pressure to extract more value from their employees,' which 'from the point of view of capital' is a 'far from straightforward project' (Taylor & Bain 1999:115). The complexity of this was illustrated clearly with the call centre management's project of hiring in an undercover boss to try and find new ways to streamline the company. The consultant is inquiring into experience of workers in order to gain some insight that will be useful for management, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

The difficulty stems from the contradiction between the quantitative and qualitative objectives of the labour process. This became apparent during training: the constant focus on the quality of the phone calls as the most important aspect of the job sat uneasily alongside the strict quantitative targets for the number of phone calls per shift. Taylor and Bain argue that 'even in the most quality driven call centre' – and the call centre I worked in claimed to put a great importance on quality, given its regulation by the Financial Services Authority – 'it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the labour process is intrinsically demanding, repetitive and, frequently, stressful' (Taylor & Bain 1999:110).

This tension between quantity and quality in the call centre structures the relationship between worker and manager. The integration of the telephone and computer systems in the call centre provides the opportunity for 'extreme levels of surveillance, monitoring and speed-up,' which nevertheless creates another contradiction in the workplace (Taylor & Bain 1999:108). The 'intensive surveillance can be counterproductive,' as it is 'costly in terms of workforce motivation and commitment.' However, 'abandonment' of surveillance is not possible, as these methods are 'integral to the operation of the call centre' (Taylor & Bain 1999:116). These two related contradictions have a strong effect on the experience of call centre workers:

> It may be difficult, if not impossible, for the operator to speed up, yet s(he) is conscious that the current call must be terminated promptly, in order to take the next one. We describe this

> as a situation in which the operator has "an assembly-line in the head," always feeling under pressure and constantly aware that the completion of one task is immediately followed by another.
>
> (Taylor & Bain 1999:109)

Stress, often the result of this pressure to ensure that quantitative objectives are reached, reduces the ability of workers to achieve the qualitative objectives, which include what Taylor and Bain describe as the demand to 'smile down the phone' (Taylor & Bain 1999:103).

In a famous account of flight attendants, who are expected to maintain a perpetual smile, Arlie Hochschild defines emotional labour as 'requiring one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild 2012:7). The method by which this can be achieved over the phone rather than in person is different. Taylor and Bain argue that the 'appropriate telephone manners and behaviours' alongside the previously mentioned need to 'smile down the phone' can be included within Hochschild's definition of 'outward countenance' (Taylor & Bain 1999:103). The demand to 'smile down the phone' can be further illustrated by returning to *The Call Centre* documentary discussed in the introduction (BBC 2013). When Nev explains that "happy people sell, miserable bastards don't", his main interest (it is safe to assume) is not the happiness of the workforce as an end in itself. In the environment of a high-volume sales call centre there is constant pressure to reach targets. Nev wants workers to be "happy" to make more sales. In a stressful environment the demand to be "happy" becomes increasingly difficult. It is not a question of the actual emotional state of the worker, but rather that they need to display "happy" emotions over the phone to close sales. This instrumentalisation of emotion occurs within certain bounds: short, pressurised encounters over the phone with the aim of closing sales.

4.5 *Affective labour and estrangement*

The demand for call centre workers to engage in labour with an emotional content has important implications. The aim of the labour process is to communicate with trade unionists and attempt to convince them to purchase insurance, an immaterial commodity. This is discussed by Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2009:21), drawing on the philosophy of Spinoza, as putting the 'soul' to work. The 'soul' is considered 'in a materialistic way' as 'the vital breath that converts biological matter into an animated body.' Therefore while:

> industrial exploitation deals with bodies, muscles and arms. Those bodies would not have any value if they weren't animated, mobile, intelligent, reactive . . . The rise of post-Fordism modes

of production, which I will call Semiocapitalism, takes the mind, language and creativity as its primary tools for the production of value.

<div align="right">(Berardi 2009:21)</div>

Although there remains a manual component to the labour process in the call centre – the demand to be at the desk for a set amount of time, the physical interaction with the computer and the headset, the verbalisation of communication at a particular pitch, tone, and speed – the key element is mental labour. The attempt to make sales involves the 'investment in desire . . . at work, since social production has started to incorporate more and more sections of mental activity and of symbolic, communicative and affective action.' The affective aspect of this is particularly important. The labour process is 'not undertaken in view of the physical transformations of matter but communication, the creation of mental states, of feelings, and imagination' (Berardi 2009:84).

Affective labour is hard to supervise and control. The application of Taylorism to the assembly line provided more easily quantifiable inputs and outputs. There is no one way to make a successful sales call, something that was clear throughout the training with the emphasis on the importance of personality. The targets that supervisors are trying to achieve are complicated by the contradiction between quantitative and qualitative objectives. The control that supervisors exert over workers have a number of adverse effects, in particular the stress of quantitative targets, reduces the overall quality of calls. As Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2009:85) argues, communication as work could, 'from a certain point of view . . . be seen as an enrichment of experience.' However, as the experience from a high volume sales call centre illustrates, 'it is also (and this is generally the rule) an impoverishment, since communication loses its character of gratuitous, pleasurable and erotic contact, becoming an economic necessity, a joyless friction.'

The results of the labour process in the call centres are not tangible from the perspective of the worker. There is little engagement with the company or the insurance product itself. This lack of information leads to a distinct disconnection from what the phone call is actually about. The interchangeable nature of the job role in the call centre meant that it would have been possible to sell all kinds of different products, so long as there was access to the relevant script. This is, of course, not an experience unique to working in a call centre. In a study of stress in call centres in particular, Kerry Lewig and Maureen Dollard (2003) have outlined the importance of 'emotional dissonance.' This is the psychological experience of the differences between the actual feelings of the call centre worker and the emotions that they are performing. Modelled on cognitive dissonance, in which two contradictory ideas are held simultaneously, this concept refers to emotions and explains the feelings of guilt and stress

callers experience as they try to convince customers to buy insurance while maintaining a positive, enthusiastic demeanour on the phone. Lewig and Dollard (2003:368), in a paper about call centres in Australia, warn that 'emotional dissonance may ultimately lead to lowered self-esteem, depression, cynicism, and alienation from work.'

The affective package that workers are required to perform during the labour process is demanding. The exhaustive, emotionally draining component of the labour process is more likely than the 'may' that Lewig and Dollard (2003:368) use to create negative effects. From my own experience of working eight-hour afternoon/evening shifts – unfortunately also complemented with a morning of reading and writing about call centres – the labour process was exhausting. In particular it made social phone calls something to avoid, unable to break out of the routinised pattern of sales calls, alongside physical conversations too. Arriving home by about 10pm, my food preparation fell into a pattern of baked beans on toast, followed by slouching on the sofa watching television.

This process of emotional dissonance is a specific alienating effect derived from the form of affective labour that is required in the call centre. This has some similarity with the industrial labourer, who 'mortifies his [*sic*] body and ruins his [*sic*] mind' (Marx 1844) in the productive process. Affective labour clearly has different effects to those described by Marx (1867:614) in *Capital*, when he describes the 'division of labour characteristic of manufacture, under which each man [*sic*] is bound hand to foot for life to a single specialized operation.' Marx continues to argue that in this process the worker becomes 'a living appendage of the machine.' Despite the differences between physical and mental effects, Ollman (1977:138) reiterates how 'the worker's mind, too, has been ruined by the nature of his [*sic*] task and the conditions in which he does it.'

The affective worker is different from the manual worker on the assembly line in a number of important ways. Marx describes, in a section of *Grundrisse* that has become known as the *fragment on the machines*, that:

> Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are *organs of the human brain, created by human hand*; the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been produced, only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process.
>
> (Marx 1857:706)

The notion of the 'general intellect' has importance for understanding the role of machinery in production. The increasing levels of capital intensive machinery holds the potential to reduce the quantity of labour required in production. However, the experience of most workers has not been a reduction in the length of the working day and more free time, but quite the opposite in fact. It entails a shift in which 'intellectual labor is no longer a social function separated from general labor, but it becomes a transversal function within the entire social process' (Berardi 2009:35). As Christian Marazzi (2011:21) argues 'communication – and its productive organization as information flow – has become as important as electricity once was in the age of mechanical production.'

It is therefore possible to identify a shift from the exploitation of the bodies of workers during the Fordist mode of production to exploiting the minds of workers in increasingly larger numbers. These shifts towards the exploitation of mental labour – whether communicative, emotional, or affective – forms part of the attempt to increase profitability in contemporary capitalism. Unlike under Fordism, 'it will no longer be possible to produce large quantities of standardized goods, not to accumulate inventories thinking that they will eventually sell at some future, non entirely predictable moment.' What takes its place is 'the need to produce limited amounts of differentiated goods', targeted 'according to the changing "taste" of consumers that we will need to know as well as possible in order to better reach them, while at the same time trying to find the best ways to realize gains in productivity' (Marazzi 2011:25). The increased pressure to realise the surplus value embedded in commodities has created new and innovative ways to reach customers and convince them to buy. This has also combined with the introduction of the profit motive further into new areas and subsequently commoditising goods and services that were previously produced or consumed in different ways. The result is an increased emphasis on affective and emotional labour, the drive to convince consumers stemming from the impulse to realise profit in even more moments.

This is not to minimise the important of productive physical labour in contemporary capitalism. Without the labour that went into re-producing labour-power, producing commodities for sale, or those for capital – for example, the computers, telephones, and networks – the affective work in call centres would not be possible. This involves a move from the formal to real subsumption of workers to capital. Formal subsumption involved:

> the juridical subjugation of the labourers, on the formal disciplining of the bodies. Real subsumption means instead that the workers' lifetimes have been captured by the capital flow, and the souls have been pervaded by techno-linguistic chains . . . The introduction of pervasive technologies, the computerization of productive processes and of social communication enact a molecular domination upon the collective nervous network. This is the domain of the dead object, the commodity, which objectifies human activity reducing it to a cognitive automatism.

> In this sense we should speak of "thanato-politics" (from the Greek "*thanatos,*" meaning death): the submission of intelligent life to the dead object, the domination of the dead over the living.
>
> (Berardi 2009:188)

There is an important differentiation in terms of mental labour, between '*brain workers'* and '*chain workers.'* Whereas '*brain workers*' are harnessed for their 'communication, invention and creation', the '*chain workers*' are those 'people who sit at their terminals in front of a screen, repeating every day the same operation a thousand times', and 'relate to their labor in a way similar to industrial workers (Berardi 2009:87). The call centre worker – or '*chain worker*' – is therefore an appendage to a new kind of machine. Not the assembly line with its physical demands, but a complex network of telecommunications technology, and in this case, immaterial financial instruments. Not particular movements repeated over and over, but a repetition of a performance aiming to convince people in new and innovative ways to part with their money.

This kind of experience – albeit for industrial workers – is discussed as a form of alienation in the early writings of Marx (1844) in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. The concept of alienation is introduced as way to understand the 'devastating effect of capitalist production on human beings, on their physical and mental states and on the social processes of which they are a part' (Ollman 1977:131). Marx explains how:

> The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more wealth he produces, the more his production increased in power and extent. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he produces. The *devaluation* of the human world grows in direct proportion to the *increase in value* of the world of things. Labor 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 . . . The worker is related to the *product of labour* as to an *alien* object. For it is clear that, according to this premise, the more the worker exerts himself in his work, the more powerful the alien, objective world becomes which he brings into being over against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, and the less they belong to him.
>
> (Marx 1844)

This statement details the underpinnings of the classical Marxist notion of alienation. The conception of alienation is 'idealist in so far as it presupposes human authenticity, an essence that has been lost, negated, taken away, suspended.' The implication of this is that 'communism is thought by the young Marx as the restoration of an authentically human essence that was negated by the relation of capitalist production' (Berardi 2009:39)

The tradition of *Operaismo* puts forward a different perspective to this idealistic notion of alienation. It does not 'anticipate any restoration of humanity, does not proclaim any human

universality, and bases its understanding of humanity on class conflict' (Berardi 2009:44). In an influential text by Mario Tronti argues:

> The working class confronts its own labor as capital, as a hostile force, as an enemy – this is the point of departure not only for the antagonism, but for the organization of the antagonism. If the alienation of the worker has any meaning, it is a highly revolutionary one. The organization of alienation: This is the only possible direction in which the party can lead the spontaneity of the class. The goal remains that of refusal, at a higher level: It becomes active and collective, a political refusal on a mass scale, organized and planned. Hence the immediate task of working-class organization is to overcome passivity.
>
> (Tronti 1972:22)

This understanding of alienation as estrangement is not based on the loss of some kind of human essence. Instead it is a 'condition of estrangement from the mode of production and its rules, as refusal of work.' It is therefore, as Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2009:46) puts it, to be 'seen as the condition of those who rebel assuming their partial humanity as a point of strength, a premise of a higher social form, of a higher form of humanity, and not as the condition of those who are forced to renounce their essential humanity.'

This philosophical perspective demands that '*it is necessary to assume the standpoint of the refusal to work*, in order to understand the dynamics both of productive transformation and of political revolt' (Berardi 2009:59). This refusal can be clearly seen in the high staff turnover in call centres. One response to this has been the 'growing preference for part-time permanent staff' as they are 'seen as able to deliver optimal performance for the entire duration of a shift.' All of the positions open at the call centre were part-time, with minimum weekly requirements and options to work longer if wanted. This flexibility correlates with 'the desirability of shift patterns which correspond to the peaks of customer demand,' rather than scheduling needs of the worker (Taylor & Bain 1999:111). There were a number of non-financial incentives used in addition to the bonus structure at the call centre to encourage workers. The main incentive was leaving early from a shift if a caller reached their targets; an insightful strategy, since the best reward was to no longer be in the call centre. It was fairly common to hit targets and leave early, especially in the final half hour of the shift, when supervisors would shout out "get a sale and go!"

The manipulation of the work schedule returns to the key problem of the capitalist enterprise, which bosses have grappled with since the inception of capitalism itself: how to extract the maximum amount of surplus value from workers during their time on the job. In this regard, the theories of Taylorism are 'an answer to the specific problem of how best to control alienated labour – that is to say, labour power that is bought and sold' (Braverman 1999:62). The measurement of the length of the working day is a basic attempt to ensure that workers

fulfil the sale of their labour power to the capitalist. By allowing workers to leave early once they had met their sales targets, management provided an incentive to intensify time workers remained on the job. This is an implicit recognition of the estrangement of workers from the labour process. After the application of Taylorism, which involves 'an acceleration of the rhythm of work, achieved by the elimination of the workday's "pores" (that is of "dead" production time)' (Marazzi 2011:76). The reward that works best for workers is a sanctioned realization of their desire to refuse to work, celebrated even if they are only allowed to leave ten minutes early. However, during my time at the call centre the higher levels of management calculated that only 79% of paid time was spent on the phone, and introduced a rule that no worker could leave earlier than that final half hour.

4.6 *Incentives*

The intensification of the labour process is linked to method of reward and punishment in the call centre. The quality control (QC) team listen into every successful sales call and a selection of other calls. After a sale QC summon a worker by placing a small laminated card on their desk. This is meant to prevent them interrupting the phone call but it comes across quite ominously. The worker then has to sit on small fold out stool by the QC desks. This is quite an infantilising experience and for me also quite an awkward experience given my height. The worker is then expected to guess what rating the call has been given, before the positive and negative aspects are detailed by QC. If the call is green the worker receives a raffle ticket and is entered into a prize draw. The draw took place every couple of months and prizes included a £100 of *Selfridges* vouchers or a *mini-wii* games console.

The company made various attempts to encourage worker participation on and off the call centre floor. There were prizes awarded for making sales, usually vouchers for High Street shops. Another example was the introduction of "theme months." The first was "spring break" which involved some cosmetic changes to the call centre, much to the excitement of the supervisors. Colourful banners and posters were plastered over the walls, with the addition of inflatable palm trees, animals, and beach balls scattered around. The supervisors insisted the workers wear garish fake flower garlands while at work. On one of the days a supervisor mixed up an industrial quantity of non-alcoholic punch which was served up in novelty plastic cups with cocktail umbrellas. At one point I asked why this was happening which was met with the simple response: "why not?"

The non-financial incentives in the call centre extended beyond redecoration. Every Friday *Trade Union Cover* paid for lots of junk food to be delivered to the office which everyone could eat in the final break. There were paid trips to restaurants or even to bars. While I was in my initial training period the sales team were taken out to *Nandos* chicken restaurant after a shift. The supervisors emailed out the invitations a few days before. As I was fairly new at the call centre – or more specifically because I had not made enough sales – I did not get an invite. The supervisors handed out menus during the shift which made it obvious who was performing well enough to go. It was quite embarrassing and clearly being used by the supervisors to exert pressure. They even let those invited – about half of the trainees – finish early and gather round to talk about the meal, leaving those not invited to continue calling. All of these incentives aimed to keep callers working at the company and try to reduce the large turnover.

It was in these ways management attempted to reconcile the contradiction between quality and quantity, through both incentives and the application of processes of control. I also observed examples of reducing explicit control in the call centre in order to encourage higher quality. There was an insistence on elaborating on the script at certain points to make it sound more natural, but this always happened within certain defined limits. The same is true of the process for dealing with objections called "clarify and reassure" (C&R), a particular form of emotional labour. Thought this is not scripted on the computer, two paper sheets were provided – "basic" and "advanced" – which explained how to deal with objections. This was only to be done in accordance with strict rules: a maximum of three attempts, the first attempting to handle the objection, the second offering a quote but then trying to C&R again, the third (if unsuccessful) ending by sending a quote.

The prevalence of technological methods of control in the call centre does not solve all of management's problems. The methods for collecting statistics and recordings of phone calls still require human input to interpret and act upon. This is evident in the number of supervisors employed in the call centre. Management requires this human component, since 'no electronic system can summon an agent to a coaching session, nor highlight the deficiencies of their dialogue with the customer.' It is therefore possible to say that call centres 'rely on a combination of technologically driven measurements and human supervisors' (Taylor & Bain 1999:108). The use of scripts for telephone calls is 'an attempt to structure the very speech of workers into a series of predictable, regulated and routinised queries and responses.' Scripts are a logical extension of Taylorism, as 'they represent a qualitative transformation in the degree to which management attempts to exert control over the white-collar labour process.' It is this which Taylor and Bain argue 'represents an unprecedented

level of *attempted* control which must be considered a novel departure' (Taylor & Bain 1999:109).

4.7 *The end of the line*

The final part of my workers' inquiry on the call centre floor was particularly difficult. I had begun to average a reasonable number of sales per shift, and was on the cusp of "graduating." However, on a Friday night, all my shifts for the following week were changed: instead of three day shifts I received five nights and a Saturday shift. The next Friday, all of my shifts were again changed to the same pattern. Working every evening at the call centre, while reading and writing about call centres during the day, began to take its toll. I went through a number of shifts with no sales whatsoever.

I had a tense "1-2-1" meeting with my supervisor about my performance. The SMART action plan only stated "Giving Jamie 2 weeks to improve his performance." After a week my performance had not improved. The next "1-2-1" was self-explanatory:

> Jamie will have completed one of the two weeks given. By end of next week 2 weeks will be over, Jamie needs to have hit 0.25sph over this two week period. Not achieving this may result in a HR meeting to review performance.

The shifts become increasingly stressful. The pressure to make sales increases with the constant intervention from supervisors to "smile while you dial!" which really is not helping. By then I had stopped wearing smart shoes to work – a bizarre requirement given it is a call centre – and begun wearing trainers. It felt like a minor victory over management.

The general atmosphere in the call centre also began to deteriorate. The number of "red" calls increased to the point that the supervisors lost their monthly bonuses. One of the other workers mentioned after a shift that she was genuinely considering asking someone to "punch her in the face halfway through the shift" so she could "leave early." A number of callers – including the one remaining caller who had trained with me – were placed on probation for failing to meet sales targets. The number of challenging phone calls I made seemed to be increasing. Speaking to low-paid public sector workers suffering under austerity was revealing as many told personal stories about how they are now working reduced shifts, suffering pay cuts, and worries about being made redundant. Often people would make negative comments about the role the union was playing in this context, with some pointing out that the union had not fought or were not worth their subscription fees. While this provides an interesting

sociological picture of workers conditions, these are also real people who you then have to try and push to buy life insurance.

During the "buzz session" for the shift we had been shouted at by the supervisors for the general level of performance in the team. I interjected making a sarcastic comment and told the supervisors not to shout at me. My final "1-2-1" meeting was therefore quite hostile. I was made to sign the feedback form including the statement that "Jamie should have a more positive attitude towards his role. Made negative comments on C&R during buzz session, doesn't give other agents a good impression." I was repeatedly questioned by the supervisor about why I could not reach my targets. I said the problem was that I did not like pressuring low paid public sector workers into buying insurance that they did not want or need. The supervisor said: "fine, this job isn't for everyone!" and became defensive. In a somewhat bizarre turn of events the supervisor then attempted the C&R process to convince me otherwise, applying the same sales techniques that I had used myself.

At the end of the probation period I had fallen far short of the targets I had been set. After an HR meeting – which was surprisingly brief – I was no longer employed by *Trade Union Cover*. Though slightly earlier than originally planned it still meant that I was one of the longest lasting workers in my training cohort. Two months after leaving the call centre I received a letter from the union. As I unfolded the letter it became clear that it was not from the union, despite the union logo at the top. The pitch suggested that I might be interested in additional benefits as a union member. If I wanted to take up the free insurance offer all I had to do was return the form, although it then stated in the small print that "a representative from [company trading name] will call about other benefits we are offering."

Chapter 5

Management in the call centre

This chapter will discuss the role of management in the call centre. It begins by examining the coincidence of another undercover researcher who was present during the training. This reveals how a method like the workers' inquiry can be used by management to understand the labour process and intensify work. It will then discuss the challenges that management face in general in the workplace and consider the need for supervision and control to extract the maximum labour power from workers. In the call centre this is closely connected to the introduction of new technologies. The connection of telephones to computers is key to understanding this process. This section will consider how management imperatives are written into the technology and labour process. It will consider what a non-capitalist call centre might look like and pose the problem of workers control.

The next part of the chapter will consider the analogy of the Panopticon, which has been frequently used in the literature on call centres. It will begin by discussing Bentham's contribution and comparing it to the call centre. The next consideration will be Focault's work on the Panopticon as well as his elaboration of discipline. This is used to understand the role of supervisors specifically in the call centre. The question of power is discussed in terms of sexism and the disciplining of the body. While it might not seem obvious at first, attention is needed on the physicality of the labour process.

The chapter then moves to consider the records of the "1-2-1" meetings I received from supervisors at the call centre. They highlight the difficulties supervisors face when trying to coach affective workers and tend towards demanding a kind of quasi-Maoist auto-critique. This internalisation of the demands of the labour process is then considered by examining Foucault's Panopticon and the development of the concept into the electronic Panopticon. The next part considers the Panopticon beyond the workplace and the similarities of its operations to the market. The importance of neoliberalism is the next topic, considering questions of freedom and the prevalence of surveillance and control in society. The final part of the chapter discusses the effects of new modes of accumulation and management techniques in the workplace. In particular it will focus on how new methods require management to gain knowledge of the labour process and place new demands on workers. It is no longer enough to be present and supervised at work; this now extends onto an emotional level, not only at work but genuinely enjoying it.

5.1 *The Undercover Boss*

The introduction to the thesis discussed *The Call Centre* documentary (BBC 2013). The figure of management is embodied in Nev Wiltshire, who the narrator explains "has developed a unique approach to keeping his young workforce on their toes." The first episode is filled with shots of Nev shouting at workers and enforcing his managerial authority in various ways – even including throwing a pen at someone at one point. In a particularly telling moment, Nev discusses his management style and declares his inspiration is 'probably Napoleon . . . a dictator." The 'frontier of control' (Goodrich 1975) seems closer to that of a strictly hierarchical military organisation than a workplace. Whether Nev is playing up to the cameras or not, he gives a new meaning to the term factory despotism. The aim of this chapter is to interrogate the role of management in the call centre, both in terms of the use of technological methods of supervision and control, but also their role on the call centre floor itself.

The importance of supervision at the call centre was apparent straight away. During the training, one attendee was noticeably out of place. He was much older than the other trainees, and wore a smart suit with a big watch and expensive shoes. Although he did not say this straight away, he eventually explained that he was a consultant employed by *Trade Union Cover* to assess their strategy by going through the training, working on the phones, and speaking to employees. The consultant had thirty years of experience in the insurance industry and had been involved in developing some of the products that the company sold. The company wanted to "streamline" the inbound customer service side of the call centre, so the consultant would compare both inbound and outbound calls and find ways to improve. He was meant to be doing the investigation undercover, and although he had confessed to our training group – which seemed to be mostly so he could distance himself from the other young and low-paid workers – the customer service team was not aware of his role.

The consultant consistently took astoundingly reactionary positions throughout the training session. These ranged from denying climate change, insulting students as work dodgers, and even arguing that prisoners should be forced to work. This last point is particularly interesting in the context of the call centre. In a discussion about the POA (Prison Officers Association) campaigns I brought up the 'Prisonfare' proposal which would involve prisoners working in call centres (Right to Work 2012). There are a number of issues with the POA, but instead of raising any of these the consultant blurted out that all prisoners "should be forced to work!" In his view prison was meant to be a punitive experience; however, he did not seem to be aware of

the irony in suggesting that the punishment should include being forced to work in a call centre.

These attitudes continued when it came to workers in call centres. While the trainer was outlining the data entry process required to collect details for calling, the consultant interrupted: "that's a lot of work, can't it just be scanned?" The trainer replied that this would mean they lost their jobs. The consultant laughed and said: "but all I want to do is save the company money!" If this comment gave an impression of the consultant's position on workers' rights the next outburst clarified this explicitly. A trainee asked if, since *Trade Union Cover* sold to trade unions, "was there a trade union at the company?" The trainer bizarrely pointed out that "companies cannot join a union" and received the immediate support of the consultant, who raised his voice and continued to reprimand the trainee: "don't ask questions like that, you don't want to lose your job do you? Do you?"

The anti-trade union attitude was not limited to workers in the call centre. The trainer explained that the company had introduced new competitions – in addition to the free insurance offer – in an effort to secure more contacts. These ranged from tablet computers, holidays, to various gift vouchers including petrol. The consultant spoke up once again as he leafed through the different competitions:

> I guess it does work because these are aspirational goods for people on a low wage, but a tank of petrol? [laughter]. Ah the iPad, people like this like to gamble, you know playing bingo and stuff, so they would want an iPad! After all people like this are less educated so they are more accepting.

These comments highlight how unpleasant the consultant was during the training. The patronising – and quite shocking – comments about trade unionists were not an aberration. I asked at one point why the lecturers' union was not targeted by the company. The consultant tried to reiterate the point about how "less educated" workers are potentially more likely to buy the insurance. This illustrates clearly how the insurance was not designed to benefit the trade union members who are customers, but rather that the customers happened to be in a trade union and the product was designed to make a profit from them.

To explain the concept of insurance, the trainer used an imaginary model reminiscent of an economics textbook. There are five farmers, who each have one cow that costs £100. Each of the farmers pays the insurer £25, which allows for the compensation of one cow per year, with a surplus of £25. I pointed out that instead of paying the money to the insurer, each of the farmers could take turns collecting the money, then choosing what to do with the surplus. The consultant argued that this would not be possible, since the farmers needed the insurer's

capital to start up the insurance scheme. However, the insurer had calculated the risk as ¼, and had therefore charged each of the farmers £25. If the farmers ran their insurance cooperatively, I argued, they could build up their own reserves, which would otherwise be expropriated by the insurer as profit. At this point the consultant got quite annoyed and said: "well, it just wouldn't be possible" and "that's just how it works."

The consultant appeared as the personification of capital during the training session. His experience of working in an insurance firm had been combined with the a kind of basic managerial logic found in books like *Call Centres For Dummies* (Bergevin *et al.* 2010), but lacked any notion of what work actually involved in a call centre. The process seemed remarkably similar to the reality TV show *The Undercover Boss* (Lambert 2010) and its predecessor *Back to the Floor* (BBC 1997), which demonstrate how research like a workers' inquiry could be conducted from the perspective of capital.

The series *Back to the Floor* followed company bosses as they spent some time experiencing what it is like to work at the other end of the company, at the coal face as it were – and quite literally in one episode. The purpose of this endeavour is to understand how the company works in reality and the attitudes of the workers it employs. The series followed twelve different bosses through the process. In an article for a management website, Dehn (1998) the producer of the series, argues that of those who featured in the series, 'virtually all of the bosses now positively advocate the system.' What is particularly interesting is the example he cited in the article of Butlin's holidays. Dehn visits the managing director months after filming and finds that he is organising his own version of *Back to the Floor* as part of the £140 million project to improve Butlin's. This involved him spending three days in the Butlin's call centre to understand how to improve customer service. The managing director now praises the benefits of this method to other members of the executive board: 'I have been in there, and I was up to my neck in guano. It has got to be the furnace of the centre. It was absolutely bloody hell in there' (Quoted in Dehn 1998).

While at first glance this may appear to be a sympathetic attempt to understand the realities of working in the alienating conditions of a pressurised call centre. However the problem is identified as a lack of proper 'computer support systems, and only two telephone lines' which created difficulties for the workers because 'the longer it took' to resolve phone calls, 'the angrier the customers became' (Quoted in Dehn 1998). Thus the managing director is able to find an instrumental use for his experience on the call centre floor. The problems of the call centre are seen as the result of technical impediments reducing the speed of the labour process. However the question of whether increasing the volume and speed of incoming

phone calls will mitigate the negative experience of working in the call centre is not posed; instead the board of executives can be content that their customer services have undergone a quantitative, if perhaps not qualitative, improvement.

The reality TV show *Undercover Boss* developed the format further (Lambert 2010). The premise is that, 'high flying executives take extraordinary steps to ensure their companies are fighting fit by going undercover in their own businesses' (Channel 4 2010). The episodes generally involve a series of common elements. The undercover boss, disguised in a new haircut and maybe a hat, is surprised at how difficult the work is, and shocked at the inefficiencies. The workers that the boss comes into contact with suffer from adverse conditions, have difficult life stories, and cannot communicate with those at the top of the company. Some have innovative methods for improving production which are ignored. The boss returns to the head office to reflect and summons a worker from each of the departments they worked in. The boss's real identity is revealed, and they discuss the problems in the company and how they will be improved. This involves implementing the new systems that workers may have devised, offering training, and promoting workers the boss was impressed with. A series of rewards are then offered to the workers who have impressed the boss.

The process of going undercover in the company gives the boss a new perspective. They are able to 'find out what's not working, fix it and reward employees who deserve recognition' (Lambert 2010). There is no attempt – and of course this is hardly a surprise – to understand the antagonisms present in the workplace or the contradictions in the process of production under capitalism. What the *Undercover Boss* shows is that the method of inquiring into workers conditions or experience is not the sole preserve of those seeking to understand exploitation and resistance on the part of workers.

There are instances in which management will use somewhat similar techniques to gain a better understanding of the production process. For example, Frederick Taylor began laying the basis for his scientific theory of management by taking 'the step, extraordinary for anyone of his class, of starting a craft apprenticeship in a firm whose owners were social acquaintances of his parents' (Braverman 1999:63). Through these investigations, and in particular the vast number of tests at the Midvale Steel Company, Frederick Taylor argued that 'managers assume… the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulae' (F. Taylor 1967:36). The motivation for these studies was an intensification of the labor process, the discovery of methods for overcoming

the 'universal prevalence and in fact inevitability of "soldiering"' on the part of workers – which can be defined as the deliberate attempt by workers to slow down the speed of work and therefore not to reach their productive potential (Braverman 1999:70).

5.2 *Managing the labour process*

An understanding of "soldiering" and why management need to develop means to ensure workers are fulfilling their potential has to begin from the basic contradiction of capitalism: the contradiction between labour and capital. The starting point is Marx's (1867:280)identification of the central role of the labour process in capitalism. Marx notes how the exchange of the commodity of labour power between the buyer (the capitalist) and the seller (the worker) appears straightforward. However, once this transaction is followed 'into the hidden abode of production', it is here 'the secret of profit-making must at last be laid bare.'The transaction that has taken place is quite unlike that with other commodities: what is being purchased is a potential, something only realised once it is put to work in the process of production. Therefore once the capitalist has 'purchased a given quantity of labor power' they 'must now "stride ahead" and strive to extract actual labor from the labor power' they 'now legally own' (Edwards 1979:12).

The exchange of labour power that appeared so simple on the market thus becomes far more complex in the 'hidden abode' of production. As Richard Edwards has argued, workplace:

> conflict exists because the interests of worker and those of employers collide . . . control is rendered problematic because unlike the other commodities involved in production, labor power is always embodied in people, who have their own interests and needs and who retain their power to resist being treated like a commodity.

> (Edwards 1979:12)

The workplace therefore becomes a 'contest terrain', to quote the title of his book. The form that that conflict will take 'occurs within definite limits imposed by a social and historical context, yet this context rarely determines everything about work organisation . . . there remains a certain indeterminacy to the labor process' (Edwards 1979:15). The task of this chapter is to move from the experience of the labour process detailed in the previous chapter, to discuss the different methods deployed by management, before moving on in the following chapter to discuss resistance specifically.

The different methods that management can use have been categorised by Edwards (1979:18) into three component parts that form the 'system of control' – or 'the social relations of production within the firm.' The first is 'direction', the ways in which the tasks that workers

have to do are specified. The second is 'evaluation', how the employer supervises and assesses the workers performance. The third is 'discipline', what methods are used 'to elicit cooperation and enforce compliance with the capitalist's direction of the labour process.' These three parts provide a useful starting point for examining the control of the labour process in the call centre.

The analysis is complicated by the indeterminacy of the labour process, but also by the question of control. The importance of control starts from the moment the capitalist tries to realise the potential of purchased labour power, but as Paul Thompson (1989:123) has argued, 'complications arise when attempts are made to specify *how* control is acquired and maintained.' He draws on Marx's notions of 'factory despotism' and the 'real subordination of labour.' The first entails a 'hierarchical chain of command', something that is 'given a material framework when capital can use science and machinery to control labour through the production process itself', which leads to the second (Thompson 1989:124). Thompson cites Friedman's (1977:45) definition of control as an important insight. The term could be used in 'an absolute sense, to identify those "in control", and in a relative sense, to signify the degree of power people have to direct work.' This is an important theoretical consideration: it is easy to assume control as totalising, rather than understanding it as an either or. This is what Carter Goodrich (1975) does with his concept of a dynamic 'frontier of control' in the workplace, constituted through struggle.

5.3 *The introduction of new technology*

The development of call centres has involved the introduction of new technological methods of control. The first call centres would seem quite anachronistic by comparison: workers huddled over phonebooks, dialling number into phones, holding handsets, and scribbling notes on paper to log their own calls. The introduction of technology – beyond that of the phone itself – was a process rather than a single event. In order to investigate this further I conducted an interview with an activist who had worked in call centres over a long period of time. The identity of the interviewee has to remain anonymous, as there is a risk of damaging their future employment prospects. The interviewee had worked at various call centres, both in the London and abroad, and detailed the experience of work and resistance. What is useful to focus on this chapter is the section of the interview that explains what it was like to work in a call centre as new technological methods of surveillance and control were introduced.

The example of the call centre in the interview was typical of a mass sales call centre. The conditions of workers were poor, with "100% of it was running on zero hour contracts." Similarly to the experience discussed in the previous chapter, the interviewee described call centre work as:

> the first time that I had worked in an environment where the work was non-stop and regimented . . . You know it's almost the pressure to hit targets, do you know what I mean? There never seemed to be a couple of hours without worrying about whether you were up on them. The targets for those would be just so high and also the targets in terms of the amount of calls that you need to make are so high, those were really, really draining.

This captures the nature of high volume sales work in a call centre: a regimented labour process driven by quantitative targets. The interviewee explained that at this particular call centre: "certainly when I started the computer systems that logged your breaks and that kind of thing were not there." This meant that "As long as workers hit their targets, you pretty much got left alone."

There was a level of autonomy for workers, beginning from a basic script, but allowing for innovation and experimentation in how the call encounters were handled. This relative freedom did not last. The introduction of new technology was identified straight away as a threat:

> People definitely saw that this was going to make the job tougher. Although there was a lot of kind of resignation, it is not to say that there wasn't kind of harsh controls and stuff before hand, and also I thought there was really wretched atmosphere in call centres from campaign managers, horrible kind of atmosphere, threats and all sorts of things like that going on.

In this sense the technology followed on from a particularly aggressive style of management in the call centre. The technology allowed for a much more effective implementation of management control. It built upon the pre-existing social relations in the workplace, one in which:

> There were all sorts of rules right. I mean for instances hanging coats on the back of your chair was banned, little things like that. Constantly listing things that people couldn't do. I've seen people being chased into toilets because they have their phones on them and stuff like that! All these things you can do with or without the computers.

The technological innovations centre on the linking of the telephone to a computer. This allowed a threefold strengthening of management. The first is the speed-up of the labour process. The development of the automatic call distributor heralded the beginning of the modern call centre. It transferred the process of connecting phone calls away from the operator and onto a computer system. This allowed the queuing of incoming calls and also the automatic dialling of outgoing calls. The control of the pace of phone calls is therefore taken

away from the worker, maximising the amount of calls that can be made in a shift. The second is that the computerisation of the calls allows for a vast quantity of measurements to be automatically collected. The meshing of the telephone with computers – and in many cases now the complete integration with VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technology – allows computer software to collect and collate data about each worker's performance. These quantitative variables are context free; not something that can be debated, considered instead as the evidence base for rewards or discipline. The third is related to this data collection, but has a particular importance. The computerisation produces digital records of all phone calls at a low cost. In sales the calls are considered as the verbal contract confirming the purchase and compiled in databases and archives. The availability of digital storage meant that every single phone call I made could be played back at a moment's notice. This allows an unprecedented level of surveillance; every call encounter is permanent, every mistake could be punishable in the future. It operates like the ability to recall every commodity produced on an assembly line and to be able to retrospectively judge the quality of its production.

These three examples highlight the way management control is programmed into technology. This represents an insight into one of the ambiguities of Braverman's (1999) analysis that Michael Burawoy identified. For Braverman:

> Control becomes a secondary feature in the organization of work, while the pursuit of efficiency becomes its primary feature. Relations in production are fashioned by a concern for the separation of conception from execution only after machinery has been determined by productivity drives. But Braverman presents another view, based on the Babbage principle, according to which control is inseparable from the pursuit of efficiency.
>
> (Burawoy 1985:47)

It is possible to treat technological innovation as the result of competition between capitalists, driven primarily by a desire to gain a profitable advantage. However, this risk missing a more nuanced understanding of how capital is inbuilt into machinery:

> Thus, as the process takes shape in the minds of engineers, the labor configuration to operate it takes shape simultaneously in the minds of its designers, and in part shapes the design itself. The equipment is made to be *operated*; operating costs involve, apart from the cost of the machine itself, the *hourly costs of labor,* and this is part of the calculation involved in machine design. The design which will enable the operation to be broken down among cheaper operators is the design which is sought be management and engineers who have so internalized this value that it appears to them to have the force of natural law or scientific necessity.
>
> (Braverman 1999:137)

The introduction of technology into call centres has to be understood in terms of management objectives. The desire to increase the volumes of calls handled by workers is clear, but also it must be remembered that:

> Machinery offers to management the opportunity to do by wholly mechanical means that which it had previously attempted to do by organizational and disciplinary means. The fact that machines may be paced and controlled according to centralized decisions, and that these controls may thus be in the hands of management, removed from the site of production to the office–these technical possibilities are of just as great interest to management as the fact that the machine multiplies the productivity of labor.
>
> (Braverman 1999:134)

Braverman (1999:134) continues to quote Charles Babbage, who argues 'one great advantage which we may derive from machinery . . . is from the check which it affords against the inattention, the idleness, or the dishonesty of human agents.' Therefore while the computerisation of the call centre allowed the speeding up of the labour process, it simultaneously introduced new methods by which workers could be controlled.

This question of technology poses a problem for what a non- or post-capitalist call centre would be. Given the technical organisation of the labour process is deeply intertwined with capital and managerial imperatives, how could this be conceived of in another way? As Burawoy (1985:53) argues 'in reality, machinery embraces a host of possibilities, many of which are systematically thwarted, rather than developed, by capital.' These possibilities are difficult to comprehend in the call centre due to the fact their current operation appears to leave little option for workers to take back control. In different kinds of workplaces the question of workers' control has frequently emerged, as Immaneul Ness and Dario Azzellini's (2011:2) book details in numerous examples spanning over a century. In particular they note how critical Marxists have understood 'workers' control and councils as the base of a self-determined socialist society.' Yet the call centre – and especially high-volume sales call centres – do not appear as an obvious target for self-management. Consider, for example, Burawoy's explanation of how:

> an automatic system of machinery opens up the possibility of the true control over a highly productive factory by a relatively small corps of workers, providing these workers attain the level of mastery over the machinery offered by engineering knowledge, and providing they then share out among themselves the routines of the operation, from the most technically advanced to the most routine.
>
> (Burawoy 1985:53)

What would the seizure of workers control look like in a call centre? The answer is probably that most workers would like to stop making unsolicited phone calls, turn off the system, and leave to do something else. The problem is that the vast majority of call centres – and especially sales call centres – produce little in the way of social value. It is possible that call centres could be put to an instrumental use during periods of struggle: trying to mobilise large numbers of people at short notice or finding out information about what is happening in a

particular area. Yet beyond that the social use is not clear, particularly given that most of the technology is developed specifically to introduce new ways to control.

The development and introduction of technology in the call centre has provided ample opportunities for management to engage in detailed surveillance and control. The labour process results in a clear and discrete output that is easily measured and recorded: the phone call. The widespread use and low cost of digital technologies has made the storage and instant playback of phone calls a reality for management, alongside statistics on call duration, break length, time between calls, and so on. The availability of this kind of data and different variables provides the basis 'evaluation', one part of the 'system of control' described by Edwards (1979:18) before. The nature of 'direction' has been discussed partly in the chapter before with the discussion of Braverman (1999) and the separation of conception from execution, specifically with the scripting of call centre encounters. Additional 'direction' is undertaken by supervisors in the "1-2-1" meetings and on the call centre floor, which will be discussed in more detail in this chapter. Finally, the various methods of 'discipline' will be considered in particular.

The academic literature on call centres has developed significantly over the past twenty or so years, as has been discussed in previous chapters. As Ellis and Taylor (2006:2) argued previously, academics 'now know a great deal about work organization, surveillance, managerial control strategies and other central concerns of labour process analysis.' One of the key debates to emerge had relevance beyond call centres and was reflected in journals like *Work, Employment and Society*. An article by Sue Fernie and David Metcalf (1997:3) argued that call centres were organised like an 'electronic panopticon.' They argue that 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.' The idea of an 'electronic panopticon' draw heavily on Michel Foucault (1991) analysis of Jeremy Bentham's (1995) 'Panopticon' model, which, McKinlay and Taylor (1998:175) argue neglects to note that 'the factory and the office are neither prison nor asylum, their social architectures never those of the total institution.' In this vein, Taylor and Bain (1999:103) introduced the notion of an 'assembly line in the head' to understand the labour process in the call centre. They argue that the 'dynamic process of capital accumulation' that takes place in the workplace makes it unsuitable for this analogy, as the Foucauldian approach 'understates both the voluntary dimension of labour and the managerial need to elicit commitment from workers.' This leads to a problematic analysis, one which can 'disavow the possibilities for collective organisation and resistance.'

The strength of Taylor and Bain's (1999) analysis lies in its conclusions that the use of technological methods of control does not solve all of management's problems. The vast array of data that can be collected still requires human input to interpret and act upon. If this were not the case there would not be so many supervisors required on the call centre floor. Management continues to require this human component, since since 'no electronic system can summon an agent to a coaching session, nor highlight the deficiencies of their dialogue with the customer.' It is therefore possible to say that call centres 'rely on a combination of technologically driven measurements and human supervisors' (Taylor & Bain 1999:108). The 'evaluation' and 'discipline' of workers discussed by Edwards (1979:18) are therefore separated from the scripting which is 'an attempt to structure the very speech of workers into a series of predictable, regulated and routinised queries and responses.' The scripting is a logical extension of Taylorism, as 'they represent a qualitative transformation in the degree to which management attempts to exert control over the white-collar labour process.' It is this which Taylor and Bain argue 'represents an unprecedented level of *attempted* control which must be considered a novel departure' (Taylor & Bain 1999:109).

5.4 *Bentham's Panopticon*

The analogy of the panopticon has been used frequently before in the literature on call centres. While the arguments about its use for understanding control – or the risk of totalising control and minimising resistance – are important, this section will use the metaphor and develop it with ethnographic detail to attempt to understand the example of this particular call centre. Jeremy Bentham (1995:31) first discussed the panopticon as an architectural device that would allow 'a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example.' The now familiar structure of the central observation post with individual cells around it, allowed 'the *apparent omnipresence* of the inspector . . . combined with the extreme facility of his *real presence*' (Bentham 1995:45).

Before moving on to discuss Foucault's (1991) development of the concept, it is worth returning to a number of points that Bentham makes in his panopticon writings. The first point is one that Bentham (1995:80) makes specifically about workers: 'whatever be the manufacture, the utility of the principle is obvious and incontestable, in all cases where the workmen are paid according to their *time*.' He therefore foresees how the idea of a panopticon can be applied as a remedy for the indeterminacy of labour power, ensuring that purchased labour power is utilised to the fullest degree. However, when workers are 'paid by the *piece*', the 'interest which the' worker 'has in the value of' their 'work supersedes the use

of coercion, and of every expedient calculated to give force to it.' This is a move away from direct control, providing workers instead with rewards to motivate themselves, or to internalise the demands of work. In the call centre the employer is purchasing labour power for a set time and pays an hourly rate for shifts. In addition to this, the bonus for sales introduces an element of piece-work, seeking to motivate workers further during each shift by internalising the demands of the labour process.

The model of the panopticon in the call centre is not recreated exactly along the lines described by Bentham. There is no central tower from which the supervisors can simultaneously observe all workers, while remaining unobserved themselves. The electronic panopticon of the computer surveillance is clearly analogous, offering the potential to interrogate each call without the individual worker's knowledge. Yet the arrangement of the call centre floor is reminiscent of the panopticon also. Each row of desks has a supervisor seated at the end, from where they can observe individual workers, both their physical performance and the computer screen. Bentham (1995:106) expresses concern for finding a method to allow the inspector to view out of the tower while also examining their own ledger of accounts, without providing illumination that would reveal the inside. A complex 'lantern' is considered 'pierced at both elevations with small holes . . . no larger than the aperture of a common spying-glass, and, like that, closed by a piece of glass, which if necessary might be coloured, or smoked, or darkened by a blind.' The computer screens of the supervisors operate a much more simplistic device. While the worker's computer screen is glaringly illuminated, each supervisor has a privacy screen filter installed. This filter creates a very narrow viewing angle, meaning that the screen can only be viewed by those directly in front it. So the supervisor can physically view other screens – and is connected to various monitoring programmes to do so remotely – they are also protected from view, and free to browse Facebook and look at "funny" pictures of cats. This became apparent as unfortunately it does not prevent overheard conversations between supervisors.

The second point that Bentham makes that is worth considering is to do with punishment. Bentham responds to a critic who argued that prisoners will experiment to test out the supposed omnipresence of the inspector:

> Will he? I will soon put an end to his experiments: or rather, to be beforehand with him, I will take care he shall not think of making any. I will single out one of the most untoward of the prisoners. I will keep an unintermitted watch upon him. I will watch until I observe a transgression. I will minute it down. I will wait for another: I will note that down too. I will lie by for a whole day: he shall do as he pleases that day, so long as he does not venture at something too serious to be endured. The next day I produce the list to him. – *You thought yourself undiscovered: you abused by indulgence: see how you were mistaken. Another time, you may*

have rope for two days, ten days: the longer it is, the heavier it will fall upon you. Learn from this, all of you, that in this house transgression never can be safe. Will the policy be cruel? – No; it will be kind: it will prevent transgressing; it will save punishing.

(Bentham 1995:105)

What is notable about this example is the role of punishment. It is not simply a case of catching someone breaking the rules, rather 'in Bentham's eyes, punishment is first and foremost a spectacle: it is insofar as punishment is not intended for the punished individual, but for all others, that the execution of the punishment is a spectacle' (Božovič 1995:4).

There is one particular example from the call centre that illustrates the use of this kind of spectacle. A worker was caught pretending to make phone calls, going through the motions, yet whenever someone picked up the phone they would immediately end the call. It appeared that the worker thought they could get away with this. However, the supervisors were able to identify a problem through the call records and immediately fired the worker mid-shift. The precarious contracts allow for this kind of summary justice to be carried out, as without employment rights you can be terminated at a moment's notice. The supervisors chose to call every worker into a special meeting in the conference room to explain what had happened. For thirty minutes the supervisors created a spectacle of shouting, clearly illustrating how workers who broke the rules would be made an example of. The aim of the panopticon is, as Miran Božovič argues, to:

deter the innocent from committing offences by producing an appearance through reality, in order for this reality to be able to produce such an appearance at all, it must itself be sustained by another appearance, one that is not the effect of reality, but that is itself a fiction. If we were to remove this fiction from reality, we would lose reality itself.

(Božovič 1995:8)

The analogue conception of the panopticon therefore must create the fiction of omnipresence. Yet, the advent of computer surveillance means that even if the fiction of the ever-watching supervisor were to miss something at the time, the reality is that all the actions of workers are recorded and can be interrogated further at a later time.

5.5 *The role of supervisors*

The application of Michel Foucault's (1991) writing to call centres has focused on the idea of the Panopticon, but there are further important points to be considered in terms of discipline more broadly. When Foucault (1991:144) discusses discipline he elaborates how 'in the factories' it 'was a question of distributing individuals in a space which one might isolate them and map them; but also articulating this distribution on a production machinery that had its

own requirements.' In factory work the implications of this are clear: the separation of workers based on the division of labour and development of assembly lines to increase the pace of work. The spatial arrangement of the call centre is somewhat different. Each desk with a computer and headset has the same qualities as the other. It should therefore not matter where an individual worker sat, yet instead the call centre was divided into sections: the row closest to the exit was reserved for the top seller, the farthest row for the newest trainees, with degrees of ability in between. Each section had different supervisors with different roles: those training the newcomers and those determined to get even more sales from the top sellers. The supervisors continue with the practice of 'walking up and down the central isle of the workshop' – or along the rows they supervise – and 'carry out a supervision that was both general and individual' – the performance of particular workers and the overall performance of the teams (Foucault 1991:145).

The role of the supervisors is divided into two parts. The first is the discipline of time: ensuring that workers arrive on time, the constant checking of the records of breaks, the booking of shifts, and preventing workers from leaving early. The second returns to the problem of labour power as a commodity, 'to assure the quality of the time used: constant supervision, the pressure of supervisors, the elimination of anything that might disturb or distract; it is a question of constituting a totally useful time' (Foucault 1991:150). This involves the use of technology and human supervision. The innovation in phone technology means that the gaps between calls can automatically be reduced to the bare minimum. The challenge for management is to devise new methods to further discipline time, as 'time measured and paid must also be a time without impurities or defects; a time of good quality, throughout which the body is constantly applied to its exercise' (Foucault 1991:151).

The supervisor in the call centre is crucial for the day to day management of workers. The supervisors act on behalf of management, and although the actual manager of the call centre would occasionally come onto the floor, it was never clear what he was actually doing. He had not –as far as I am aware – ever worked in a call centre himself. The only real contact with him was at the company socials or at the monthly award ceremony, where he delivered a dry PowerPoint presentation about how the company was performing, with slide after slide of vague graphs. There were four main supervisors in the call centre. Two supervised the Academy trainees, and the other two for the day and evening teams respectively. They all had previous experience of working in call centres, whether at this particular workplace or somewhere else. Each of the supervisors had quite different personalities and working out how to negotiate with each one could have a significant impact on the experience of the shift. The supervisors could intensify the labour process in various ways, but they also decided which

workers were kept on through training and decided on deadlines for the probation period with the HR department. Therefore building and maintaining a relationship with the supervisors had a noticeable impact upon the time spent on the call centre floor but also the potential length of employment.

The supervisors pay was based on a basic rate that was not significantly more than the other workers with the addition of significant bonuses each month. These were based on the performance of the teams they supervised, and focused on the number of sales and limiting the number of red calls. The bonuses contributed enough to the pay of the supervisors that not achieving them would have a substantial effect on their lifestyle. For most of the month this did not cause any problems and supervisors would give very general advice on how to improve sales and warnings about the most common red calls. However towards the end of the month this would change. As the number of red calls approached the 10% threshold the "buzz sessions" became intense and supervisors would get increasingly aggressive. Individual workers would be picked on for their mistakes and chastised in front of the whole group. On one particular occasion we were taken into a training room and shouted and sworn at for over an hour about the importance of quality, partly to vent their frustration, and partly to keep the trainees off the phones to reduce the chance of further mistakes.

Towards the end of one month a supervisor illustrated the importance of his bonus to a worker on the call centre floor. He took out a picture of his baby son and stated to the worker that if she did not make any more sales "he would go hungry next month." The supervisor was not clear about whether his son's food would be the first thing cut when he did not make his bonus, but his comments do raise a number of important points. The first is that although the supervisors appeared as the representatives of capital on the call centre floor, their material conditions were not remote from the call centre workers. The second is that the bonuses clearly had a noticeable impact on the supervisor's wages and they would change their activity to try and achieve them. The third is that attempting to encourage workers to achieve the targets was not straightforward; there was no one thing that supervisors could do to change this.

The monthly targets had an effect on the provision of training. In the last few days of the month the amount of training would increase dramatically. A large part of a shift could be spent in a separate room going over sales techniques or other kinds of training. In some instances the trainees would spend part of the shift just playing games off of the call centre floor. This ensured that the workers who were most likely to make bad calls were kept off the phones, in a last ditch attempt for the supervisor to maintain their averages. The supervisors

would therefore act in their own economic interest – even if that involved disrupting the labour process – to achieve their own bonuses. Unsurprisingly there were no complaints from workers at getting these extended breaks.

5.5.1 *Power and sexism*

The power of the supervisors can be illustrated through the examples of sexism in the workplace. The workforce was predominantly young and the majority of workers were women. On a typical shift the composition was approximately 80% women, although this could change a little due to shift patterns. Half of the supervisors were men, along with almost all of the senior management. There was a culture of sexism on the call centre floor that was elaborated in this context. The topic of sex would often come up in discussions, with workers talking about whom they would sleep with and so on, similar to the conversations filmed in the call centre documentary. Having come from a university setting – in which sexism is most likely to the subject of discussion rather than the content – this was not surprising given how pervasive sexism is in contemporary society, but I was not expecting it in a formal work setting . This is certainly not to imply that the university is an environment free from sexism, but rather that many of the comments or behaviours would not be acceptable. In the call centre sexism took a more open form, rather than hidden sexual harassment, and operated in a different context. The examples in the call centre were of course different to the traditional shop-floor forms of macho sexism, but there was a prominence of the kind of 'raunch culture' objectification and misogyny from both men and women, similar to that detailed by Ariel Levy (2006).

The relationship between supervisors and workers could become overtly sexist in this context. One of the male supervisors would often make sexist comments about women who were working, which were mainly ignored by others in the call centre, to the point where it became normalised. Alongside the running commentary he would walk around the call centre and offer to massage the shoulders of some of the workers, while ignoring others. I had a discussion with one worker about it specifically on a break. She had told the supervisor that she did not want to be touched by him, nor did she want to be involved in any "banter." From then on the supervisor ignored her completely, not even offering sales advice. She said that she preferred this option as she could just get on with work. I spoke to other workers who said they would try and manipulate the supervisor so he would go easier on them and bend the rules while on the job. The response from most of the workers followed the second pattern: that there is nothing that can be done about it or that it is just to be expected.

The supervisors controlled the shifts and gaining preferential allocation could improve the experience of work, particularly for those workers with other commitments, studies, or second jobs. Any holiday allocation also had to be approved by supervisors. Although it was unpaid, not taking the required number of shifts in a week could result in losing the job, so being able to take unpaid holiday was important. The supervisors could also determine when a worker had to be on the phones or what time they could leave a shift. In addition to all of these methods of control, supervisors could ultimately fire workers on the spot with little justification necessary. Therefore in this context the supervisors held power over workers and were able to adopt certain behaviours that workers objected to. The lack of contestation over the 'frontier of control' (Goodrich 1975) with respect to the labour process also extended to the question of sexism. The concentration of power in the hands of the supervisors left the workers feeling relatively powerless. The option of refusal became less of a possibility, with the example of the worker who stood up to the supervisor remaining isolated. The widespread use of the notion of "banter" to defuse tensions and legitimate behaviour made challenging it very difficult. If someone objected to a supervisor's actions, it would be explained away as a "joke", and if the objection continued the fault would then lie with that person's failure to "get the joke" or to "play along."

The experience of sexism in the workplace was also found in *The Call Centre* documentary. The first example is Nev intervening in the personal life of one of his workers. Upon finding out that she is not happy due to a relationship ending Nev parades her around the office shouting: "any single blokes here? I've got a desperate female . . . any single blokes need a hug . . . want a date?" This behaviour by management is shocking to see, yet once the programme moves on to show the interview process it begins to make more sense. The ephemeral qualities needed for a good telesales worker means that it is a difficult task to choosing who to employ. In Nev case it seems to boil down assessing their "confidence." In practice this involved walking a woman up and down the sales floor while asking the other workers whether they would employ her. Nev explains it is also "to see if any of the boys fancy you", explicitly objectifying the woman. Therefore anyone who immediately opposes this kind of behaviour is not likely to get the job. After being employed critique is sidelined in the way discussed before, they must be failing to "get the joke."

5.5.2 *Disciplining of the body*

The dimension of sexism put additional pressure on workers to behave in way expected by the male supervisors. The extension of disciplinary control to the body also related to the labour

process directly, which may at first seem unlikely in a call centre. Foucault explains how disciplinary control:

> does not consist simply in teaching or imposing a series of particular gestures; it imposes the best relation between a gesture and the overall position of the body . . . good handwriting, for example, presupposes a gymnastics – a whole routine whose rigorous code invests the body in its entirety, from the points of the feet to the tip of the index finger.
>
> (Foucault 1991:152)

The physicality of the labour process in the call centre does not seem that important at first. However, throughout the training the physical dimensions of making a "good" phone call are constantly reiterated. Workers are not allowed to simply sit, slouched at the desk, to make calls. Instead the supervisors explain how an upright posture must be maintained all times, head lifted to project the voice. The voice itself must be modulated specifically throughout the script; again it is not simply a case of reading the words out loud. During the training a script is annotated with the required pace, what tone, where to pause, which words to emphasise, where to gather responses, with which questions to ask and how. It is regular mentioned how standing and gesticulating can add the ephemeral "good" quality to calls. Trainees are advised to observe the top sellers and emulate their delivery. The best results that I got during my time at the call centre involved a physical dimension. I developed a routine: constantly standing, ensuring that my body was moving, gesturing as if addressing someone in person, with specific movements and exaggerated facial expressions.

The affective dimension of the labour process proves problematic for managing a call centre. This aspect is unlike the finished commodity appearing at the end of a Fordist production line. No two interactions on the phone are ever the same; no one strategy will ensure a sale in each encounter. The use of emotion and humour are specifically subjective and receive different responses. Thus, discipline over the labour process is a difficult thing to achieve. It starts from the scripting, something that happens away from the call centre floor, often shrouded in mystery and not to be questioned. The script provides the skeleton of the conversation which must be fleshed out with different affects. The disciplinary role of the supervisor is to apply the 'principle of a theoretically ever-growing use of time: exhaustion rather than use, it is a question of extracting, from time, ever more available moments and, from each moment, ever more useful forces' (Foucault 1991:154). In the context of successful sales calls this means attempting to combine both quantitative and qualitative objectives.

The "buzz session" provides a valuable example of how supervisors attempt to motivate workers in call centres. Each shift begins by gathering together all workers for a motivational

session. Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming evoke a familiar scene from their own ethnographic research in a call centre:

> On a chilly Monday morning a group of twelve call center workers feel a twinge of anxiety as they leave their "call-pods" and file into a large meeting room. The firm – let us call it "Sunray Customer Service" – are well informed about the alienating nature of labor, especially when it comes to the mind numbing, depressing and frequently humiliating job of a call center slave. But Sunray management had a clever idea. Knowing that it was only when its workers had checked-out (either literally or mentally) that they begin to feel human again and buzz with life; knowing, also, that call center work requires high levels of social intelligence, innovation and emotional initiative; knowing all these things, Sunray had to find a way of capturing and replicating that buzz of life . . . on the job.

(Cederström & Fleming 2012:9)

The experience is very similar to the "buzz sessions" held at the call centre. The two trainers who led these sessions off always stressed how important it was to be in the right mood to sell. The problem for management is how you go about doing this. None of the workers *want* to be at work, as is common in these kinds of part time jobs. Most have other interests, passions, or things they would rather be doing. Cederström and Fleming (2012:10) argue that what is happening in the call centre is an attempt 'to *inject life into the dead-zone of work*.' This means a situation whereby management actively encourages workers to 'just be yourself!' Those characteristics which were discouraged in the Fordist workplaces of the past now become demanded: personality, tastes, quirks, and so on. This is because 'there is no better call center worker than the one who can improvise around the script', and this needs the worker to 'breathe life into a dead role and pretend their living death is in fact the apogee of life.'

The "buzz sessions" involved a number of staged fun activities. A common game involved the trainer using an iPhone app. The app was a form of charades: one person holds the phone up to their forehead and points it to a group of people. It displays whatever needs to be acted out, sung, or impersonated. It is much like charades except the iPhone records the attempts. This allows the trainers to replay the most embarrassing moments of the workers attempt to join in the organised entertainment. The other competitions – whether word games, general knowledge, or the scintillating company rule book quizzes – were only motivated on the basis of offering the possibility of leaving working slightly earlier if you win. There were a number of uncomfortable moments: singing happy birthday to an elderly grandma of one of the trainers, asking lots of questions about an individual's behaviour at a company night out, and so on. Cederström and Fleming capture an exceedingly excruciating moment:

> The workers looked at the floor anxiously, feigning smiles but knowing that something pretty awful was about to happen. They were told to form a circle as Carla – the "team development

leader" – prepared to deliver a pep-talk, which would have been funny if not for the sadistic glint in her eye. "As you all know, life at Sunray is more than just a job, it's all about fun and enjoying yourself, here you can really shine and be yourself!" The workers shifted nervously as she bleated on, "And it's all about color and fun . . . OK guys, lets do it!". "Oh Jesus" muttered one worker with blue hair and an anarchist tattoo on his wrist. Carla hit PLAY on her outdated CD player and we all began to sing Kermit the Frog's only Top-10 single: *Why are there, so many, songs about rainbows, what makes the world go round . . . someday we'll find it , the rainbow connection, the lovers, the dreamers and me . . .*

(Cederström & Fleming 2012:10)

While these kinds of encounters might seem unlikely and bizarre and perhaps seem 'remote from the large-scale shifts reshaping a waning late-capitalism' there is an interesting insight captured here. These attempts at enthusing workers are one of a number of 'novel forms of regulation' focused 'on those moments of life that once flourished beyond the remit of the corporation' (Cederström & Fleming 2012:11).

Management is concerned with more than just the workers participation in these activities. It is not enough simply to take part: the worker must take part in a particular way. Therefore while ostensibly it is about "fun" it also involves a 'coercive nature.' Failing to take part in a genuine way risks labelling as 'a party-pooper', which is 'the most serious crime you could commit, even worse than taking these exercises to the extreme' (Cederström & Fleming 2012:16). Thus the attempt by management to intensify the labour process of affective work involves new demands being put on workers. It is not enough to sell you labour-power – nor even to work hard during that time – you must also enjoy the process. The demand for authenticity puts additional pressures on workers, not only in the performance on the phone to customers, but also performing to the evaluative gaze of management. It is therefore possible to conceive of the labour process as disciplined by a number of different 'tactics.' These involve 'the art of constructing, with located bodies, coded activities and trained aptitudes, mechanisms in which the product of various forces is increased by their calculated combination' (Foucault 1991:167).

5.5.3 *The "1-2-1" meetings*

The supervisor's presence on the call centre floor was the main way in which they enacted their role. However once a week each worker is called into a "1-2-1" meeting with a supervisor for individual coaching. The performance sheet that had to be filled out was labelled as "1-2-1" which although that implies four people, there was in fact only two involved in the 1-to-1 meeting. In these meetings specific targets are agreed and the performance of the worker is dissected with various suggestions about how they can improve. Throughout my time at the

call centre I kept a record of the "1-2-1" meetings, often asking for a photocopy of the feedback form from the supervisor. Although the somewhat contradictory advice detailed in these meetings might suggest otherwise, these meetings were always conducted by the same supervisor.

The "1-2-1" meetings are structured around a feedback form on a single sheet of A4 paper divided into five sections. The first details the "Performance on targets / objectives" set in the last meeting with boxes to tick as appropriate. The second section lays out the "New targets / objectives." In addition to more tick boxes there is also a sentence reminding workers that failure to reach these targets can result in an HR disciplinary meeting. This section also includes space for the "SMART action plan", a mnemonic for setting specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound goals. However, this management device is instead used for positive and negative comments about the workers performance. The third section records "attendance / timekeeping", the fourth "training / development needs", and the fifth "behaviours / attitude", each with space for notes and any actions required. The form finishes with a box for the worker and the supervisor to sign, agreeing to the analysis and outcomes.

The first "1-2-1" meeting detailed my performance in vague terms. My SMART action plan stated:

> Does well to elaborate /expand on F+B. F+B uses first name well. Pace good, pauses decent. Natural and conversational. Add okays and greats after F+B. Add more energy in tone. Add emphasis on key words. Use assertive okays. Need a more assertive tone. Does well to take on feedback and apply. C&R stay assumptive, close and move on with script.

There was not much else on the feedback form other than ticks in boxes for various targets and one line explaining the need to "stay/sound confident, project voice!" Then all that was required was a signature to agree to my first performance review.

The advice given in the "1-2-1" meetings tended to be similar. The majority of the meeting is filled with a managerial demand for workers to auto-critique themselves, answering questions like: "how do you think you can improve? What more could you be doing? How else could you have approached that phone call?" The selection of SMART action plans show how this developed across meetings:

> Jamie has improved his script delivery. More natural and flowing, conversational. More assertive around DD page. Confidently C&R and close, advance C&R training will help.

A few weeks later my "1-2-1" stated:

> Stay assumptive when C&R'ing. Don't lose confidence (Hear this in his voice), Natural and conversational through SD. F+B use pauses in the right places = let cust digest info. Keep pace

steady and constant. Use a more reassuring / firm tone (take control). E.g. Use Okays! Greats and customer name.

And again a few weeks later:

Jamie has got off to a great start this week (well done and keep this up). Jamie needs to focus on improving his performance and keeping it constant. Aim for 4 more sales this week. Use training materials such as advance C&R and put this into practice. Stay confident when C&R'ing / close and stay positive. Sound more assertive, firm tone.

After these examples the "1-2-1" meetings started becoming less frequent. The next set of meetings that I had with the supervisor started when my performance stopped improving in the call centre. The feedback explained that:

Pauses are good, as is pace. Don't pause for too long, not allowing customer to interrupt, just let the script flow. Good use of positive words, don't over use positive words as it looses it purpose. Don't offer quote straight away, follow C&R procedure. Great use of okays. Do well to sell on F+B. Apply training, adv C&R. Change mentality, approach to selling on competition leads. Don't get defeated, objections will always come up, stay positive. Confidence.

The next week followed on a similar line:

Jamie can sometimes get defeated when doing C&R, closing, needs to have more belief and be more assertive, rather than saying it for the sake of it. Needs to start improving performance, Jamie gets close to his target, then gets defeated, keep up confidence.

These excerpts from the "1-2-1" feedback sheets highlight the difficulty that supervisors have in providing constructive feedback that can actually improve sales for workers. The encouragement to be "confident" or "assertive" is hard to disagree with, however there is little elaboration about what this actually means during a phone call.

The "Sales feedback sheet" is used by supervisors while they listen into calls. The sheet has ten areas required for "effective selling", each with a number of options that are either ticked if they are achieved during the call or underlined if not.

1. Call intro (alert, focused, not talking outside the call)
2. Script delivery (natural and conversational, using first name, pace, energy, pausing)
3. Confidence (assertive okays, assumptive tone)
4. Assertiveness (taking control, closing)
5. Rapport (use of rapport building)
6. Selling on Benefits (features to benefits, key word emphasis, sounding enthusiastic, pausing after benefits, positive words, okays)
7. TCF and compliance (not selling on cooling off period, offering quote on a second objection)
8. Timeliness (spending appropriate time on Free Offer (no longer than 6 mins), and pitch)
9. C&R (acknowledgement, dealt with specific objections, probed, closed after C&R)
10. Behaviours (positive use of language, positive body language, sitting up straight, and adapting to client)

There is also a space for additional comments, divided into positive and corrective. The feedback sheet, like the "1-2-1" meetings, are almost deliberately vague. The aim is not to encourage a particular method of selling or train a homogenous group of workers. The nature of the emotional labour deployed in the labour process is complex; what is valued are the unique characteristics, prizing qualities like "personality." Therefore these instruments encourage a kind of quasi-Maoist auto-critique, described earlier. Workers are asked to constantly repeat where they have gone wrong on the phones. This process shifts the emphasis onto the worker as active agent in every potential sale on the phone, removing the agency of the person receiving the sales call. Every call can be a sale, so long as the worker internalises the combination of self-help phrases and management buzz words constantly repeated by the supervisors.

5.6 *Foucault's Panopticon*

The demand for the worker to auto-critique themselves is an attempt to convince workers to internalise the demands of the labour process. It takes on an almost gratuitous aspect considering the number of ways in which workers are subjected to the management gaze. It is at this point it is worth returning to the notion of the 'electronic panopticon' that Fernie and Metcalf (1997:3) use, beginning with Foucault's notion specifically. For Foucault:

> the perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly. A central point would be both the source of light illuminating everything, and a locus of convergence for everything that must be known: a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned.
>
> (Foucault 1991:173)

This is the ideal type of surveillance found architectural form in Bentham's account. Yet this totalising notion of surveillance is not necessarily what the management imperative is attempting to achieve. As Foucault (1991:174) argues when discussing the panopticon in relation to production, 'the disciplinary gaze did, in fact, need relays.' Therefore, surveillance conceptualised as a 'pyramid was able to fulfil, more efficiently than the circle . . . it had to be broken down into smaller elements, but in order to increase its productive function: specify the surveillance and make it functional.' The question that requires attention is the function of surveillance in the call centre, rather than the general ability that the computerisation allows.

The role of surveillance at work developed alongside the changes in production. Foucault (1991:174) identifies how in 'the régimes of the manufactories' it 'had been carried out from the outside by inspectors, entrusted with the task of applying the regulations.' This method,

that once produced the kind of reports that Marx studied for the chapter on the working day, gave way to something else. The development of factories required:

> an intense, continuous supervision; it ran right through the labour process; it did not bear – or not only – on production (the nature and quantity of raw materials, the type of instruments used, the dimensions and quality of the products); it also took into account the activity of the men, their skill, the way they set about their tasks, their promptness, their zeal, their behaviour. But it was also different from the domestic supervision of the master present beside his workers and apprentices; for it was carried out by clerks, supervisors and foremen. As the machinery of production became larger and more complex, as the number of workers and the division of labour increased, supervision became ever more necessary and difficult. It became a special function, which had nevertheless to form an integral part of the production process, to run parallel to it throughout its entire length. A specialized personnel became indispensable, constantly present and distinct from workers.
>
> (Foucault 1991:174)

In this passage Foucault articulates a clear explanation of how imbedded the supervisory function becomes in the production process. The specific development in call centres therefore builds on a long history of integrating supervision directly into the productive process and into the machinery itself.

The notion of the panopticon continues this integration of supervision and production to a new level. Foucault argued that the major effect of the panopticon was:

> to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short. That the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.
>
> (Foucault 1991:201)

But is it possible to apply this architectural model for a prison into the context of the workplace filled with doubly-free workers? Management in the call centre is certainly able to subject workers to an audio, visual, and even computational 'field of visibility' that workers are aware of. It is made abundantly clear to workers that this is the case, but do they then 'assume responsibility for the constraints of power'; do they 'make them play spontaneously play upon' themselves; do they 'inscribe' upon themselves 'the power relation in which' they 'simultaneously play both role'; and ultimately 'become the principle of' their 'own subjection'? (Foucault 1991:203). This would paint a picture of an unchecked management power in which workers are left helpless, left with only the option of fleeing from the call centre – drawing on the only advantage their status as doubly-free workers has over indentured workers or prisoners. It is worth returning to the quote from McKinlay and Taylor

(1998:175), that 'the factory and the office are neither prison nor asylum, their social architectures never those of the total institution.'

In order to understand this further it is worth examining how these processes take place in particular examples. The role of surveillance is interrogated in R. Danielle Egan's (2006) study of an exotic dance club. The management in the club claim that surveillance plays the role of protecting dancers, however 'most surveillance cameras serve as a strategy for social control for owners and managers over dancers in clubs' (Egan 2006:204). In a situation where the workers are under a dual observation: both the (male) gaze of the customer and the supervisory gaze of the manager, the demand to internalise is powerful. In a description that draws on Foucault, Egan (2006:206) argues 'it is the oscillation of the gaze – in this sense, the lack of coordinates or its omniscience – that imposes the authority of the owner and management.' For the individual dancer it is not possible to know whether the 'camera is focusing on them and thus fear that the eye is always on them.' However this does not mean that there is no need for an observer as in this instance the management gaze is supported by 'occasional punishment', through the application of arbitrary fines based on deliberately vague rules (Egan 2006:210). The potential power of the panopticon mode of surveillance for controlling and intensifying the labour process of workers is clear. To be able to 'diffuse the locus of supervision from the individual who can not be everywhere at once to a roaming gaze that can capture subjects and analyze their movements in multiple places at once' would be the dream of factory foreman of the past (Egan 2006:205).

5.6.1 *The panopticon beyond the workplace*

The metaphor of the panopticon is able to shed light on the processes that take place in the call centre, but it can also be expanded out to consider contemporary society. Massimo De Angelis (2007:194) puts forward an intriguing comparison between 'a socially pervasive market order' – like that found in contemporary capitalism – that 'presents organisational and disciplinary characteristics that are similar to those of a prison, not just any prison', but 'the panopticon.' De Angelis (2007:194) remarks that some might 'find this comparison odd, if not paradoxical', but he continues to develop a valuable contribution. The comparison centres on the way in which both 'are two forms of the same thing . . . a disciplinary mechanism in which the individuals' freedom is limited to a choice from a given menu and they are prevented from defining the *context* of their interaction' (De Angelis 2007:195). The importance of this comparison is that it connects the management techniques in the call centre with the broader experience of neoliberal capitalism.

The first example that De Angelis (2007:204) uses is the 'principle of modularisation of the panopticon.' While the panopticon itself was conceived of as a physical building, it 'can be interfaced with the outside world through an administrative device, bookkeeping and the publication of accounts', something that is common for most organisations. This provides a way for signals to be read from outside and competition between different organisations. Moreover, De Angelis argues that:

> Bad management is demonstrated by loss of profit . . . the publication of the accounts is a way to increase the productivity of surveillance, its effectiveness, to maximise the panopticon principle. It is the means through which the disciplinary mechanism set in place can operate efficiently.
>
> (De Angelis 2007:205)

Therefore both the supervised and the supervisor become caught in a mechanism of surveillance. The panopticon and neoliberal capitalism both involve 'impersonal mechanisms of coordination of individual subjectivities that give form to social labour.' While Bentham found that the impersonal quality imbued the panopticon with the ability to inspect, Hayek's conception of the market emphasised 'abstract rules of conduct, which bind together private individuals so that there is no need for them to develop common aims' (De Angelis 2007:206). Similarly while the observation tower mediated between individuals, distributing punishments and rewards, for Hayek money and prices play a mediating role (De Angelis 2007:212).

The argument for extending the metaphor of the panopticon is not that the market is a panopticon, no more than the call centre is actually a panopticon. Instead, by drawing on the properties of the panopticon a better understanding can be developed of the processes that are taking place. This is how De Angelis' argument is constructed, following for Gilles Deleuze (1998:29) argument that the abstract formula of panopticism is 'no longer "to see without being seen" but *to impose a particular conduct on a particular multiplicity*.' This is developed further by De Angelis (2007:213), adding that, 'in such a way that the multiplicity is so immersed in this conduct that the latter becomes naturalised, and when there is naturalisation of conduct there is invisibility of the power behind it.' The articulation of this power through space is where the 'parallels with neoliberal economic globalisation' become' striking. De Angelis argues that neoliberal capitalism can be conceived of as:

> a system of interrelated virtual 'inspection house', which we may call the 'fractal panopticon' . . . each panopticon, that is each set of interrelationships of control and resistance defined by a scale of social action, is in turn a singularity within a series of singularities, which stands in relation to each other in such as way that their action constitutes a 'watchtower' that is external to them, thus forming a greater panopticon – and so on in, in a potentially infinite series.
>
> (De Angelis 2007:216)

The implication of this is important for understanding the dynamics of potential resistance. The supervised and the supervisors become subordinated to the abstracted logic of the panopticon. De Angelis (2007:220) argues that resistance must therefore go beyond just 'overcoming the "watchtower."' Instead,

> *The inspected must recognise themselves as part of the inspection force and posit new commons and new forms of co-production if they want to move beyond the systems of inspection and the endless production of scarcity it gives rise to*.

(De Angelis, 2007:220)

5.7 *Neoliberalism*

The changes that have been taking place since the crisis of capitalism in the 1970s are often broadly labelled as neoliberalism. In some examples this is understood as a break from the normal operation of capitalism – a move towards a more inhumane or unequal version. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey argues that:

> It is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.

(Harvey 2007:2)

These 'political economic practices' have risen to a position of hegemony since the 1970s. The result has been programmes of 'deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision.' The result of these forced 'neoliberal freedoms have, after all, not only restored power to a narrowly defined capitalist class. They have also produced immense concentrations of corporate power' (Harvey 2007:38).

What is important about Harvey's (2007) conception of neoliberalism is that it is about the *restoration* of class power. After all 'resistance to the "new" is not a cause that the left can or should rally around' (Fisher 2009:28). The neoliberals, in a sense, 'were more Leninist than the Leninists, using think-tanks as the intellectual vanguard to create the ideological climate in which capitalist realism could flourish' (Fisher 2009:29). The result was not simply to defeat the working class movements of the time, but also to drastically undermine the possibilities of new movements emerging. The attempt to overcome the 'chronic difficulty of overaccumulation since 1973' has therefore involved a project aiming at the 'privatization of everything' (Harvey 2003:149).

The restoration of class power involved sustained attacks on freedom. As Harvey (2003:157) argues, 'financial power could be used to discipline working-class movements', and a devastating assault on the working class was waged, and is continuing to be waged today. Therefore the aggressive 'privatization' wrought by neoliberalism forms 'the cutting edge of accumulation by dispossession.' This process can be identified in the response to the 2008 financial crisis: widespread austerity programs that involve attacks on worker's wages and conditions, slashing of public spending, and the privatisation of public services like health and education.

The notion of freedoms under capitalism is complex. The word freedom has a number of meanings as is indicated by Marx:

> This worker must be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid of them, he is free of all the objects needed for the realization [*Verwirklichung*] of his labour-power.
>
> (Marx 1867:272)

These *freedoms* are exploited by capital rather than workers. To be *freed* from the ability to do anything other than sell your labour-power is hardly freedom in the conventional sense. This is exacerbated in a market economy as Karl Polanyi argued:

> the comfortable classes enjoy the freedom provided by leisure in security; they are naturally less anxious to extend freedom in society than those who for a lack of income must rest content with a minimum of it.
>
> (Polanyi 2002:262)

Thus the supposed freedom of a free market economy no more trickle down to the less well off than the benefits of capital accumulation are claimed to. Rowland Atkinson and John Flint (2004) found an increase of gated communities in the UK that indicates this polarisation. These new communities were comprised of expensive housing units physically separated from the surrounding area, often resembling fortresses and using surveillance technologies and private security to ensure they were 'defended.'

The technological aspect of these regimes of surveillance is important. The past few decades has seen a number of technological advances – and importantly drastic reductions in costs – that have increased the proliferation of devices that can enable widespread use. As Harvey (2005:3) argues neoliberalism 'requires technologies of information creation and capacities to accumulate, store, transfer, analyze, and use massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace.' These methods have been applied to other areas than capital accumulation, with a police force in the UK testing 'predictive policing, a mingling of

criminology, anthropology and mathematics designed to stop crimes before they take place' (Peachey 2013). It evokes images of the *Minority Report* (2002) style pre-crime, but with the 'pre-cogs' – gifted humans with pre-cognitive powers to see into the future – replaced with computer databases and complex algorithms.

The hegemonic rise of the free market has had deleterious effects on society. As Arestis and Sawyer (2005:201) argue this has involved the 'promotion (and almost the worship) of the private market over other modes of economic organisation.' The removal of anything 'perceived as barriers or obstacles to the operation of the market' gives an unrestrained character to its implementation. The defeat of really existing socialism – although by the 1970s this was already abundantly clear – gave strength to the acronym TINA, Margaret Thatcher's slogan that 'There Is No Alternative!' As Ricardo Antunes (2013:31) argues that 'with the defeat of the workers' struggle for the social control of production, the social, ideological and political bases on which to resume the process of capital-restructuring were secured.'

The rise of neoliberalism has involved new methods of capital accumulation being introduced. Antunes (2013:32) highlights the importance of 'flexible forms of accumulation, downsizing, forms of organisational management, technological advance, and alternative models to Taylorism/Fordism, particularly Toyotism, or the Japanese model.' These attempts to intensify the search for profitable outlets for capital accumulation required ideological consent as well as coercion. This involved a 'cult of *subjectivism* and extreme individualism above forms of solidarity and collective and social action' (Antunes 2013:33).

The defeat of really existing alternatives occurred alongside the defeat of possible alternatives. The changes in production that Antunes identifies had a significant impact on work:

> extensive deregulation of labour-rights, eliminated on a daily basis in all corners of the world that have industrial production and services; increase in the fragmentation of the working class, precarisation and subcontracting of the human force that labours; and destruction of class-unionism and its transformation into docile unionism, based on *partnership*.
>
> (Antunes 2013:37)

Thus the post-Thatcher context was one of deregulation of business, with a flourishing of new managerial techniques, while trade union rights were severely curtailed. The basic right to strike became one that was tied up in bureaucratic procedures that had to be followed to the letter, a long way from the shop floor vote. If the Conservative governments spearheaded the introduction of neoliberalism, New Labour and Tony Blair followed in their footsteps. The 'Third Way' represented an 'increasing divide between New Labour and the unions, which had had a central role in the *origin and historical development* of the party' (Antunes 2013:75). This can be seen clearly in the removal of clause four – which detailed the promise of

nationalisation – from the labour party constitution and refusal to repeal the anti-trade union laws after New Labour came to power.

It is this general context in which call centres developed. The deregulation of financial markets played a key role, particularly for insurance products like those being sold at *Trade Union Cover*. It is necessary therefore to consider how management and different techniques developed – especially without organised trade union resistance. The next part of this chapter will consider the broader changes in the workplace that have taken place.

5.8 *Changes in the contemporary workplace*

The process of restructuring that has taken place inside of companies has involved intensification of the labour process. Antunes (2013:34) uses Castillo's (1996) notion of '*organisational lyophilisation*' to understand this. The process – which refers to freeze-drying, a method to preserve perishable material – is used to 'characterise the elimination of living labour that occurs during process of productive restructuring.' For Antunes (2013:37) the focus of this restructuring is 'flexible accumulation', involving 'the introduction of labour-force management-techniques associated with the information-age, as well as the widespread introduction of computers into the productive process and into services.' These techniques involve a constant evaluation of workers performance with the aim of 'greatly reducing or eliminating both *unproductive labour*, which creates no value, as well as other equivalent forms.' Therefore the management gaze must penetrate into the labour process of individual workers, assessing their value to the company and deciding whether or not they are worth keeping on.

The introduction of new management methods have sought to intensify work in different ways. Carol Stephenson (1995) observed two examples of Japanese management techniques being introduced into British firms. The first involved the *Kaizen*-system (meaning the continual improvement). This involved 'incentives' for workers to 'make their own changes' (Stephenson 1995:220). Workers devise different ways to improve either the experience of work or the processes involved. These are evaluated by management and the best are then introduced. The successful suggestions have involved changes to the bus routes to work and even gone as far introduce measure that intensified their own labour process. The *Kaizen*-system can be understood as an attempt by management to gain both consent from the workforce and access to their knowledge of the labour process. Instead of dressing up in

disguise like the *Undercover Boss*, the process is explicitly detailed and offered out to any worker to participate.

The second example used by Stephenson (1995:233) is the just-in-time method of 'synchronised production.' The production line supplied another site on demand via a computer system. The specifications could be changed at short notice and products would be forward to the next site every fifteen minutes. The differing ways in which these management methods were implemented is summarised by Stephenson (1995:233) as a 'combination of Taylorist and post-Fordism practices.' Antunes (2013:64) argues that the use of the Toyotist model in the West, unlike in Japan, 'was *implemented and made feasible without the counterpart of "lifetime-employment".*'

There are a tranche of new management techniques that have more mixed origins than those borrowed from other modes of capital accumulation. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have argued in their study of management thought:

> Capitalism cannot find any resources within itself with which to justify grounds for commitment . . . to maintain its powers of attraction, capitalism therefore has to draw upon resources external to it, beliefs which, at a given moment in time, possess considerable powers of persuasion, striking ideologies, even when they are hostile to it.
>
> (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007:20)

There is a capacity for management thinking to absorb criticism and subvert it to encourage consent in the process of capital accumulation. The adoption of phrases about the alienation of work that would be more common in critical theory is a somewhat surreal moment, yet it makes the thoroughgoing critique of contemporary work even more crucial.

There are a 'new wave of managerial motivation techniques' that have 'gleaned' insights from the 'growing industry of self-help and new-age spirituality.' What can now be called 'liberation management' starts from the position that 'no one can exploit workers better than workers themselves' (Cederström & Fleming 2012:4). It does not take as a starting point the fear of absenteeism that was present for the managers of Fordist workplaces. The binary of present or absent is no longer so clear. The belief of management in factories – especially of Taylorism – was of an inevitability of soldiering, of slowing down production. However the demands of new forms of work and management is a development of this even further, for 'every fiber of your organism to always be switched on, the enemy of production is what human resource managers like to call *presenteeism*: being present only in body with every other part of you being far, far away' (Cederström & Fleming 2012:7).

The danger of '*presenteeism*' is easily apparent with affective forms of service work. The experience is understood by 'even a child' that 'knows that the smile and "have a great day" from a customer-service-worker is fundamentally creepy.' This is similar to what Tinwell *et al.* (2011:1) have identified as 'The Uncanny Valley' in the simulated experience of emotion by robots or computers. As technology increases in sophistication there is a risk of falling into 'The Uncanny Valley.' The 'phenomenon implies that virtual characters approaching full human-likeness will evoke a negative reaction from the viewer, due to aspects of the character's appearance and behavior differing from the human norm' (Tinwell *et al.* 2011:1). The ability to fool people into believing that an emotion is real is a difficult challenge. The same is true in part for people expressing fake emotions, not only can the emotion itself be called into question, but it also creates a negative experience on the part of the recipient.

Affective work therefore imposes demands on the delivery and maintenance of packages of affects. This 'emotional administration' brings with it new forms of supervisions and control. Cederström and Fleming argue that a worker:

> can no longer happily blend into the anonymous throng of dark suits or blissfully disappear into an indistinguishable mass of factory workers. With the rise of what could only be called *exposure capitalism*, everything about us is suddenly on display – to be seen, to be judged.
>
> (Cederström & Fleming 2012:38)

The supervision is no longer limited to where, how, and what we do on a task, or how long it takes. It reaches into an emotional level: is the worker showing that the correct emotions? Are they genuinely feeling those emotions? This introspection shifts the balance of power in the workplace: it is not the boring tasks to be completed in poor conditions, the fault lies instead with worker for failing to expose genuine emotions. This therapeutic element is present in meetings with supervisors or managers and ties into 'the widespread popularity of therapy (in all its forms, from counselling and yoga to self-help DVDs and life coaching)' attempt to displace the antagonism of work (Cederström & Fleming 2012:38).

This mode of management can be found in *Office Space* (1999). The protagonist works in bland office, consigned to an individual cubicle. His job involves updating bank software to ensure compliance with the new date format after 1999 and suffice to say he is not satisfied with his work. The worker is harassed by eight different managers for forgetting to put a new coversheet on one of his reports. To each one of the managers he admits his mistake and they remind him of the memo and the necessity of coversheets. Although Mark Fisher (2009:40) uses the example in *Capitalist Realism*, he does not include some of the other interesting illustrative points from the film. The plot involves the worker being hypnotised – and at the sudden death of the hypnotherapist – is no longer worried about work and free to express

himself. This gives the impression that it would take something monumental to resist or even refuse work, but it does raise an important critique. It involves a tirade against the pointless non-work of memos about bureaucratic procedures which results in the worker being promoted by a consultant for his unintentional straight-talking business sense. The worker explains:

> Yeah, I just stare at my desk; but it looks like I'm working. I do that for probably another hour after lunch, too. I'd say in a given week I probably only do about fifteen minutes of real, actual, work.

(*Office Space* 1999)

The style of management continues as the office workers leave for a coffee break. At the chain restaurant they meet a new character who is also harassed by her boss. The company regulations state that a worker must wear fifteen pieces of 'flair', additional items on their uniform that show their personality. She is taken aside by the manager and asked why she is only wearing fifteen pieces of 'flair'. She asks if this is a problem and the manager replies:

> Now, you know it's up to you whether or not you want to just do the bare minimum. Or... well, like Brian, for example, has thirty seven pieces of flair, okay. And a terrific smile . . . People can get a cheeseburger anywhere, okay? They come to Chotchkie's for the atmosphere and the attitude. Okay? That's what the flair's about. It's about fun.

(*Office Space* 1999)

In this encounter the demand for 'flair' does not seem to be very fun. As Fisher (2009:40) rightly argues the demand is 'a handy illustration of the way in which "creativity" and "self-expression" have become intrinsic to labor' and moreover how there are now 'affective, as well as productive demands on workers.' For management it is difficult to observe and measure how creative a workers self-expression is, resulting in the 'attempt to crudely quantify these affective contributions.'

5.9 *Conclusion*

This chapter has sought to examine the role of management in the call centre. It started with an unusual insight into the perspective of management from meeting an undercover consultant during the training, reminiscent of the *Undercover Boss*. This highlights important questions of the politics of knowledge and how management seek a better understanding in order to intensify the labour process and reduce the possibility of soldiering. These two aims stem from the indeterminacy of labour power; the act of buying labour power does not guarantee it will be used to the extent management want. The chapter considered the different ways in which management can achieve control and focussed particularly on the role

of technology. In a call centre the application of technological methods of surveillance and control is expedited by the integration of the telephone and computer. This poses the question of workers control in new terms: what would a non-capitalist call centre look like? This signals the importance of the refusal of work which will be discussed in the following chapter.

The next part of the chapter focused on the analogy of the Panopticon. Starting with Bentham it considered the similarities and differences with *Trade Union Cover* and used it to elaborate points from the ethnography, particularly related to surveillance and punishment as spectacle. Foucault's contribution was discussed in terms of the Panopticon and discipline. In a similar way this allowed for further details of the ethnography relating to supervisors specifically to be interrogated. The example of sexism on the call centre highlighted the importance of power and the lack of contestation over the 'frontier of control' (Goodrich 1975). The examples of the "1-2-1" meetings I received in the call centre were analysed, with the conclusion that coaching is a far from straightforward activity, relying instead on workers internalising the demands. These sections allowed for a reconsideration of the usefulness of Foucault's contribution and the metaphor of the electronic Panopticon to shed light on the management techniques and behaviours in the call centre.

The chapter then moved to consider the metaphor of the Panopticon outside of the workplace. Drawing on De Angelis (2007) comparison of the Panopticon and the market the analysis extended out from the workplace to society and the broader changes that have taken place. This involved a discussion on neoliberalism and its implications, particularly related to the questions of freedom, surveillance, and control in society. The growth of call centres has to be understood as emerging in the context of new modes of accumulation and the defeats of trade unionism. This has led to changes in the workplace generally with new management techniques being developed and applied. The drive to reduce costs and increase efficiency requires management to seek a better understanding of the labour process, as seen in the example of the undercover consultant at the beginning of the chapter. This is harder to achieve in a workplace like a call centre with workers engaging in affective labour. It is no longer a question of being present or absent, nor even working hard, but the supervision reaches into the emotional level: is the worker actually feeling what they are supposed to? Ultimately surveillance is about power, as Sun-Tzu (2008:71) identified over two thousand years ago: 'know the enemy, know yourself, and victory is never in doubt, not in a hundred battles.' Thus this chapter has sought to understand how management power and surveillance has shaped not only the call centre floor but has become written into the technology also. The military analogy serves an additional purpose: this chapter has detailed the side of management, it is now necessary to focus on the opposite side.

The voice of the worker has been relatively silent in this chapter. The notion of power involved in the panopticon is one that is exercised on the body and mind, and the possibility that the 'effect is to infiltrate the mind or soul so as to constitute us as "subjects" who discipline ourselves' (Knights 1990:320). Therefore workers 'subjectivity is understood as a product of disciplinary mechanisms, techniques of surveillance and power-knowledge strategies: human freedom is constituted through their mediation of subjectivity" (Knights and Willmott 1989:554). This position has led to arguments that the individualising strategies of management have been able to eradicate the possibilities of resistance. What is common in these studies is that 'management is triumphant, and it is suggested that discipline has replaced conflict, when seductive discourses make workers the captives of organizational values' (Mulholland 2004:711). Call centres have become emblematic of new methods of surveillance. The example of an electronic Panopticon maps easily onto the workplace and is borne out in the discourse of management. However, as Taylor and Bain (1999:109) argue, the innovations in call centres 'represents an unprecedented level of *attempted* control which must be considered a novel departure' (Taylor & Bain 1999:109).

It is not the case that the management techniques succeed in their totalising aims, because the 'control mechanisms embodied significant levels of managerial coercion and therefore attracted varying levels of resistance' (van den Broek 2004). The traditional of industrial sociology has previously been able to focus on worker resistance. It 'has been able to uncover the variety of workplace resistance and misbehaviour that lies beneath the surface of the formal and consensual.' This legacy, as Thompson and Ackroyd (1995:615) argue 'is in danger of being lost as labour is taken out of the process and replaced by management as the active and successful agency.' The challenge that Thompson and Ackroyd (1995:629) pose, which remains relevant today, is to fight against 'the removal of workers from the academic gaze.' This is the challenge that will be taken up in the next two chapters.

Chapter 6

Resistance

The focus of this chapter is resistance in the call centre. The aim is not to view worker's resistance through the supervisory gaze of management from the previous chapter. Instead, the starting point is the fundamental contradiction of capitalism: the dialectical struggle between labour and capital. This requires an analysis that is sensitive to the varied forms of resistance that can take place. The shift in the gaze requires a rejection of the notion of resistance as pathology and the move towards an active inquiry that seeks to uncover it. As Gigi Roggero has argued – to paraphrase – 'if you put on your glasses and cannot see workers struggle, perhaps it is not that there is no struggle, but that you need a new pair of glasses'[7].

The visual analogy of the gaze is useful for conceptualising the difficulties in discussing workplace resistance. Tim Strangleman (2004:187) has discussed the ways in which sociologists – in particular in the *Work, Employment, and Society* journal – have 'seen' work. He highlights how Nick Hedges and Huw Beynon's (1982:7) *Born to Work* combined photographs and text to try and reveal the workplace, or as they put it, to 'seek out the scene of the crime.' The other example that Strangleman uses is Bolton, Pole, and Mizen's (2001) research on child workers. They gave disposable cameras to child workers who documented their own experiences of work, providing a window into a world that is usually hidden from sight. While the chapter that follows will present the argument through text, these new ways of *seeing* work and resistance present an important illustrative point.

The aim of this chapter is to cast an analytical gaze over the call centre that was the site for the research. The visual analogy illustrates the subtlety and nuance that is necessary to uncover something that is deliberately hidden, often directly in response to the pervasive gaze of management. My position as an undercover researcher provided the opportunity to see the interactions of workers and management at the level of the individual workplace, not only as a passive observer, but also as an active participant. It is an attempt, in the words of Thompson and Ackroyd (1995:629), to 'put labour back in, by doing theory and research in such a way that it is possible to "see" resistance and misbehaviour, and recognise that innovatory employee practices and informal organisation will continue to subvert managerial regimes.'

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[7] Gigi Roggero speaking at 'The Politics of Workers' Inquiry Conference' at University of Essex in 2013 organised by Ephemera. See: http://www.ephemerajournal.org/events/politics-workers-inquiry

The first part of this chapter will discuss what forms resistance can take and address the problem of it being deliberately hidden. To illustrate this point there is a discussion the history of slave resistance. The connection between slavery and development of management techniques that was discussed in the previous chapter will be revisited in this context. This is not to equate the struggle of slaves to doubly free workers, but to draw out a number of conceptual points. In particular this section will focus on the different forms of resistance, from strikes to misbehaviour. The next section looks at the specificity of the labour process and resistance. The examples of the airline attendants smile strikes and the subversion of call centre technology are examined alongside an example of precarious workers strike in Italy.

The second part of the chapter develops Kate Mulholland (2004) research at an Irish call centre. It takes her identification of the 'repertoire of resistance strategies' used by call centre workers, described as '*Slammin' Scammin' Smokin' an' Leavin*' – or 'cheating, work avoidance, absence and resignation' (Mulholland 2004:713). This is used as a framework to discuss the different instances of resistances that were found in the ethnographic research in the call centre. This section also considers the challenges of finding or participating in resistance as an undercover researcher. The next section attempts to understand the different moments through the notion of the refusal of work used by the *Operaismo*. This leads to an understanding of the problem of turnover as indicative of a refusal and is elaborated through David Graeber's (2013) categorisation of 'bullshit jobs'. This is developed further by looking at the anti-work tradition, considering the connections between Paul Lafargue, Marx, C.L.R. James, the *Operaismo*, and the history of slavery. The chapter continues the previous discussion of the connections between Taylorism/Fordism and slavery and considers its implications for post-Fordism. The final part of the chapter discusses the attempts to organise in the call centre drawing on a number of ethnographic examples.

6.1 *What is resistance?*

In order to be able to "see" resistance in the workplace it is necessary to consider what could constitute resistance, while simultaneously remaining attentive to new or emergent forms. The archetypal form of resistance is the suspension of the labour process through the withdrawal of labour: the strike. While this is the form of resistance often viewed as the signal of class conflict in the workplace, it does not cover the wide range and variety of different forms that can emerge. The difficulty in finding open acts of resistance is no accident. In a study of 'lifelong indentured servants' Edward B. Harper found that:

servants most characteristically expressed discontent about their relationship with their master by performing their work carelessly and inefficiently. They could intentionally or unconsciously feign illness, ignorance, or incompetence, driving their masters to distraction. Even though the master could retaliate by refusing to give his servant the extra fringe benefits, he was still obliged to maintain him at a subsistence level if he did not want to lose his investment completely. *This method of passive resistance, provided it was not expressed as open defiance, was nearly unbeatable*.

<div align="right">(Harper 1968:48-49 quoted in Hodson 1995:79)</div>

The forms of resistance chosen by indentured servants were necessarily covert due to the surveillance of the master. In a study of peasant resistance James C. Scott (1987:33) found that 'open insubordination in almost any context will provoke a more rapid and ferocious response than an insubordination that may be as pervasive but never ventures to contest the formal definitions of hierarchy or power.' Therefore peasants engaged in 'everyday' forms of resistance, because, like 'most subordinate classes which, as a matter of sheer history, have had little prospect of improving their status, this form of resistance is the only option.'

There is a rich history of struggles by slaves and indentured workers. However, it is not limited to only to closed or passive acts. For example, Eugene Genovese (1976) details the different struggles in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Genovese argues:

the significance of the slave revolts in the United States lies neither in their frequency nor in their extent, but in their very existence as the ultimate manifestation of class war under the most unfavourable conditions. The resort to insurrection in the United States, especially when more than merely a violent outburst against vicious local conditions, provides a yardstick with which to measure the smoldering resentment of an enslaved people who normally had to find radically different forms of struggle.

<div align="right">(Genovese 1976:588)</div>

The strength of this argument is that it does not minimise the agency of slaves, overemphasise their structural weaknesses, nor does it write-off the possibility of open resistance. In particular Genovese (1976:595) poses the question: 'what could the slaves have accomplished if they had totally lacked an insurrectionary spirit and if their masters had had no fears of getting their throats cut?' This question forces a consideration of how in control are still affected by the threat of open conflict, even if the actual number of examples are limited. The changes in behaviour can be identified in 'the panic of the slaveholders at the slightest hint of slave insurrection' which 'revealed what lay beneath their endless self-congratulations over the supposed docility, contentment, and loyalty of their slaves' (Genovese 1976:595).

The connection between slavery and modern capitalism is often downplayed and seen as an aberration consigned to the past. Eric Williams (1994) argued that slavery was incredibly important to Britain's industrial development and considered how racism developed from

slavery, rather than slavery being the result of racism. David R. Roediger introduces an argument from George Rawick – who was involved in the Johnson-Forest Tendency – that:

> Racism grew so strongly among the Anglo-American bourgeoisie during the years America was colonized because blackness came to symbolize that which the accumulating capitalist had given up, but still longed for. Increasingly adopting an ethos that attacked holidays, spurned contact with nature, saved time, bridled sexuality, separated work from the rest of life and postponed gratification, profit minded Englishmen and Americans cast Blacks as their former selves. Racism, according to Rawick, served to justify slavery but also did more than that.
>
> (Roediger 2007:95)

This interesting claim suggests that the legacy of slavery had an impact in the introduction of management techniques and the formation of the working class in the U.S. David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch draw on American labour historian John R. Commons's:

> striking connection of the cutting edge of management with the bloody history of race contrasts sharply with the bloodless efficiency of stopwatches and assembly lines that dominates histories of U.S. managerial contributions to history.
>
> (Roediger & Esch 2012:6)

In their book Roediger and Esch (2012:21,141) detail how slave owners organised a large number of publications on the 'management of slaves', some of which had wide circulation. They found that a 'deeply embedded connection of management to racial brutality and to hubris regarding racial knowledge had matured in slavery, settlement, and empire.'

The reason it is important to connect the history of struggles of slaves and indentured workers to today is to understand the development of resistance. It is not to say that slavery and indentured labour no longer exist; the International Labour Organisation estimates that 20.9 million men, women, and children are currently in slavery (see: "What Is Modern Slavery" n.d.). During Trans-Atlantic slavery different management techniques were tested and developed, laying the groundwork for Taylorism. Many of these techniques were used in responses to the open and closed struggles of slaves. An understanding of this history – the struggle between exploited and exploiter – provides an insight into the dynamics that drive capitalism. Throughout this process management may attempt total control, but this is something which has yet to be achieved.

There are – of course – important differences between slaves and doubly-free workers. To draw comparisons between the development of different tendencies in management control and resistance is in no way to suggest equivalency. Karl Marx (1867:272) ironically defined workers as doubly-free under capitalism as they are free in two senses: they are free to choose who to sell their labour to and additionally *freed* from the ownership of capital or means of production. Marcel van der Linden (2008:137) discusses the forms of resistance used by doubly

free workers and slaves, identifying how 'subaltern workers may resort to a wide range of strategies' and provides a vast range of examples (van der Linden 2008:137). In particular he highlights how 'a very important form of struggle used by all categories of subaltern workers is the *strike.*' The definition that Marcel van der Linden (2008:179) deploys is useful, arguing that 'in a sense, a strike means a collective exit – not with the intention of leaving for good, but to exert pressure temporarily. The transition between "running away" and "fighting for better working conditions" is in reality rather fluid.'

Resistance in the workplace is not limited to strike action and it is necessary to broaden out of the notion of what constitutes it. Randy Hodson (1995:80) provides a useful definition of worker resistance, that 'any individual or small-group act intended to mitigate claims by management on workers or to advance workers' claims against management.' This evokes what Richard Hyman (1975:26) – drawing on the work of Goodrich (1975) – calls the 'invisible frontier of control' that exists in a workplace, 'a frontier which is defined and redefined in a *continuous* process of pressure and counter-pressure.' This situates resistance as a result of the dialectic of struggle between labour and capital inside the labour process. It therefore includes sabotage (Jermier 1988) or the more general acts that Edwards and Scullion (1982:154) categorise as 'the withdrawal of cooperation.'

Harry Braverman's (1999) analysis in *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism* is 'commonly accused of offering a sobering portrait of capital's subjugation of labour, but no analysis of how and when the latter responds' (Brophy 2010:475). However, there is one evocative statement that signals a possible direction for developing this further, Braverman argues:

> the hostility of workers to the degenerated forms of work which are forced upon them continues as a subterranean stream that makes its way to the surface when employment conditions permit, or when the capitalist drive for a greater intensity of labor oversteps the bounds of physical and mental capacity. It renews itself in new generations, expresses itself in the unbounded cynicism   and revulsion which large numbers of workers feel about their work, and comes to the fore repeatedly as a social issue demanding solution.
>
> (Braverman 1999:104)

Braverman discusses the way in which the labour process creates resistance even if this is not obviously apparent. The notion of resistance continuing as 'a subterranean stream' bubbling under the surface captures an important dynamic. The problem is that there is no divining stick that can guide the search for resistance below the surface. In this sense, Frederick Taylor, the subject of Braverman's critique, recognised the risk of resistance emerging during the labour process. Unsurprisingly, Taylor's perspective is quite different:

> Now one of the very first requirements for a man who is fit to handle a pig iron as a regular occupation is that he shall be so stupid and so phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his

mental make-up the ox than any other type. The man who is mentally alert and intelligent is for this very reason entirely unsuited to what would, for him, be the grinding monotony of work of this character. Therefore the workman who is best suited to handling the pig iron is unable to understand the real science of doing this class of work. He is so stupid that the word "percentage" has no meaning to him, and he must consequently be trained by a man more intelligent than himself into the habit of working in accordance with the laws of this science before he can be successful.

(F. Taylor 1967:41)

The importance of this passage by Taylor is the importance of his belief in the prevalence of 'soldiering' – the slowing down of work – on the part of workers. It also highlights his clear disdain for workers, drawing on similar terminology developed by slaveholders to categorise the suitability of slaves for certain tasks based on racialised stereotypes.

The limitation of work was a focus for Taylorism and the studying and collecting information about the labour process seen as key to combating it. There were a number of studies that sought to understand the phenomenon of 'soldiering' in industrial work. For example, with the research of Melville Dalton (1948), Donald Roy (1952, 1954), Tom Lupton (1963), and Sheila Cunnison (1966). These studies found that 'the nature and extent of the adaptation of operative to the methods of scientific management' and in particular to discover the 'economic rationality of the response of workers to industrial regimes' in terms of their pace of work. 'Soldiering' is only one of the ways in which the labour process can be limited by workers. Both time and products can be 're-appropriated' by workers which lead to new forms of resistance (Thompson & Ackroyd 1995:616).

The labour process tradition developed the analysis to examine the dialectic of control and resistance. This tradition, which can be found for example in the work of Friedman (1977), Edwards (1979), Burawoy (1979), and Edwards and Scullion (1982), locates worker resistance in the development of managerial strategies of control. If workers were not acting as 'fully conscious agents engaged in class struggle, in seeking to control, management did.' This notion of class struggle in the workplace, that occurs whether workers are actively fighting it or not is particularly useful. However, 'even the highly developed control-resistance model struggles to capture the full range of employee practices that we refer to as misbehaviour' (Thompson & Ackroyd 1995:617).

The additional behaviour covered by the notion of 'misbehaviour' broadens the scope of workplace resistance. Ackroyd and Thompson (1999:2) develop Sprouse's (1992:3) definition of misbehaviour as 'anything you do at work you are not supposed to do.' It can include a number of different 'work behaviours - such as incivility, sabotage, culture, humour, leadership or harassment' which 'for many workers who lack formal collective organisation . . . may

140

represent the most available forms of resistance and as such should be analysed as acts of resistance in their own right' (van den Broek & Dundon 2012:99). Rather than considering resistance and misbehaviour as separate categories they 'often overlap', as 'individual acts of mischief coalesce into collective forms of resistance.' However, misbehaviour can also provide workers with ways to deal with the pressure of the labour process, for example 'mischief' to '"get back" at management (or customers) or behaviours that allow workers to "get by" when confronted with the degradation of a mundane job' (van den Broek & Dundon 2012:102).

6.2 *The labour process and forms of resistance*

It is important to consider the connection between the specificities of the labour process of different jobs and how these can lead to new forms of resistance. An interesting example of this can be found with the 'Cathay Pacific Smile Strike.' The workers drew on the fact the company advertised its 'service with a smile' to engage in a specific form of work to rule. The works engaged in a 'smile strike', refusing to deploy the emotional labour described by Hochschild (2012) in her famous book. In addition to this the workers also threatened to 'stop providing meals, snacks and beverages like alcohol.' As Tsang Kwok-fung, the general secretary for the Cathay Pacific Airways Flight Attendants Union, remarked, 'we cannot smile because of the situation, because of how the company treats us' (Huffington Post Canada 2012).

This creative approach to resistance could also be developed for call centres. Refusing to participate in certain aspects of the call, the greeting for example, or refusing to 'smile down the phone' (Taylor & Bain 1999:103) could have a similar effect. Kate Mulholland (2004:709) provides a useful perspective for examining resistance further in her study of informal workplace collective attitudes and practices in an Irish call centre, building on Martinez Lucio and Stewart's (1997) concept of the collective worker. Mulholland (2004:709) argues 'that in subordinated work conditions, workers engage in a recipe of informal collective practices that are organically borne out of their daily work experiences.' Şafak Tartanoğlu (2014) found that workers' organisation in Turkish call centres was being built by subverting the labour process in new and creative ways. Activists collectively rang into inbound call centres in what they called a 'call attack' and spoke to workers about organising, reaching a large number at the same time. This would then be followed up with meetings, leafleting, and other traditional methods. The new use of the technology, originally designed to centralise and then maximise phone calls, also proved vulnerable to attempts at organising. Although this kind of tactic would not be possible in a predominantly outbound call centre, I did encounter a number of examples of trade unionists trying to subvert the call, which will be discussed later.

The nature of service work means that workers 'have immediate contact with the market and subsequently can act in ways that may have an adverse and immediate impact on profitability' (Mulholland 2004:713). This is especially true with emotional labour, which draws on workers personalities and emotions to extract additional profit. The ability of workers to perform this labour is a new skill, as detailed in previous chapters. Therefore while call centre workers are limited to the extent that they can only express their emotions over the telephone this makes the content of the phone call important to the profitability of the call centre. This presents 'workers with new opportunities to resist' (Mulholland 2004:716). It also presents management with new challenges in controlling this kind of labour. The scripting for sales call gives the impression of a standardised and regular call encounter, however in order to make sales there is a demand to go beyond this, which is not straightforward. The esoteric qualities of successful salespersons are hard to calculate or inculcate, therefore many managers 'see the potential in hiring "stars", "naturals" and "personalities", workers they assume have a flair for selling, who they insist will "add value" to the sales encounter' (Mulholland 2004:716).

Enda Brophy (2010:480) details the experience of 'Collettivo PrecariAtesia', a workers collective in Rome, formed in 2004 in one of the largest call centres in Europe. The workers were classified as 'freelancers' as 'they technically rented their workstations and were paid by the call, but management set their shifts at six hours a day, six days a week.' The workers were therefore not entitled to a range of contractual rights, including the right to unionise, to strike, holiday or sick pay, or even maternity leave. One worker described 'seeing women forced to work during their eighth month of pregnancy lest they lose their position.' The Collettivo began to organise in the call centre and used a kind of 'digital sabotage.' The workers hung up the phone 'at the two-minute and forty-second mark when they received the greatest compensation for their calls', and called a number of strikes subverting their status as freelancers to leave work without the permission of management. The result of the campaign, which spread across different Italian call centres, was a reclassification of the workers as employees and compensation. However, as a result of the campaign every member of the Collettivo lost their job (Brophy 2010:481).

The example shows how there have been campaigns to organise in call centres, yet the results can differ. The response of trade unions to the new conditions and structures of work has been varied, with Russell (2008:206) suggesting that unionism in call centres is 'embryonic.' Existing trade unions have made attempts to adapt to organise in call centres, for example in Canada, discussed by Guard, Steedman, and Garcia-Orgales (2007), and Australia, detailed by Rainnie and Drummond (2006). There have been examples of successful unionisation, for example an

Austria where collective agreements cover all call centres, both in-house and outsourced (Holst 2008).

There is no shortage of potential grievances in call centres. As Enda Brophy (2010:471) points out 'working in a call centre tends to include a well established mix of low wages, high stress, precarious employment, rigid management, draining emotional labour and pervasive electronic surveillance.' It is possible to conceive of call centre work, as Brophy puts it:

> not as a humane departure from, but instead as the latest update of the Taylorist separation of conception and execution – for these workers, post-industrial society has become not Daniel Bell's dream, but Harry Braverman's nightmare.
>
> (Brophy 2010:474)

Therefore it is important to pose the question of what kinds of resistance and organisation is possible in this context that can try to overcome these conditions. They provide 'a vital testing ground for labour's ability to adapt and reorganize in a digital economy' (Brophy 2010:471).

6.3 *Moments of resistance*

Kate Mulholland's (2004) research at an Irish call centre reveals a pattern of workplace resistance. The call centre she studied is different in a number of regards to *Trade Union Cover*. Firstly, there was a trade union in the call centre that represented between a third and half of the workers, but did not have any collective agreements other than health and safety. Secondly, the forms of electronic supervision were not as developed and were therefore somewhat easier to circumvent. The 'repertoire of resistance strategies' used by the call centre workers is described as '*Slammin' Scammin' Smokin' an' Leavin*' – or 'cheating, work avoidance, absence and resignation.' These forms of resistance to the 'fragmented work and new management initiatives . . . reflect traditional patterns of work opposition' (Mulholland 2004:713). The framework that Mulholland provides is a useful starting point for discussing the different moments of resistance and the possibility for small victories in the call centre.

The first term used by Mulholland (2004:714) is '*Slammin'*,' which she describes as the process of faking a sales encounter. The workers 're-deploy "talk time" and the technology to fake sales thus highlighting how target driven productivity encourages them to search for short cuts.' She explains how the workers describe this 'with great amusement,' yet 'their terse references to "flogging myself for nothing" are illustrative of the deep resentment they share over effort.' This form of resistance was simply not possible at *Trade Union Cover*. Due to the financial regulations that apply to selling insurance each successful sales call was digitally

recorded and then scrutinised by the quality assurance team so fake calls would be easily detected. However, there was frequent discussion about the possible ways in which sales volumes could be boosted. The more outlandish involved considering getting friends to sign up to the insurance, selling to them to receive the sales bonus, then cancelling before the direct debit was due to be paid. The supervisors frequently reminded workers that this method of "selling on cancellation" – although the instance they were referring to was trying to dupe customers into buying the product over the phone as they could always change their mind later – would result in disciplinary action.

The second form of resistance is '*Scammin'*.' It refers to the various attempts by workers to avoid work, whether simply not turning up for work, pretending to be sick, or leaving early without permission (Mulholland 2004:718). There were various methods for avoiding work at the call centre. The shift structure was officially defined in strict terms: two slots of three and a half hours, each with a fifteen minute break, sandwiched around an hour long unpaid break. The exact amount of time that would be spent on the phone selling insurance was subject to a struggle between workers and supervisors. The supervisors tried to demand that workers should arrive fifteen minutes before their shift starts so that they would be ready for work despite the fact this was unpaid. There were then a number of other points of contention during the shift in which the length of time on the phone could be extended or reduced.

At the start of each three and a half hour shift there was a "buzz session" with the supervisors. As discussed previously, these played a motivational role as well as providing an opportunity for management to inculcate workers with the various rules of the workplace. The length of the "buzz session" was never officially defined and therefore it was at the discretion of the supervisors. This meant that as long as the games or discussion continued it could be stretched out. This involved a level of informal organisation as one individual worker could extend the session by asking more questions as the supervisors would catch on that they were trying to distract them and therefore cut the "buzz session" short. A successful extension involved a careful balancing act of feigning interest, posing questions, and stimulating discussion. Throughout my time at the call centre a collective approach emerged around this. Subtle cues would be exchanged under the gaze of the supervisors, a nod or raise of the eyebrows encouraging other to participate in the process. Although even the best attempts – which were then gleefully relayed to others in the smoking breaks – could delay the start of work by at the most forty-five minutes, it was viewed as a significant victory. The flexibility existed because supervisors also did not have to work on the call centre floor during this time, but ultimately they would be held responsible by their managers if the "buzz sessions" became too long.

The supervisors allowed workers to leave early from a shift if they reached their sales targets. This was viewed by most workers as the best incentive to work, rather than any of the small prizes or games that could be played. It was common to see workers haggling with supervisors trying to trade in vouchers or prizes to go home early instead. This highlights how little workers enjoyed working at the call centre as any opportunity to leave would be seized upon. During my time at the call centre the amount of workers leaving early reached a peak. The call centre manager organised a meeting with the supervisors to introduce new rules as the statistics showed that workers were only logged into the computers for 79% of their paid time. As one of the supervisors relayed to the workers this was "unacceptable" as "the company was paying loads of money per month for people to just sit at home." Which while workers considered a perfect situation, unsurprisingly management did not. The new rules stipulated that no worker could leave before the last thirty minutes of the shift. However, this incentive had proved so useful for motivating workers to sell that supervisors began to circumvent the new rule by taking people off the call centre floor for training in a separate room. The training involved playing games and was a reward, although they would have to stay on site they did not have to use the phones and could then leave thirty minutes early.

There was constant tension over length of the fifteen minute mid-shift breaks. At first glance it appeared there would be no ability to do this as the breaks were timed on each computer with a large counter displaying the time taken in minutes and seconds. Therefore it should have been possible for a supervisor to call up an individual worker's statistics and see if they have taken more than thirty minutes per day. However, the break-time setting on the computer was also used for 1-2-1 meetings with supervisors, training exercises, quality meetings after every sale, and so on. The task of supervising breaks was furthered complicated by the fact that not all workers could take the break at the same time. Unfortunately it was not possible to hang up mid-call when the break slot arrived, although often this was a temptation. This meant that workers began to file off the call centre floor gradually as the calls ended. The supervisors had to physically check the times on the individual computer screens to see if a worker was taking a longer break, walking up and down the rows.

The reliance on visual checking created the possibility for extending the break-times. In order to leave the call centre to smoke or join the smoker's conversations workers had to exit at the far side of the room. Upon returning, workers checked their computer screen to see the time remaining, and if away from the gaze of the supervisor could quickly log in and out, resetting the timer. Then workers moved to other side of the call centre where the break room was located. The supervisors would come into the break room to announce timers were almost up, which would be disputed by individuals saying that they had come onto the break late. Most of

the supervisors handled this badly, rather than formally disciplining workers they would get annoyed, a process that workers strung out to extend the break. The condition to this was not being caught with the break timer over fifteen minutes, which could result in formal disciplinary action. The final opportunity was to sit at the desk with the headset on and not log into the system until the supervisor cast their gaze along the row. This could extend the break, especially if they were busy corralling other workers into leaving the break room.

There was another moment that occasionally occurred during shifts. The computer system that distributed leads – the numbers for the autodialing system to call – would run dry. It required a supervisor to manually update the leads for each campaign. If the supervisor was not paying attention they would miss the error message popping up on callers screens. The screen displayed a counter stating that it would check automatically after two minutes or on demand. The message would not appear for every worker, just for a section who were on the same campaign. This unexpected break could be extended so long as each worker delayed telling the supervisor, but inform them as eventually, as they would notice either way. This collective misbehaviour involved similar cues to the "buzz session", glances and mouthing words across the call centre floor. Most workers would take the impromptu break and tell the supervisor after a rest and because it was generally frowned upon to report it straight away.

Throughout my time at the call centre there were more deliberate attempts at sabotage, although these remained covert and were rarely mentioned. The call centre had just enough headsets for callers on a typical day, so if any were to become damaged some callers could be moved off the call centre floor. The wires connecting the headsets to the phone were fairly brittle and with a little effort could be sabotaged, but this could have unforeseen effects. During one shift I started with a "1-2-1" meeting and came late onto the call centre floor. There were no spare headsets except a few with frayed cables that did not work correctly – which had been under the care of other workers. I incorrectly assumed that this would mean I would not have to make calls during the shift, but the supervisor forced me to make calls balancing the regular handset on my shoulder. Under the threat of losing a day's pay I continued to call, now feeling like a bad parody of a 1990s stock trader raising my voice to be heard.

While there have been attempts to use sabotage as a guiding theoretical principle for understanding workplace resistance, these have been of limited success. It can be found in the work of Geoff Brown (1977) and Pierre Dubois (1979). However, the problem is that by arguing that 'anything less than complete conformity sabotages the capitalist project of maximising profit', it elevates all kinds of minor actions to the level of major challenge to management

(Thompson & Ackroyd 1995:616). As can be seen from the example above, minor and hidden incidents of sabotage may well provide a release for workers frustrations, but they do not significantly undermine the project of surplus extraction in the call centre. The proliferation of computers in production has undoubtedly offered new opportunities for sabotage. Take for example, this incident quoted by Hodson, of:

> an overworked purchasing agent who maliciously ordered 2500 circuit boards and 1,000,000 batteries through a computer terminal. The circuit board manufacturer queried back because the boards were obsolete and no longer in production. However, "several lorry loads of batteries arrived at the site before the stores manager began making enquiries regarding the purpose and storage of this large supply of batteries".
>
> (Hodson 1995:92)

The prospect of destroying of a few call centre headsets look very minor in comparison.

There was one example of a worker who attempted a more extreme form of '*Scammin*" during work. He sat at his desk and would stretch out the time between calls, pretending to be taking notes about the calls. When a customer did pick up the phone he immediately hung up, albeit in the virtual form of clicking a button. One of the supervisors caught on to what he was doing because it was flagged in his records as an anomaly that he was not spending any time on calls. After reviewing his call statistics they were able to identify what he was doing and he was summarily fired mid-shift on the call centre floor. The supervisors immediately called all of the workers into the conference room for an emergency meeting. Over the period of at least half an hour the fired worker – despite having already left the workplace – was made an example of. This show of managerial force was used to illustrate how the rules must be abided to, how they would find out if workers tried anything similar, and that punishment would not be lenient.

The third form is a specific method of avoiding work by '*Smokin'*.' This provides workers with the 'opportunity for an extra break, regardless of whether people smoked or not,' interrupting managements schedule of work. Mulholland additionally found that:

> the habit of meeting is also important for it encourages work group identity and a shared sense of grievance when workers discuss training, staff shortage, disappointments over pay, prize giving, the excessive monitoring, arbitrary discipline and not least productivity pressures.
>
> (Mulholland 2004:719)

Therefore while smoking breaks may not at first seem that important, they act as 'informal meetings' with the potential to build collectivism on the basis of shared grievances, 'and as such are an antidote to individualizing strategies' (Mulholland 2004:720).There were two fifteen minute statutory breaks per shift at the call centre. Most workers left the building and stood around the corner, regardless of whether they smoked or not. These meetings provided

an opportunity to vent about the pressures of work away from the management gaze. The importance of these as moments of resistance was clear from the fact conversations would be cut short the moment a supervisor joined for their break.

The final form of resistance that Mulholland (2004:720) uses is quitting the job or '*leavin'*.' Like many call centres, the one studied by Mulholland had a high staff turnover, with around eight percent of the workers leaving each month. While '*leavin'*' might seem like the archetypal individual act it forms 'part of a more widespread pattern of work rejection.' This consideration of quitting the job as a form of unorganised resistance is key to understanding that call centres are not workplaces devoid of any form of struggle, despite their low levels of unionisation and officially sanctioned industrial action. Going back to the definition of strike action that Marcel van der Linden (2008:179) uses, the exit from work is not vastly dissimilar to a strike: the 'transition between "running away" and "fighting for better working conditions" is in reality rather fluid.' The key is workers seeing the potential to be able to change the conditions in the call centre.

The moments of resistance in the call centre present methodological challenges for an undercover researcher. Each of the moments was a departure from how supervisors wanted workers to behave in the call centre. All of the workers participated to some degree in these actions. Even though I was a researcher – and in that sense an outside in the workplace – I still needed to work and perform the labour process like the other workers. I engaged in the moments of resistance described above and therefore my presence involved an 'intervention.' Michael Burawoy (1998:14), as discussed earlier, argues that 'interventions' do not need to be minimised. They 'create perturbations that are not noise to be expurgated but music to be appreciated, transmitting the hidden secrets of the participant's world.' The involvement of all of the workers in a form of misbehaviour – whether on their own or collectively, formally or informally – meant that not taking part in these would be an intervention in itself. I would likely have been labelled as the opposite of a trouble maker, someone likely to make problems for the other workers by following all of the rules which might expose them. The negative reactions that people received when they reported to supervisors that leads had run out ensured they were more likely to engage in collective misbehaviour next time. If this was repeated – which was never the case in the call centre – presumably further social sanctions would be applied. In this sense there was a form of unstated collectivity that emerged in the workplace.

Failing to be accepted by the other workers would have created an access problem. It is unlikely that other workers would have shared their experiences or discussed topics of

resistance if they thought it would be reported to management, however that is not the only reason to engage in the different moments of resistance. As Taylor and Bain (1999:110) succinctly argue that in call centres: 'it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the labour process is intrinsically demanding, repetitive and, frequently, stressful.' The moments of resistance provide temporary respite from these characteristics of the labour process. The researcher-worker, like the other workers, is pushed by this dynamic into finding ways to ameliorate the situation. Therefore I engaged in a number of these moments, partly out of choice to experience the labour process in the way that my co-workers did, and partly due to the highly pressurised target driven environment. Roscigno and Hodson (2004:34) recognise this dynamic when they argue that 'rather than such resistance being solely an effort to regain dignity in the face of personal insult and conflict with managers, resistance in such settings may be as much a function of frustration, boredom, and personal stress resulting from organizational chaos.'

The defensive strand of resistance does pose problems for organisation. While 'telling the boss exactly what you think, or quitting, or finding small ways to mitigate the relentless pace of work can all be rewarding in the short run, these activities do little to challenge management's structural power in the call centre.' (Brophy 2010:477). However, the move towards activities that could form a challenge can start from these relatively minor actions. As Mulholland (2004:720) argues, while the attitude to trade unionism in the call centre she studied was generally positive, 'very few had a developed sense of how their actions could be further mobilized.' The path towards mounting successful workplace resistance has to build upon grievances, however minor they may appear. For example, issues like access to communal break space, repairing broken equipment, repealing a particular punitive management rule, all have the potential to build momentum and confidence. Mulholland argues that:

> Examples of this sort are a missed opportunity for the trade unions to take the initiative over what are conventional workplace issues, when the union has yet to transform this wellspring of conflict into an offensive against management.
>
> (Mulholland 2004:720)

6.4 *The refusal of work*

The forms of resistance that Mulholland (2004) identifies provide a framework to discuss the examples from the call centre. However, they also present a challenge of how they could relate to a potential organisational form. The insights from the *Operaismo* can shed some conceptual light on this. As Mario Tronti (1971:89) put in clear terms, 'we have to invert the problem', instead of starting with capital, 'change direction, and start from the beginning – and

149

the beginning is working-class struggle.' The problem with this approach is that there are not a wide variety of open struggles from which to draw conclusions. A potential remedy is directing attention onto the class composition of workers in the call centre. As Roggero argues, and was discussed earlier:

> Our challenge is to begin once again from the blockages experienced by the struggles of the precarious . . . to use *operaismo's* classic terms, the political composition of the class is crushed within the sociological mold of its technical composition.
>
> (Roggero 2011:23)

An important contribution of the *Operaismo* is this notion of class composition. It begins with a consideration of the technical composition – the organisation of the labour process, the use of technology, and the conditions of the reproduction of labour power. The political composition, on the other hand, leads to the specific forms and relations of struggles, a complex factor continually subjected to processes of re-composition. These 'blockages' are therefore the result of the technical composition of the working class at a particular point, preventing sustained struggles and giving the impression of calm in many workplaces. For example, the limitation of most trade union demands to the questions of wages can results in the abandonment of struggle over the labour process itself. By failing to contest control over the organisation of work by management, workers themselves are left in a difficult structural position. The drastic shift in the frontier of control in the workplace means that it no longer appears as something that can even be contested, leaving significant power in the hands of management. However, these blockages facing precarious workers are neither permanent nor immovable. In seeking to shift the blockages it is first necessary to understand the conditions of the workplace and the class composition at particular points.

A particularly important point to consider with precarious work is the question of turnover. High levels of turnover are a characteristic of the service industry and are particularly acute in call centres. This poses a significant obstacle to organisation as networks that are built rapidly fall away as existing people drop out. However, this can be re-conceptualised by considering Marcel van der Linden's (2008:179) argument that the 'transition between "running away" and "fighting for better working conditions" is in reality rather fluid.' Rather than considering workplaces with high turnover as un-organisable, the problem can be turned on its head. As Tronti argues:

> Obviously non-collaboration must be one of our starting points, and mass passivity at the level of production is the material fact from which we must begin. But at a certain point all this must be reversed into its opposite. When it comes to the point of saying "No", the refusal must become political; therefore active; therefore subjective; therefore organised. It must once again become   antagonism – this time at a higher level.
>
> (Tronti 1966)

150

The 'strategy of refusal' could begin from the moments of resistance discussed earlier in the chapter, whether it is calling in sick to work, leaving mid-shift, or simply not turning up to the workplace again. Therefore the first challenge is to find the moments of resistance that are already taking place, attempt to understand how they could be turned into a refusal, and seek out the organisational forms that can develop this further.

The strategy of refusal builds on the notion of the flight from work. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001:204) argue in *Empire*, 'the refusal of work and authority, or really the refusal of voluntary servitude, is the beginning of liberatory politics.' However they also add that 'the refusal in itself is empty.' They paraphrase Spinoza, that 'if we simply cut off the tyrannical head of the social body, we will be left with the deformed corpse of society.' Therefore the key to answering the puzzle of contemporary class struggle is not only identifying those moments of resistance but understanding the potential of these lines of flight from work.

This can be clarified by returning again to the empirical example. In the call centre there was a distinct lack of identification with the work. As described earlier, every worker had some alternative activity that they would prefer to be doing. There were aspiring actors, musicians, students of all kinds of varied fields, but none who described call centre work as their passion. The package of affects they had to use in the labour process bore no relation to what they wanted to be doing. The problem is that for the majority of workers who desire to do something more creative, most would struggle to support themselves in this pursuit alone. While the creative activities may produce value of different kinds, it is likely not to be that which will receive the remuneration necessary to reproduce their own labour power.

The specificity of call centre work makes it particularly susceptible to the refusal of work and kinds of sabotage. In the broadest sense work under contemporary capitalism can be categorised into three types. The first is work in which the demand for workers' control no longer makes sense. The call centre is an obvious example as it would be difficult to imagine why it could be brought under workers' control. This is because the development of the call centre has been tied closely to the use of methods of surveillance, speed up, and control. Rather than seizure of the means of production a more attractive option is to simply go and do something else.

The second kind of work is that which could be fulfilling and useful if it could be radically reorganised. An example of this is privatised care work. In the UK a large proportion of this kind of work is done on a highly casualised basis with low-pay, often organised on a regulated basis in which limits are put on how long workers may spend with each user. If this work could

be socialised and organised in a different way, it could have a significant impact on both workers and users. The third form is work in which workers retain a higher level of autonomy and the main aim would be to take control of the workplace and run it democratically. An example of this could be lecturers. In these two cases there are clearly differences in the resistance that emerges and could be successful. If there is an element of the work that is socially important, fulfilling, or indeed enjoyable, then it is worth staying and fighting. In these cases the flight from work does not take on the same importance. However, when work is stripped of these features almost entirely, then the refusal of work not only becomes a useful strategy, but it is also something that emerges from the labour process itself.

The development of capitalism and the application of technology to the productive process held the potential to drastically reduce the amount of time that people had to work. Yet David Graeber (2013) notes that John Maynard Keynes predicted in 1930 that by the end of the century the working week would be reduced to 15 hours. Not only did this fail to materialise, but the opposite now seems to be true. The potential of technology has instead been 'marshalled . . . to figure out ways to make us all work more.' This has entailed, Graeber (2013) argues, the creation of jobs that 'are, effective pointless.' The decline of manufacturing, at least in terms of the quantitative number of workers employed, could have fulfilled Keynes prediction, but Graeber argues that:

> rather than allowing a massive reduction of working hours to free the world's population to pursue their own projects, pleasures, visions, and ideas, we have seen the ballooning not even so much of the "service" sector as of the administrative sector, up to and including the creation of whole new industries like financial services or telemarketing, or the unprecedented expansion of sectors like corporate law, academic and health administration, human resources, and public relations. And these numbers do not even reflect on all those people whose job is to provide administrative, technical, or security support for these industries, or for that matter the whole host of ancillary industries (dog-washers, all-night pizza deliverymen) that only exist because everyone else is spending so much of their time working in all the other ones . . . These are what I propose to call "bullshit jobs."

> (Graeber 2013)

In this passage Graeber identifies an important problematic: what is the potential of struggle in workplaces that trap workers into doing tasks so far removed from what they want to do. Although assembly line work is repetitive and undoubtedly unappealing, the application of technology can vastly reduce the amount labour required and machinery can be put to work for a variety of different ends. There are a range of jobs, often low paid, that if they were to disappear the impact would be immediately felt: transport workers, nurses, or refuse collectors, for example. For those working in 'bullshit jobs' it is 'not entirely clear how humanity would suffer' were they to 'vanish. (Many suspect it might markedly improve.)' (Graeber 2013).

6.5 *Anti-work*

In the context of 'bullshit jobs' the rejection of work becomes an important tendency to understand. The theoretical basis of the anti-work perspective can be traced back to the Cuban Marxist Paul Lafargue. In a pamphlet, *The Right to Be Lazy* published in 1880, he argues that:

> the proletariat, the great class embracing all the producers of civilized nations, the class which in freeing itself will free humanity from servile toil and will make of the human animal a free being, – the proletariat, betraying its instincts, despising its historic mission, has let itself be perverted by the dogma of work. Rude and terrible has been its punishment. All its individual and social woes are born of its passion for work.
>
> (Lafargue 1883)

Lafargue asserts that the expansion of the possibilities of non-work is central to the radical transformation of society by the working class. This is not only the possibility of pursuing new creative endeavours; it even includes just being lazy. Christopher Taylor (2014:1) argues that Lafargue's 'radicalization of laziness had a precedent in Karl Marx's own writing', yet despite Lafargue being Marx's son-in-law, the perspective has had a limited impact on the development of Marxist thought. There has been a renewal of interest in autonomist Marxism and perspectives of anti-work, like that of Kathi Weeks (2011). Yet, Lafargue's 'critique of work is never put in relation to his Caribbean genealogy', furthermore 'This hesitation over slavery, I suggest, amounts to a symptom of disavowal, an attempt to exorcise the spectre of a Caribbean past that haunts the structures of rule and refusal constitutive of post-Fordist Empire' (C. Taylor 2014:2). Therefore, it is possible to connect the moments of resistance and the understanding of them as a refusal of work back to the histories of slavery discussed earlier in the chapter.

The flight from work described in *Empire* is explicitly associated by the authors as the product of French philosophy and Italian politics. This understanding, as Christopher Taylor (2014:3) argues, 'elide the connections between the development of radical Italian Marxism and the mid-twentieth-century work of C. L. R. James.' As detailed in the discussion of methodology in chapter three, the connections between the Johnson-Forest Tendency – of which James was a leading member – and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and later the *Operaismo* were important for the development of workers' inquiries. However, Christopher Taylor (2014:3) goes further arguing that 'this appearance of similitude, however, intimates a deeper history of material connections, one in which an expansive circuit of transnational interaction and epistemic exchange linked the Caribbean to the Mediterranean.'

The theoretical contributions made by C. L. R. James are important to consider further. The analysis undertaken by the Johnson-Forest Tendency in the USA owed much to James. His 'approach to capitalism in Detroit derived from transnational sources and histories; he explored capitalism in the global North with creole eyes, placing the Fordist factory and the Caribbean plantation into a coincident time and space' (C. Taylor 2014:4). The challenge posed by the James in the Johnson-Forest Tendency, in France by *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and later the *Operaismo* in Italy, was to launch a critique of orthodox Marxism. As discussed in the methodology chapter, for the first two this was a question relating to the class nature of Soviet Russia. For all three it also involved writing 'within and against an intellectual and institutional context in which Marxism was effectively redefined as a theory of distribution', a distortion of Stalinism stemming from the experience of state socialism. Work therefore became central and 'Soviet-style Marxism foreclosed any critique of work' (C. Taylor 2014:7).

The moment of workers' inquiry developed by James and the Johnson-Forest Tendency was an attempt to develop a thoroughgoing critique of contemporary work. Although the focus of their analysis was on Fordist workers in the USA, 'the theoretical roots . . . lay in James's explorations of slavery in the Atlantic world' (C. Taylor 2014:7). In *The Black Jacobins*, C. L. R. James focussed on the Haitian revolution because:

> The revolt is the only successful slave revolt in history, and the odds it had to overcome is evidence of the magnitude of the interests that were involved. The transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into people able to organize themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement.
>
> (James 2001:xviii)

The study emphasised the self-activity of slaves in an attempt to uncover the dynamics of struggle. This method was developed and applied in the context of Fordist factories in the USA. As Christopher Taylor (2014:7), argues – and it is definitely worth reiterating – 'while labor in a plantation society and labor in Fordist society are qualitatively different, the plantation and the factory are both constituted through an antagonistic dialectic, pitting a workforce striving for "universality" against the regime of labor in capitalism.' Thus the Johnson-Forest Tendency followed on from James's study, which 'opened a historiographical method and a political perspective that could be deployed to frame both the dynamics of both plantation *and* Fordist capitalism.' The search to uncover the subjects of revolt is therefore the search for those engaging in a refusal: the slave, the Fordist worker, those seeking to regain their autonomy.

The theoretical development of workers' inquiry from James's study of the Haitian revolution and application to workers in Fordist factories in Detroit is important, yet it leaves the question of what relevance this has to contemporary call centre workers. The connection between

slavery and Taylorism was asserted by Roediger and Esch (2012:141), as discussed earlier. Christopher Taylor (2014:11) starts from a similar basis arguing that 'plantation slavery and Fordist capitalism appeared comparable to James because the latter reinscribed, reasserted, and internationalized the composition of work that had obtained in plantation societies.' He expands this by applying it to 'the transition to post-Fordist empire', arguing that it 'marks a renewed intensification and generalization of plantation-era processes by which capital attempted to impose work—a generalization and intensification that is negated through its refusal' (C. Taylor 2014:11).

The opposition of the anti-work perspective to orthodox Marxism is a historical peculiarity. Marx studied the 'antagonistic social dynamics of postemancipation Jamaica' and 'would develop a robust antiwork perspective in the *Grundrisse*.' (C. Taylor 2014:14). While Negri's perspective was developed through a close reading of the *Grundrisse*, the figure of the slave remains absent in his anti-work politics. The passage from *Grundrisse* that Taylor identifies touches on a number of points:

> *The Times* of November 1857 contains an utterly delightful cry of outrage on the part of a West-Indian plantation owner. This advocate analyses with great moral indignation—as a plea for the re-introduction of Negro slavery—how the *Quashees* (the free blacks of Jamaica) content themselves with producing only what is strictly necessary for their own consumption, and, alongside this 'use value', regard loafing (indulgence and idleness) as the real luxury good; how they do not care a damn for the sugar and the fixed capital invested in the plantations, but rather observe the planters' impending bankruptcy with an ironic grin of malicious pleasure, and even exploit their acquired Christianity as an embellishment for this mood of malicious glee and indolence. They have ceased to be slaves, but not in order to become wage labourers, but, instead, self-sustaining peasants working for their own consumption. As far as they are concerned, capital does not exist as capital, because autonomous wealth as such can exist only either on the basis of *direct* forced labour, slavery, or *indirect* forced labour, wage labour. Wealth confronts direct forced labour not as capital, but rather as *relation of domination* [*Herrschaftsverhältnis*]; thus, the relation of domination is the only thing which is reproduced on this basis, for which wealth itself has value only as gratification, not as wealth itself, and which can therefore never create *general industriousness.*
>
> (Marx 1857:325-6)

The free slaves have become active the subjects of two refusals: refusing slavery and then refusing wage labour. Freed from the direct, forced exploitation of slavery they are unwilling to submit to indirect modes of exploitation. This experience in the Caribbean is the starting point for Marx's notion of anti-work, although it did not develop in the same way as either Lafargue or James. The anti-work perspective provides a critique that is not limited to the question of control of the labour process. In the context of Graeber's (2013) categorisation of 'bullshit jobs' it is possible, as Christopher Taylor (2014:17) argues, to go further than 'moralistic

invocations of labor's value' that 'appear grotesquely comical.' The potential that an 'Antiwork Marxism' holds is that it:

> encourages us to laugh at this moralism, to take it for the farcical tragedy that it is, and to imagine new forms of life. If we listen carefully, we can detect in this laughter—resounding through Marx, James, and Negri—the resonant echo of free blacks in Jamaica, laughing with "malicious glee" as the plantations around them crumbled.
>
> (C. Taylor 2014:17)

This perspective returns the focus to the activity of workers themselves. Instead of posing the question of resistance in the call centre as only a fight for small improvements to a job that is almost universally disliked, it also holds the potential to reassert a critique of work. This shifts the interpretation of workers in the call centre from a marginalised, only able to run away from the job, to active subjects refusing the current organisation of work.

6.6 *The attempt to organise in the workplace*

The refusal of work and anti-work politics provide an important framework for understand the potential tendencies of struggle in a workplace like a call centre. However, even the most erudite theoretical perspective still has to be translated into practice. The popularity of an anti-work politics has been severely hampered as 'unfortunately', Christopher Taylor (2014:14) points out 'we have allowed racist nineteenth-century ideologies to define both work and not-work.' The idea that the 'bullshit jobs' that David Graeber (2013) discusses could be rejected on an organised basis at this stage appears quite distant. The level of struggle in the call centre was restricted to the moments of resistance discussed earlier in the chapter. However, what these moments do show is an unorganised resistance expressing a refusal and the tendency towards anti-work. It can therefore be used to understand what kinds of strategies and tactics can develop from the experience of work itself.

The issue of moving beyond the sporadic everyday practices of resistance presents a series of problems. Burawoy (1998:14) continues on the subject of intervention to argue that 'institutions reveal much about themselves when under stress or in crisis, when they face the unexpected as well as the routine.' This kind of active intervention into a call centre was undertaken by the Kolinko (2002) inquiry. One of the explicit aims of Kolinko was to find and intervene in workers struggle. This draws on the best elements of the workers inquiry tradition in seeking to combine knowledge production with a form of organisation. The challenge for Kolinko (2002:23) was that they had trouble finding what they were looking for: 'the absence of open workers' struggles limited our own room for "movement".' They continue to argue:

'what is the point in leaflets and other kind of interventions at all if there is no workers' self-activity to refer to?' These difficulties do not result in a failed researcher project however. As Burawoy (1998:17) points out, 'the activist who seeks to transform the world can learn much from its obduracy.'

I had a number of isolated conversations with different workers at the call centre about organising collectively. The decision to move forward with a project of organisation was not one taken lightly. My position as a researcher entails a number of privileges. For example, because the call centre job was not my livelihood, nor was it somewhere I intended to be employed long-term, the impact of losing the job was significantly lessened. The act of discussing organising, let alone actually trying to organise, in a non-unionised workplace puts workers at risk of losing their jobs. This kind of intervention could have serious ramifications for other workers. It is therefore important to remember that the workplace is not a laboratory. Therefore, sensitivity was required in the approach, alongside recognition of the importance of workers actual self-activity.

It was an important aim for my inquiry to attempt to uncover the possibilities for resistance and organisation in the call centre. The nature of this particular call centre, and its relationship with trade unions had an ambivalent effect on the workers employed there. Although they had much more contact with trade unions than other precarious workplaces, the contact involved a service relationships rather than self-organisation. Throughout the time at the call centre there was only one other worker that I spoke to who had ever been a member of a trade union. I spoke regularly to him about the possibilities of organising in the call centre as we both travelled back to the same part of London on the tube. The discussions focused on the likelihood of getting sacked by the company, what kind of demands we would have, and the difficulties of getting other people on board. After a while these discussions began to move onto practical suggestions about organising in the call centre which will be detailed in this section.

It was difficult talking about trade unionism with other call centre workers. That did not mean that politics was absent from the workplace. For example, after the events in Woolwich (See: Jones, Quinn, & Urquhart 2013), anti-racism and anti-fascism became common point talking points during the breaks. There was interest in how people could oppose the English Defence League, and although no one had been on a demonstration before, there was a good discussion about going together to one in the future. The political interventions began to open up a space to discuss the possibilities for resistance but also to identify people to speak to further.

The reaction to the media coverage of Woolwich provided the starting point for further discussions. The majority of the workers were students or graduates and had a limited connection to the student movement of 2010. The political situation that most had grown up in was the wake of the Labour Party's invasion of Iraq, the financial crisis, MPs expenses scandals, and inner city riots. Neither trade unions nor the traditional avenues of social democracy were discussed as vehicles for change. This did not mean that there were not a wide variety of grievances. The topics discussed included: low wages, bullying supervisors, the cost of housing in London, extortionate landlords, overpriced transport, and student debt among others.

During a shift one of the trainees who started at the same time as me passed me a hand drawn cartoon of the 'undercover boss' consultant with a speech bubble saying 'you'll lose your job son!' This was the beginning of more serious discussions about how we could organise in the workplace. He stated that he did not care whether he lost his job and suggested that we could meet some other people in a pub after work. The first discussion away from the workplace – other than the smoking breaks – took place in a nearby pub. A group of us who worked the same shifts would go for a drink at the end of work. These became more political with discussions about what building a union would involve and why it was worth doing. One person in the group argued that the job wasn't really that bad, and after all "if it ain't broke don't fix it!" and "I'm worried about ruining the atmosphere in the office." The cartoonist argued that he had "always been in the union, you don't want to wait until it is too late." He elaborated that "the worst thing about work is when people are rude. When I was at [company] and in [the union] they wouldn't do it because of the union. To me, joining a union is about respect." We discussed who else we could get together for another chat after work.

The next time we met was after a Saturday shift. We opted for lunch nearby. The discussion began by explaining what being in a trade union would involve and the clandestine nature required was quite off putting to some people. The closest approximation that one person could arrive at was that the union would be "like Dumbledore's army"[8]. It speaks volumes that the closest comparison to trade unionism was an example from a fantasy story. Another person had been involved in the staff forum – a kind of management run scheme to discuss problems at work – and had been arguing for the London Living Wage[9]. He agreed that organising collectively might be a good idea, but at least wanted to try the staff forum first.

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[8] I was not aware of this reference at the time. For more information, see:
http://joindumbledoresarmy.warnerbros.com/
[9] The London Living Wage is calculated as £8.55 per hour (and £7.46 for the rest of the UK) by the Living Wage Foundation, see: http://www.livingwage.org.uk/

The clandestine nature of organising was clearly an obstacle, but it was also a source of enthusiasm while working a boring job. Over a week of secretive conversations and invitations we organised the largest and most successful meeting in a pub near the call centre. In the best tradition of exciting meetings there were too few seats and not enough space around the table. The spot at the back of the pub seemed appropriate, if only slightly too noisy for any easy discussion. After the discussion got underway one of the other workers nudged me and pointed to something on the wall. Alongside the hipster decorations and bookshelves filled with unread books was a tattered red Soviet-era communist flag mounted in a frame. One of the workers pointed it out, saying: "I guess that's appropriate isn't it!" Appropriate perhaps, but also somewhat surreal having the first official meeting under a commodified version of a communist symbol. The discussion was wide ranging, but often came against the stumbling block that there was little sense of how a group of workers could begin to effect change in the workplace.

The attempt to begin building some kind of organisation involved trying to join a trade union[10]. After finding out about how to join the trade union on their website I called the membership telephone number. I explained over the phone that I was a call centre worker and interested in joining, to which I was told this could only be done by email or post, which was a slightly surreal experience of one call centre workers speaking to another. I emailed over my application and did not receive a reply for a few weeks, after which I got an email confirming my membership and the telephone number for a branch organiser. After missing each other a few times due to the nature of shift work I made contact with the organiser. She informed me that I had been added to a combined, geographical branch that covered a wide area and different employment types. Unfortunately, I had missed the last branch meeting a few days before which had been cancelled anyway for low attendance. I was shocked to find out that the next meeting would not take place for three months. After a brief discussion the organiser offered to pay for a room in a pub near the workplace to host a meeting. She also offered to post membership forms, of which three arrived in a hand written envelope a few days later.

There was a real difficulty in relating the trade union to the workplace. The jump from collective meetings to joining an organisation whose members the call centre sold insurance to was complicated. This was greatly exacerbated by the high turnover in the call centre. The length of time it took to start having meetings meant that a number of the initial people involved had left the call centre during this initial phase. As detailed in one of the previous chapters my exit from the call centre came earlier than planned, however I was the longest

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[10] The name of the union, like that of the company, will remain anonymous.

employed in my training cohort. Despite leaving the call centre I kept in touch with the group of workers that were trying to organise and met up with them a number of times after they left.

6.7 *Conclusion*

This chapter has focused on resistance. It began by discussing what could constitute resistance and the difficulty of locating it in a workplace given it often occurs in clandestine context. In order to understand this further the first section discussed the slave resistance, returning to the connection between the history of slavery and management covered in the previous chapter. Part of the reason for this is to introduce examples of resistance in contexts that appear to remove all – or at least most – of a subject's agency. The intention here is not to compare call centres to slavery, but neither is it to resign slavery to some kind of aberration that existed in a separate realm of historical development. As discussed before, Roediger and Esch (2012:141) found a 'deeply embedded connection of management to racial brutality and to hubris regarding racial knowledge had matured in slavery, settlement, and empire.' Although the primary question of this chapter is related to resistance in the *Trade Union Cover* call centre, a secondary question remains to identify how forms of resistance have developed historically in this context. The next section examined the connection between the labour process and forms of resistance specifically. The examples of the smile strike by flight attendants, the call centre strike in Italy, and the 'call attacks' in Turkey (Tartanoğlu 2014) highlight how new creative forms emerge.

The framework provided by Kate Mulholland (2004) for categorising different types of resistance and misbehaviour, *'Slammin' Scammin' Smokin' an' Leavin'*" – or 'cheating, work avoidance, absence and resignation' (Mulholland 2004:713) – were used to understand the different moment of resistance in the call centre. This involved a number of challenges related to finding and participating in these moments as an undercover researcher. It is clear from the number and breadth of examples that under the surface there is the potential for organised resistance in the call centre. The 'subterranean stream' that Braverman (1999) refers to is bubbling away, although at present it does not seem obvious how it will reach the surface.

The next part of the chapter developed the theme of the refusal of work which emerged during the research at *Trade Union Cover*. The high levels of turnover in the workplace were a clear indication of this, alongside the various attempts to reduce time at work – both from the workers themselves, but also as rewards from management. This was developed with the

contributions of the *Operaismo* to the refusal of work as a strategy and the autonomy of the working class from capital. The problem of turnover was then considered in terms of the majority of workers desire to do something else than call centre work and conceptualising it as a 'bullshit job' (Graeber 2013). The chapter then moved to consider the contributions of Paul Lafargue and C.L.R. James, tracing the connections between the Caribbean and anti-work politics, and returning again to the historic connection between management and slavery.

The translation of the refusal of work into action is challenging, yet the interventions are important to consider. The attempts to organise in the workplace were limited, but the initial activities were detailed and assessed. It is not the case that the findings from this call centre are typical or could be generalised out to cover different workplaces, but it does raise a number of general questions that are worth addressing. The different acts of resistance and misbehaviour have to be considered in the cultural context of no union organisation and a relationship to trade unions that is problematic. As van den Broek and Dundon, (2012:106) argue these 'take on very different meanings for workers who are denied formal structures and representation, or who feel such representation is futile.' The act of leaving – whether through storming off the call centre floor or just refusing to continue working – is therefore evidence of hostility to the work and a lack of a collective channel to change conditions. Although workers may not have viewed themselves – to return to Thompson and Ackroyd's (1995:617) argument – 'as fully conscious agents engaged in class struggle, in seeking to control management did.' The struggle in the workplace is taking happening whether or not workers were involved, which often means that it is a struggle they are losing. The next chapter will address the question of organisational forms and consider potential means by which the tide of struggle could be turned.

Chapter 7

Precarious organisation

This chapter develops the theme of resistance from the previous chapter to analyse the possibilities for organising in a precarious workplace like a call centre. The lack of any trade union organisation meant that many workers did not consider the workplace as a site of collective struggle. The exposure to service sector unionism is likely to create a picture of trade unions that are far removed from the categories of 'unionateness' that Robert Blackburn (1967:18) uses. However even if the trade union organised a successful recruitment drive in the call centre, it is worth considering Beynon (1973:140) point that 'trade unionism is about work and sometimes the lads [sic] just don't want to work. All talk of procedures and negotiations tend to break down here.' This relates to a general lack of opportunities for political struggle over grievances much broader than the workplace. The failure of trade unions to intervene in the organisation of the labour process in call centres has left the frontier of control to be overwhelmingly pushed by management. As Taylor and Bain (2001:62) argue 'the future success of trade unions in call centres will depend in no small measure on their ability to contest and redefine the frontiers of control on terms desired by their members.' This requires a break from the conception of unions as service providers to a shrinking base of members, and a move towards combative organisations that are focused on workplace struggle.

The high turnover of workers in call centres presents a real and difficult obstacle for organisation. In addition to this the tendency for management to victimise individuals has a damaging effect on the longevity of campaigns. It is therefore necessary to try and conceive of forms of resistance and organisation than can be generalised on a larger scale. It is not possible to develop a strategy for unionising the non-union sectors based on a small number of individuals. As Thompson and Ackroyd argue:

> It is not a case of "waiting for the fightback", romanticising the informal, or disregarding the capacity of unions to renew their own organisation and strategy. Rather as industrial sociologists, we have to put labour back in, by doing theory and research in such a way that it is possible to "see" resistance and misbehaviour, and recognise that innovatory employee practices and informal organisation will continue to subvert managerial regimes.
>
> (Thompson & Ackroyd 1995:629)

In order to move forward the understanding of workplace resistance and misbehaviour has to be deployed to uncover the complex relationships that emerge in the workplace and identify how challenges to management can be constructed. This has to go alongside a strategic critique of contemporary trade unionism, not only to understand its failings, but as part of a

demand to utilise its resources in an organising project that has workers self-activity at its heart.

The first section of the chapter will consider how organising could have taken place outside of *Trade Union Cover*. The relationship between the trade unions (as customers of the call centre) and the workers employed by the call centre will be considered further with a further pieces of undercover research. The potential for opening a space to organise is discussed in the context of this unstable relationship. The next part examines the different theoretical positions on precarious labour, including a critique of the term precariat. The category of precarious workers is discussed as heterogeneous and considers its implications.

The second section surveys the current state of trade unionism in the UK. It examines statistics for trade union membership and strike action. The analysis seeks to understand the defeats of trade unionism since the 1970s to understand the contemporary failure to organise in the private, service sector. The next part considers different sources of collectivity and the possibilities of new forms of union organisation like community unionism. The debates are put in the context of the rise in popularity of service unionism from trade union bureaucrats, looking at how existing unions are trying to promote membership. This is compared to the example of an Australian trade union that has turned insurance from a service provision into a workplace demand. The section then moves on to consider the insights gained from working at *Trade Union Cover* and calling trade unionists to consider the implications of the shift towards service unionism. The last part of this section considers other possible strategies for trade unions, focusing on the benefits of organising strategies and their implementation.

The third section expands the empirical research on call centres with an in-depth interview with a worker involved in an organising campaign at a different call centre. The interview details a campaign in a call centre with a similar labour process and use of management methods as *Trade Union Cover*, but covers the process of organising over a much longer period. It highlights a number of important considerations of how to organise and different strategies, alongside management's tactics of victimisation and how these could be countered. The section then moves briefly away from call centres to examine a number of examples from other workplaces: casual university teaching staff, cleaners, electricians, and cinema workers. This highlights a number of different strategies from precarious workers and considers what can be generalised from these successes. The final part of this section introduces a geographic dimension to the argument, posing the different possibilities and challenges of working in London.

7.1 Organising outside of the workplace

The example of *Trade Union Cover* sheds a unique light on contemporary trade unionism in the UK. At one point while working on the call centre floor I noticed the marketing team – a group that I had almost no contact with normally – whisking boxes of publicity material, leaflets, banner stands, pop up displays and so on into meeting rooms. I was drafted in to move boxes, a welcome relief from working on the phones. Once my task was done the marketing team started dividing up the material to be sent out to the different trade union conferences.

It is a bizarre situation in which the employer attends the national conference for the trade union that the workers could have been members of. Hypothetically, if the workers had joined the union and travelled up to the conference they could mingle with other delegates. Some of whom might take up the conference special offer for insurance and would then receive sales calls from the delegates from the call centre. However, given there were no union members at the call centre this unusual connection was not made. The aim of this chapter is to unravel the connections between the workers, the employers, and the trade unions. Although this example is far from typical for an unorganised private sector workplace, it has the potential to allow for a revisiting of the debates on the nature of trade unionism and the possible directions in which they are, or indeed could, be moving.

I engaged in an additional piece of undercover research to find out more about how the company presented itself to trade unions. I knew someone who was going to a trade union conference and I asked him to direct a few questions to the sales team. He asked whether the workers in the company were in a trade union. The response was terse: "yes, sure, *we* are in a trade union." This was followed up with a specific question about whether the workers on the call centre floor were in a union: "well they can be in a union, but, you know, they're part time and most of them are students and so they haven't joined a union." The sales team then started to deflect further questions and moved my contact away from the stall. This hostility was the first sign that the relationship between the trade unions and the company was more complex than perhaps it first appeared.

After joining the trade union I began to receive emails about the insurance offer, despite working in the call centre that sold the insurance. At no point did I opt-in to receive marketing information or was offered an opportunity to opt-out. It was a surreal moment to receive emails advertising the same insurance that I was selling during a shift at the call centre. Even after leaving the call centre, and indeed even after leaving the trade union, I continued to receive marketing material. The emails were personalised with my name and covered with the trade union's logo. The sales pitch was ambiguous in the way that was outlined during my

training: the "customer will think it is from the union . . . but, um, we never lie about who we are."

The close relationship between the call centre and trade union created the possibility for what the trade union Unite (2012b) has recently begun to label 'leverage.' They define it as 'a process whereby the Union commits resources and time to making all interested parties aware of the treatment received by Unite members at the hands of an employer.' This can involve the use of additional forms of protest alongside the threat of industrial action or where such action is difficult to mobilise. Unite (2012b) do explicitly state that 'leverage does not offer a solution that excludes the critical need to organise workers.'

In the particular circumstances of this call centre it would be possible to envisage how a 'leverage' campaign could develop. The contract I signed specified that my 'terms and conditions of employment are not subject to the provisions of any collective agreement.' In most workplaces this would not provide a useful basis for a campaign involving customers, however given the call centre works with trade unions, this could be used to force open a space to organise. Exposing – or even just threatening to expose – the anti-union attitude of the company to the trade unions that it relies on for customers is a potentially powerful bargaining tool.

It was not easy to highlight the relationship between different trade unions and the call centre. I contacted a number of trade union activists, lay members, elected officials, and organisers, which had limited success. In general they were outraged that their trade union would be involved in service provision that relied on low paid non-unionised workers. However most of these conversations never developed further, despite a number of comments about how something should be done about it. There were discussions on activist e-mail lists but it did not seem to go higher up the trade union bureaucracy. This would only be speculation, but it is likely that while the call centre management would be implicated in this relationship, there would also have to be people inside the trade unions who arranged or at least agreed to setting up the deal too.

7.2 *Understanding precarious labour*

The employment relations in the call centre were insecure. During my time at the call centre I could be fired at any point as my employment contract offered no security. The majority of the workers were either in a similar position or employed through a temp agency. The lack of job security poses a significant challenge for organising in a workplace. The term precarity has

been used to describe the conditions of insecure employment. Angela Mitropoulos (2005:12) argues that the application of the term '"precariousness" is both more unwieldy and indeterminate than most.' She continues to point out that if anything can be said 'for certain about precariousness, it is that it teeters', which points towards 'some of the tensions that shadow much of the discussion about precarious labour.' Pierre Bourdieu described 'précarité' as a:

> *new mode of domination in public life . . . based on the creation of generalized and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submission, into the acceptance of exploitation. To characterize this mode of domination . . . a speaker here proposed the very expressive concept of flexploitation. The word evokes the rational management of insecurity . . . what is presented as an economic system . . . is in reality a political system which can only be set up with the active or passive complicity of the official political powers.*
>
> (Bourdieu 1998:95-9)

This definition provides an important starting point for the discussion of precarity, yet the arguments about the existence of a 'precariat' put forward by Guy Standing (2011) has done much to muddy the waters. Richard Seymour (2012) argues that Standing's (2011) formulation of the precariat 'remains at best *a purely negative, critical concept*', but this is not to say that the term should be completely rejected. The problem with the concept is that 'its advocates want it to do far more than it is capable of doing – that is, naming, describing, and explaining a developing social class' (Seymour 2012). Precarious employment is not new, as is evident from the description by a dock worker in 1882, 'dock labouring is at all times a precarious and uncertain mode of living' (quoted in Seymour 2012). Furthermore, the imbalance of power between capital and labour has meant that the period of secure employment for men in Western Europe under the Fordism of the 1960-1970s is an exception to the rule historically. If it is not a new phenomenon then it is necessary to consider how conditions of precarity have arisen or could be overcome. The defeat of trade unions under Thatcher signalled the beginning of neoliberalism, involving attacks on workers terms and conditions, the dismantling of the welfare state through the reduction of government spending, and the opening up of public services to market forces (Harvey 2007:12). So while the precariousness of labour in general is built into capitalism, this has been greatly exacerbated the loss of trade union organisation and that 'precarity is built into neoliberal capitalism, in which growth is predicated on financial risk and indebtedness' (Seymour 2012).

The experience of contemporary precarity has to be understood as part of the shift away from the patterns of production and consumption of Fordism. In terms of employment, Mitropoulos (2005:13) argues that the 'flight from "standard hours" was not precipitated by employers but rather by workers seeking less time at work' and connects it to what 'the Italian Workerists

dubbed the "refusal of work" in the late 1970s.' This escape from the discipline of the Fordist labour market potentially alters the content of the struggle. Anthony Iles (2005:36) warns of the risks of considering the struggles only 'in terms of battles for better legislation.' This attempt to win only employment reform 'misses the opportunity to investigate the tendency for self-organised (or "disorganised") labour to develop a more generalised struggle.' It is in this way that the concept of precarity therefore takes on a political role in the autonomist tradition: it becomes a 'project to dismantle the mass worker as the central object for labour struggles and place it on the shoulders of the more encompassing but diffuse idea of the precarious worker (McKarthy 2005:55).'

In practice precarious employment has not led to a greater amount of leisure time for workers to enjoy. It may reduce – although 'not necessarily' – the 'actual amount of time spent doing paid work', but 'the post-Fordist worker' has to 'be continually available for such work (Mitropoulos, 2005:13).' The time spent not working becomes devoted to searching and preparing for work. This leads Mitropoulos (2005:13) to argue that while Fordism which sought to 'sever the brains of workers from their bodies', post-Fordist capitalism is 'characterised – in Foucault's terms – as the imprisonment of the body by the soul.' This notion is different to the orthodox Marxist conception of alienation. The perspective put forward by Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2009:44) does not 'anticipate any restoration of humanity, does not proclaim any human universality, and bases its understanding of humanity on class conflict' (Berardi 2009:44). In an influential text by Mario Tronti argues:

> The working class confronts its own labor as capital, as a hostile force, as an enemy – this is the point of departure not only for the antagonism, but for the organization of the antagonism. If the alienation of the worker has any meaning, it is a highly revolutionary one. The organization of alienation: This is the only possible direction in which the party can lead the spontaneity of the class. The goal remains that of refusal, at a higher level: It becomes active and collective, a political refusal on a mass scale, organized and planned. Hence the immediate task of working-class organization is to overcome passivity.
>
> (Tronti 1972:22)

This understanding of alienation as estrangement is not based on the loss of some kind of human essence. Instead it is a 'condition of estrangement from the mode of production and its rules, as refusal of work.' It is therefore, as Bifo (2009:46) puts it, to be 'seen as the condition of those who rebel assuming their partial humanity as a point of strength, a premise of a higher social form, of a higher form of humanity, and not as the condition of those who are forced to renounce their essential humanity.'

Not all precarious workers are employed to do the same kinds of work however. Kidd McKarthy (2005:57) suggests a distinction between 'BrainWorkers', those 'who are hired not

for their general labour but for specialised skills or their creativity', and 'ChainWorkers', employed to work at large chain stores like McDonalds. They are 'automatons and the only thing they have to sell is their labour.' The extension of rationalisation into the 'ChainWorkers' workplaces means that 'there is all the discipline of the factory with none of the interdependency and vulnerabilities which formerly allowed workers to fight back (McKarthy 2005:57).' The 'ChainWorkers' therefore face the largest structural barriers for organising. As Pollert and Charlwood (2009:344) have argued the question of vulnerability is best understood with an emphasis on the conditions of 'low pay and non-unionism.' The changes that have taken place in the labour market over the last thirty years has involved an increasing polarisation of the types of jobs available (Kaplanis 2007), with a growth in the number of low-paid 'lousy jobs' at the bottom (Goos & Manning 2007).

The position of different precarious workers is uneven. Migrant workers, and in particular those without legal immigration status and therefore employment rights, are particularly at risk (Ryan 2005). There are also additional pressures on workers who attempt to balance paid work and unpaid work, for example workers carrying out home and family responsibilities as well as employment. This remains primarily a demand on women in the workforce and increases the likelihood of employment in 'non-standard' jobs that are temporary or casualised (Fredman 2003). It is therefore possible to say that the most precarious and vulnerable are those in low paid, 'non-standard' jobs, without trade union organisation as they are not covered by either of the 'three regulatory regimes – collective bargaining, employment protection rights, and the national insurance system' (Fredman 2003:308). Much academic literature is concerned with 'the unionized workforce', yet 'the non-unionized themselves, who comprise the majority of employees, have been marginalized', something that Pollert and Charlwood (2009:357) argue demands renewed attention.

7.3 *Contemporary British trade unionism*

The levels of trade union membership have been falling consistently in previous years. The headline statistics for 2011 show that there were 6.4 million employees who were members of a trade union with a density of 26%. The figures are based on the Labour Force Survey series that began in 1995 and shows a downward trend from 32.4%. The membership is divided between 3.9 million in the public sector and 2.5 million in the private sector (Brownlie 2012:7). Union membership density in the public sector stands at 56.5% whereas in the private sector it is only 14.1% (Brownlie 2012:11). This division is exacerbated by the fact that 'the education and health and social work industries each account for over a fifth of union members but only

for 7.6 and 11.5 per cent of non union members respectively' (Brownlie 2012:11). It is therefore possible to say that these areas have a hugely disproportionate representation, or rather that there are other areas that lack any significant union organisation.

The general picture of trade unionism in the UK is bleak. Trade unions operate in a context of defeats, as argued by Thompson and Ackroyd:

> Political action by a succession of Conservative administration has also clearly shaped the broader landscape. Three significant dimensions of policy can be identified: a strategy of de-regulation of labour markets and promotion of a low wage, low skill economy as a means of attracting inward investment; competitive tendering and internal markets in the public sector; and the sustained legislative assault on union organisation, employment rights and collective bargaining.
>
> (Thompson & Ackroyd 1995:618)

The 2012 statistical bulletin published by the Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills (2013:7) found that there were 6.5 million trade union members in the UK with a density of 26%. This was an increase of 59,000 from 2011, but remaining far below the peak membership of over 13 million in 1979. This modest rise follows four years of falls in membership of over 100,000. The overall trend since 1995 is downward, decreasing by 6% from 32%. The division between public and private sector remains significant. Membership in the private sector increased for the second year in a row by 63,000 to 2.6 million, with an increase in density to 14.4%. This is a small recovery after the drop of 447,000 between 2007 and 2010. In the public sector density fell slightly to 56.3% following on from a fall of 177,000 in 2011.

The level of strike action can be used as an indicator of the confidence and combativity of the working class. The institutional figures for trade union membership are certainly quite worrying and the figures for official strike days paint a similar picture. In the 1980s there was an average 400 strike days lost per 1,000 workers annually (Carley 2008:15). Between 2003 to 2007 the average number of strike days per 1,000 workers had fallen to only 25.1 (Carley 2008:14). The past few years has involved the trade union response government austerity programmes, which has been three-fold: the Trade Union Congress organised a significant demonstration on the 26th March 2011 in London which was followed by two large strikes in June and November later that year. These strikes involved 262,000 and 963,000 days lost respectively each. Over 90% of the lost working days in 2011 were in the public sector, and these two strike days overwhelmingly contributed to this. This represented an increase of four times the number of days lost through strikes compared to 2010. The TUC claimed that the November strike was the biggest for 30 years (Carley 2012). Although there have been public sector strikes in 2012 the number of strike days fell sharply from the high of 1.4 million to 250,000 (Office for National Statistics 2013b).

The growth of employment in the service sector has not been matched by a growth in levels of trade unionism in this sector. Trade unions 'face considerable obstacles to extending their presence in private services, not least from hostile employers' (Williams & Adam-Smith 2009). However, Walters' (2002) study of part-time workers in retail organizations found that workers with less secure employment was not necessarily a barrier to unionisation. The response from non-unionised workers in workplaces where there was a union was either that there had been no attempt to recruit them or they did not think that joining a union would achieve anything.

It is therefore possible to put forward an argument that does not consider the novelties of the service sector as insurmountable obstacles to unionisation. The failure to unionise service work is an outcome of class struggle, rather than inevitable. The victory of management lies in part in their ability to use 'the more hostile political and economic climate for trade unionism to undermine their power and legitimacy' (Williams & Adam-Smith 2009). This has often taken place without concerted attempts by trade unions to mount a serious counter-offensive. However it is not the case that there are not examples of organised workers in the service sector. For example, flight attendants – the focus of Hochschild's (2012) work on emotional labour – have effective trade union representation (Korczynski 2002) and engaged in extensive industrial action in 2010 in the UK (Walker 2010), as well as the smile strike discussed earlier.

The context of call centres, with the high turnover of staff and extensive surveillance and control, is particularly hostile to trade unionism. Despite this there are 'generally sufficient opportunities available for workers to express their grievances, articulate their discontent, and thus resist efforts to shackle them' (Williams & Adam-Smith 2009). Bain and Taylor (2002) – over ten years ago now – documented the development of trade union organisation in a number of different call centres. The question of developing strategies for organising the service sector remains on the whole unanswered in the UK.

The arguments about the decline of trade unionism tend to focus on post-1979. While this is undoubtedly an important moment, Kelly (1998) argues, drawing on long wave theory, that the history of trade unionism is not a linear progression since the late 19th century. McBride and Martinez Lucio (2011) argue that the concept of worker collectivity is important for understanding the potential for trade union organisation. Collectivism, or rather management led conceptions of collectivism, can be used to undermine trade unionism (Bacon and Storey 1996). Therefore the introduction of 'quality circles, teamworking, management led 'mass' meetings' should be seen as an attempt to create 'a collective identity through the prism of corporate identity' and 'have become increasingly referenced in human resource management.' Furthermore it is an '*attempt* by managers to create direct forms of

communication with workers and to bypass embedded and institutionalized systems of worker representation' (McBride & Martinez Lucio 2011:796).

The new management strategies have the potential to undermine collectivity and increase the individualisation of workers. However, as Martinez Lucio and Stewart (1997) have argued there is a connection between individual and collective struggles. What starts as an individual issue can lead into a collective one. As Stewart argues:

> Why is individual isolation so often referred to in terms that can also be interpreted as reward factors – flexitime and individual contracts? Is it really true that these create insecurity in a personalized and individualized way? [Yet] it is also significant that most union struggles today are provoked by management strategies that focus on temporalizing and fragmenting labour.
>
> (Stewart 2006:188-9)

It is useful to consider the relationship between collectivism and occupational identity. There are a theorists that have contributed to the debate, from Strangleman *et al.* (1999), Savage *et al.* (2001), Turnbull (1992), to MacKenzie *et al.* (2006). The attempt to understand the changing nature of work in relation to collectivism has the potential to shed additional light on the problem. For example, MacKenzie *et al.* in their study of unemployed steel workers in Wales, argue that:

> the collectivism that was intrinsic to the steelworker identity, although heavily premised on the occupational community, extended to a sense of class identity and solidarity. The group identity of the steelworker was based on a sense of distinction, but rather than leading to excessive particularism based on the occupational community, it served as a mechanism through which class-based thinking and class identity were articulated, and allowed for the recognition of a shared structural location and problems in common with workers elsewhere.
>
> (MacKenzie *et al.* 2006:848)

For this pre-politicised group, sources of collectivity were found outside of the workplace. However, it was still linked to an occupation. It does show the potential for broadening out an analysis from the workers and the forms of traditional trade union organisation inside the workplace however. The potential of this can be seen with the growth of 'community unionism' as a topic of increasing interest (McBride & Greenwood 2009). More concretely it can be seen with launching of Unite community membership (Unite 2012b).

The possibilities for community organising type initiatives can potentially draw the focus away from the workplace. Implicit in some of the arguments about this is an acceptance of the limitations of contemporary workplace organisation, rather than attempts to challenge or overcome them. There is potential to gain an insight by interrogating how workers mobilise for struggle in the workplace, to try and understand 'the conditions under which individual workers come to define their interests and identities in collective terms' (McBride & Martinez

Lucio 2011:802). By focusing upon 'how different relations and experiences are referenced as resources and the basis for legitimating action in the struggle against an employer or the state' (McBride & Martinez Lucio 2011:802). What this requires is an analytical focus on resistance at the workplace level. This is not something that can be put off until some future point as Neil Davidson argues:

> For without the entry of the currently unorganised private sector workers into the trade union movement any revival of struggle will be unnecessarily weakened and limited, and their recruitment will not happen automatically.

(Davidson 2013:217)

While there is a potential in re-thinking the relationship between worker and union there also has to be an awareness of alternative strategies that are currently being pursued inside of trade unions. Drawing on different sources to strengthen organisation, whether in the community or otherwise, still maintains a focus on organising. This stands in contrast to the growth of service unionism, in which the approach taken to building the union is quite different.

7.4 *Service unionism*

This relationship between the call centre and the trade unions reveals a number of features of contemporary service based trade unions. There has been a concerted move towards service provisions across different trade unions. For example, UNISON a major public sector trade union states on its website in the 'reasons to join' section that 'every member receives our full range of benefits and services, including':

- o   Legal help for you at work and your family at home
- o   Financial assistance and debt advice in times of need
- o   Helpline open until midnight on weekdays and 4pm on Saturday
- o   Accident and injury compensation for you and your family
- o   Exclusive member discounts including money off cars and holidays

(UNISON 2014b)

None of the five reasons to join the union mention collective organisation, representation, or anything about conditions at work. The example of insurance being offered by unions is particularly interesting however. While the trade unions make the insurance offer part of the reason to join – and even make it appear as though it is offered through the union in some cases – a private company is profiting from the arrangement. The provision of insurance may not at first appear to be a salient issue of class struggle, and that certainly seems to be the case

of trade unions in the UK. However, the Australian electricians union the ETU turned insurance provision into a demand. They fought a successful campaign to ensure that:

> Each week, participating employers make severance contributions to Protect on behalf of their employees. The amount each employer is required to contribute is determined by an enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA).
>
> (Electrical Trades Union 2012)

So instead of allowing private companies to profit from access to their membership, unions could have instead organised to win further concessions from employers. This re-frames the notion of service provision into a workplace grievance, transforming it into a combative demand.

The process of calling trade union members in the call centre gave an interesting insight into the state of trade unionism. The majority of the people spoken to were middle-aged, it was rare to speak to young workers. Most worked in the public sector, however this was dependent on the campaign leads which grouped workers together. This meant ringing large numbers of postal workers, followed by local government workers, teaching assistants, health care assistants, and so on. It was common to hear complaints about the union on the phone. Instead of the introduction with the union's name aiding the pitching of the product it occasionally elicited criticisms about the anti-austerity strategy of the union or distain that their union subscriptions were being misspent. The impression of trade unionism that this gave – particularly if you were a young worker who had never been involved in one before – was fairly pessimistic.

From the perspective of a sociologist the phone calls were fascinating, well initially at least. This relationship, of workers in an unorganised workplace regularly communicating with organised workers, could provide opportunities for the notion of collective organisation to infect the call centre. As noted previously, a trade union official attempted to subvert the phone call to ask about conditions in the call centre. He asked a number of questions including whether there was a recognised union in the call centre. Despite my excitement about the possibility of some kind of emerging solidarity it was necessary to inform him that: "just to remind you all calls are recorded and may be listened to ensure accuracy or for training purposes, is that ok" Luckily the activist picked up the hint that discussing these issues over the phone could endanger my job. He pointed out that he did not want the insurance, finished up the call, and wished me good luck. The system of electronic supervision in the call centre had precluded this possibility.

There was a general lack of knowledge of trade unions in the call centre. In one example during my training I overheard a group of co-workers complaining about the heating in the call centre. They joked about a number of possible courses of action including joining a trade union. One of the workers stated that they would not know which one join; despite the fact on the wall next to them were posters of each of the trade unions the call centre worked with. A number of these posters included taglines that would suggest they would be an appropriate union to represent call centre workers.

The possibilities of unionisation in the call centre have to be put in the context of neoliberalism and the very low levels of unionisation in the private sector in the UK. Neil Davidson (2013:213) has argued that this has meant 'many working class people do not have the opportunity to develop "trade union consciousness", with all that means in relation to the likelihood of their holding left wing political positions and accepting the need for collective action to improve their condition.' There are serious limitations in understanding the question of unionisation in these terms. Instead of pathologising the non-unionised worker it is worth considering the character of trade unions themselves. By drawing on Robert Blackburn's (1967:18) definition of 'unionateness' this can be explored further. He defines it as 'the commitment of an organization to the general principles and ideology of trade unionism.' This means that the 'unionateness' of a trade union can be gauged as follows:

> It regards collective bargaining and the protection of the interests of members, as employees, as its main function, rather than, say, professional activities or welfare schemes . . . It is independent of employers for purposes of negotiation . . . It is prepared to be militant, using all forms of industrial action which may be effective.

> (Blackburn 1967:19-20)

The basic features of trade union organisation are exactly the same thing that is being undermined by the shift towards service based unionism. However, this operates in a contradictory context: the impetus to transform unions from above is not necessarily matched by support from below. The tension between the trade union bureaucracy and the rank and file members will be discussed further in the examples later in this chapter.

Service provision, as can be seen from UNISON's 'reasons to join', is one attempt to overcome falling membership rates driven from top of the unions. The required responses to the challenges facing unions have also been posed in terms of revival or renewal. Fairbrother (1996) puts forward an argument for union renewal that will be driven from a rank and file workplace level. This has the potential to overcome the lack of representation for women in trade unions, discussed by Colgan and Ledwith (2002). Not all theorists emphasise the potential for change from below in trade unions however. The 'managerial renewal'

perspective, argued for by Willman (2001) among others, places the potential for change emanating from the national leadership of trade unions.

The divorce of the national leadership from the conditions of the workplace is supposed to endow them with the resources – and indeed the responsibility – for developing the strategies that could lead to a renewal. It appears that some of the strategies being developed by national union officers tend towards service provision. This can be seen on a larger scale, but also in smaller ways too. For example, the UCU advertised a new online recruitment drive with the incentive that 'if a member joins using your link, your name will be automatically entered into a prize draw where you will have the chance to win a John Lewis hamper worth £200' (UCU 2012a). It is worth noting that the John Lewis partnership was started as an 'experiment in industrial democracy' (Lewis 1948). This has been described by Ramsay (1980:52) as 'suffocatingly paternalistic in its apparent benevolence.' The aspect of worker participation can be understood as a 'response to the challenge of labour' which entails a 'blatant dislike of trade unionism' (Baddon *et al.* 1989:80). So ironically recruitment to the union is encouraged with a hamper from a famously anti-trade union company.

The concept of 'organising' – perhaps opposed to selling services or though not necessarily so – is used to outline how union renewal could be achieved. This can refer to the introduction of specialist functions to represent different groups of workers, for example to cater specifically to the needs of casual workers. The effect of specific measures for women workers inside UNISON is discussed by McBride (2000) and is particularly important considering that women workers are now more likely than men to be union members. New innovative structures and specialist organisers have been proposed to aid unions organising, for example the TUC's Organising Academy (Heery *et al.* 2000). The concept has also been used by others, like Bronfenbrenner and Juravich (1998), to refer to an overarching change towards 'organizing unionism', making organising the primary focus of trade unions.

There is however an ambiguity in what is meant by the term organising. Simms and Holgate (2010:157) illustrate this by arguing that the new approaches have 'tended to see organising as a "toolbox" of practices rather than as having an underpinning political philosophy or objective.' This has created a situation in which organising is being adopted without asking 'the fundamental question of what are we organising "for"?' The move towards focusing in organising is nevertheless positive. In the UK it emerged as a response to the 'new realism' approach of 'partnership' in the 1990s that argued for closer relationships with employers (Kelly 1999). The response by 'key policy makers at the TUC and in affiliate unions' was to look towards 'US programmes such as the Organising Institute and Union Summer which were

explicitly intended to attract underrepresented groups into the union movement' (Simms & Holgate 2010:159).

The growth of an organising agenda in the US has involved much more debate. This can be found, for example, in the work of Brecher and Costello (1990), Robinson (2000), and Dreiling (2001). The debates were 'were frequently underpinned by ideas of worker self-organisation and were explicitly linked to the political agenda of shifting the culture of US unions away from business unionism towards a form of unionism based around membership activism and power' (Simms & Holgate 2010:160). This is an important distinction to make as it develops the concept of 'organising' to mean more 'than simply recruitment.' Therefore organising must be able to 'deliver sustainable increases in workplace *power* for unions and for workers.' At its core must be 'worker self-organisation' (Simms & Holgate 2010:164).

7.5 *Organising in a call centre*

The challenge put forward by Simms & Holgate (2010:164) for an 'organising' model is an important one. Yet the lack of active struggle in the *Trade Union Cover* limited the possibilities to explore this further. One of the lessons from the Kolinko (2002) inquiry is that despite the best intentions of researcher it is not always possible to find open struggle to engage with in a workplace. Although the previous chapter discussed moments of resistance at *Trade Union Cover* and some initial attempts to organise it would be quite a stretch to label it as a successful example. During the empirical phase of the research I made contact with someone who had led a strike in a call centre. The detailed interviewee we conducted has the potential to shed some much needed light on the possibilities for organising in a call centre and contained a number of important examples. The identity of the interviewee has to remain anonymous because they had been victimised in the workplace, as the excerpts from the interview will detail, and identification could have implications for future employment prospects.

The interviewee had worked at various different call centres, both in the UK and abroad, but the interview focussed on one example in particular. It was a charity fundraising call centre and "could have anything up to about five hundred people on their books." The condition of the workers in the call centre was typical for the sector as "100% of it was running on zero hour contracts." The interviewee detailed their experience of working at a charity fundraising call centre in relation to a previous job:

It was the first time that I had worked in an environment where the work was non-stop and regimented. And so before that I worked for fifteen years in the civil service and you know even though there was of course a level of factory standards and it was never as controlled you know.

It is worth noting that the civil service has a recent history of trade union militancy with the PCS union being involved in a number of national strikes and campaigns. The interviewee had been active in the union in his previous workplace and had a developed practical experience and knowledge of trade unionism. He summarised the experience of the labour process in the call centre as:

You know it's almost the pressure to hit targets, do you know what I mean? There never seemed to be a couple of hours without worrying about whether you were up on them. The targets for those would be just so high and also the targets in terms of the amount of calls that you need to make are so high, those were really, really draining.

This experience is similar to that of *Trade Union Cover* and is typical of the high volume outbound call centre, described by Taylor and Bain (1999:109), in which the worker 'has "an assembly-line in the head," always feeling under pressure and constantly aware that the completion of one task is immediately followed by another.' The reality for workers is that of a regimented labour process driven by quantitative targets, despite the fact that in this example the aim of the labour process is to solicit charity donations.

The behaviour of management in the call centre followed a similar pattern to that described in a previous chapter. Although there was not an analogous "Nev" figure the approach tended towards the despotic. In addition to the surveillance methods common in call centres, management exerted their power with:

all sorts of rules right. I mean for instances hanging coats on the back of your chair was banned, little things like that. Constantly listing things that people couldn't do. I've seen people being chased into toilets because they have their phones on them and stuff like that! All these things you can do with or without the computers.

This bullying style was indicative of a workplace in which the 'frontier of control' (Goodrich 1975) lay mostly in the hands of management. This behaviour had the potential to limit workplace resistance, but the aggressive tactics also became a grievance for workers. The first instance of resistance that the interviewee referred to came as a response to management:

There was one guy, an Irish guy, he had been there for years and they said he had been skipping calls. Now the operations manager kind of got involved in it and it was obvious that they were trying to catch him out and it was obvious that kind of wanted to get rid of him. And it was also quite clear that here was someone who was seen as someone who would stand up to managers. That is a big fear for them that someone would kind of stand up. It was before we had really had a go at organising the union. He was in the Labour party and a trade unionist anyway.

This example highlights the hostility of management to the first stages of organisation in the call centre. If an individual worker is singled out to be a problem, or likely to "stand up" to managers, steps can be taken to increases the supervision with a view to terminating employment. This fear of victimisation can be used to prevent workers taking the first steps to organise collectively. However, victimisation of workers is not necessarily a straightforward process for management:

> I think there had been attempts beforehand, before I had got there, and I think people had joined from there and it had kind of fell away. It made it quite difficult to go to the union about it when they kind of sacked him at the start and basically yeah, they sacked him on the spot for fraud. They called it fraud! He was skipping calls, that was fraud. And what he said was: The system had kind of, the reason it kind of sounded like he had skipped the calls, was because my screen had frozen. And the act the initial hearing the HR guy, who obviously didn't know what he was talking about, said: if your   screen was frozen then everyone else's would have on all the campaigns, they would all freeze, all have done the same. And so what we did, one of the first things we did as a union was we had a kind of a letter or a petition saying, well it was a survey. When the system goes down, does your screen freeze? We did this survey, we turned up about forty of these surveys in the appeal hearing [laughter] and so they had to kind of accept that, so he got reinstated. And that was kind of a big win for us.

The reliance on the electronic surveillance of the labour process proved problematic for management. As they were not experienced with the labour process management lacked knowledge of the systems compared to the workers. The workers organised their own survey, arming them with the evidence to fight the victimisation. This first step is important in two regards: firstly it highlights a weakness on the part of management and secondly it developed the confidence of the workers to oppose a decision by management. This opening challenge questions the authority of management and provides a defence against the threat of victimisation.

The confrontation provided the impetus for the workers to launch an organisational project in the call centre. The interviewee had previous experience as a trade unionist in the civil service. They explained how "when I first started there and I had this sort of thing, I'm in a workplace, the first time I had gone in I saw there was an opportunity here to have a go at building a union from scratch." Therefore it was an explicit choice from the start of their employment to try and organise in the call centre. The interviewee's knowledge and practical experience had to be reapplied in this new context. The workers in the call centre initially received very limited support from the trade union, unlike the interviewee's previous experiences in the civil service. The trade union had a combined branch that the workers joined and at its monthly branch meetings it "would be lucky to get ten or fifteen people, out of four thousand." The interviewee explained that when they joined the branch:

> It wasn't outward looking at all, it was really pretty much you know service providers. And you know they would provide people to go and represent people at a disciplinary and so on, which is fair enough.

The lack of support from the established trade union meant that the initial attempts at organisation need to be undertaken independently by the workers at the call centre. This entailed an individualisation of what should have been a collective process.

The workers began to organise in the call centre informally. While they did recruit other workers to the trade union, they also relied on informal meetings to develop networks in the workplace:

> When I first got there an attempt to get a few people together in a pub and have a bit of a chat you know. The thing was the union kind of, I didn't know a few people and it wasn't until I had been there a few months. When um, the issue that came up really was the one of pay. It was while I was having a smoking break, which you know smoking, you should really take up if you want to organise! [laughter] Well that's kind of a clue really isn't it. If you go outside for a break with the smokers that the kind of place to be really.

The smoking area and the pub are located as important sites for these first discussions about organisation. The pub – despite not being an accessible location for all workers – provides a useful opportunity as it is removed from the workplace and workers might be meeting there anyhow after a shift. The smoking are provides a regular opportunity to meet with different workers throughout the shift temporarily away from the supervisory gaze. The interviewee stressed the importance of this using these opportunities –perhaps joining the smokers, not necessarily taking up smoking yourself – is certainly something that should not be underestimated, indeed Mulholland (2004:713) references '*Smokin'*' specifically as a form of resistance in her study. Identifying and exploiting the moments were workers meet collectively away from management supervision is an important and replicable starting point.

The dispute in the interviewee's workplace developed after the workers came into contact with someone who worked in one of the company's other call centres. The interviewee discovered that they were on different pay scales. There was outrage at the fact they were receiving less pay than workers doing the same job at a different site. This formed the basis for the campaign:

> So even though this is the last thing you should do, you know, when you're starting to organise to go for an issue that is seen as being unwinnable [laughter]. But it was just too deeply felt, it was kind of you couldn't really avoid it so we just got people together in a pub, we thought maybe five or six people would turn up, in fact over twenty people turned up. So we decided that we would agitate around pay but there were a whole load of other issues, one of them was around kind of bullying, and so taking that one which was kind of you know didn't go down very well.

The interviewee explained that the issue of pay was "seen as being unwinnable." This is partly due to the charity fundraising that the call centre was engaged in. As mentioned earlier, the managers would apply a kind of "moralism" to workers: soldiering at work would only hurt the charity, a pay rise would mean less money for the charities, and so on. The "moralism" that surrounds charities can be deployed by management in an attempt to encourage workers or deflect their grievances. This is despite the fact that charity call centres – in general – are not charities themselves. Instead they are a sector of outsourced call centre operations which compete for contracts to raise money on behalf of charities. Therefore the call centre itself is a profit-making venture. The workers undertook an investigation, looking through the company's accounts to prove that a pay rise could come from the profits rather than the funds raised for the charities.

The identification of a demand for the campaign was an important development. However, there remained obstacles to organising the campaign:

> It was difficult that people were part time you know. But again as long as you have got a core of people that are kind of trying to speak to the new people coming in, that are constantly involved in trying to build, being at the forefront of fighting on these issues, then you can still get people in. See the thing is, in terms of the kinds of numbers on the books and so on, it was going to be really, really difficult to kind of get the numbers that we would need to get a kind of recognition but we actually did win stuff. We actually won the first pay rises in there for six years and that was over the threat of walkouts of the threat of cancelling our shifts at the same time. But as we were doing it there were moments were you were like what is the point of doing this? We'll never break through etc. But I think that people feel that it was very, very important that it was done, that we had that, and also that when it came to a disciplinary there was someone, there were people who were trained up through the union to you know represent people, you know the bread and butter stuff. I think when we won the pay thing the lots of people joined the union afterwards.

These obstacles are typical for the experience of organising in casualised, private sector workplaces. What is interesting about this quote is that the interviewee does not gloss over the problems and highlights the importance of attention to detail on "the bread and butter stuff" and the experience of a success. The combination of these two factors was important for the campaign. The success proved that it was worth getting organised and raised confidence. The attention to detail meant that every opportunity to organise was exploited to its fullest potential, focussing on the possibilities rather than the limitations.

The interviewee detailed the practicalities of finding opportunities to organise on the call centre floor. One of the most important examples was to:

> to make an announcement about the union in what they called the break out area. Someone would stand up, usually me or the couple of others that would do it, and we would make an

announcement about it. And it would usually go down really, really well! But of course as well we would publish leaflets, newsletters and that kind of stuff.

The workers held their own organising "buzz sessions." Instead of the management led "buzz sessions" that Cederström and Fleming (2012:10) argue are an attempt 'to *inject life into the dead-zone of work*', the workers seized the opportunity to inject organising into the break-time. These interventions required significant confidence on the part of individual workers at first, especially considering how the threat of victimisation still hung over the call centre floor. These acts were shifted into collected interventions when the workers started planning them together and writing leaflets to hand out. The interviewee explains that the leaflets were:

> Mainly about whatever was happening in the call centres, we would do articles about you know the wrap time, or you know how the pay campaign was going, but also we would put in stuff about the anti-fascism or some other political campaign.

The interventions at break-time provided a wider audience to the workers who were organising. It allowed the move from a smaller group to wider networks at the call centre. The workers began to meet regularly outside of the call centre:

> We would have meetings in a pub afterwards, basically right after the shifts ended, so at least once a month we would meet. In the Wetherspoons and we would all gather round like trying to listen, you know all repeating stuff to each other. But we managed to get a separate room upstairs booked as we got some money from the union and they would do stuff like pay for that. There were times as well where when the system went down it was an opportunity to go around the call centre and talk to people. Alongside talking to people in all the breaks and that. Actually some of the best times were when on a Saturday after a shift loads of people would go to the pub afterwards and you could chat to everyone away from work.

Once the regular meetings had started the relationship with the trade union improved. The union began to provide resources and logistical support to the workers. Despite this, the overwhelming majority of the activity has was led at a rank and file level. The interventions at the call centre were not without risks. Although the break-time speeches and leaflets were identified as an important part of the project they could also easily become a point of confrontation.

One of these confrontations took place at the height of the campaign. There was now a network of collective organisation spread across the call centre with regular meetings. The interviewee explains how:

> Yeah it was basically we would take up issues and there was a guy who had got suspended for his apparent behaviour in a briefing. There were a number of people who were upset about it. It was someone who wasn't the easiest, he was a kind of a Marmite guy, not everyone kind of liked him and that but he was in the union. But that didn't matter because as the union we tried to establish a principle that actually an attack on this person was an attack on the union. So we had a big meeting to discuss you know our position etc. And I wrote up a piece and I put

it in [a socialist newspaper] and stupidly put my name next to it. And next thing I know I get this phone call, I'd just come back from [union] conference. And they said right you have written an article and it has your name on it, it's in [a socialist newspaper], and it is bringing the name of [the company] into disrepute, you are therefore suspended and later you will have a hearing and so on.

The threat of victimisation that had hung over the call centre had returned with a vengeance. The interviewee had been victimised for something that had happened outside of the call centre and became the focus of an attempt to break the worker's organisation. The establishment of the trade union principle of "an attack on this person was an attack on the union" meant that the workers were prepared for a defence campaign:

And so word got out and within a day of my suspension we had organised a meeting in a pub of about fifty people and people were very, very angry and saw it as an attack on our right to organise, which is great, it is fantastic. You know and as I said someone who had been there for years, it was a coach basically, and she said do you know what I'm not going to do my shift until you get [the interviewee] back. So we for my hearing, we had taken a few people to the [union] branch meeting and argued for a strike ballot, we got a protest outside the hearing. And you know people came from different charities and stuff and I was involved in going round getting solidarity, getting speeches we had people in our meeting speaking from [a charity] who were out on strike at the time and a group of them came down, a group from the RMT came down, about fifty people all in all. A number of people came before their shifts, came down from work and it was good. I remember people also, the next meeting we had was quite big, and I think we agreed that we would kind of go for a day of people not working their shifts and so on and that's when we called a strike.

The campaign was able to build links both inside and outside of the call centre. The prospect of being able to call a strike in the call centre shows how the level of organisation had grown significantly from the conversations in the smoking area or the pub after work.

The existence of worker's self-organisation in the call centre provided the means for a collective response to the victimisation. Despite this, the interviewee explains that:

It was very difficult because that's when a lot of people started, a lot of people who had been key to building the union were concerned, and actually the chief executive came and sat on the shop floor he was calling in, even though, union recognition was going to be over his dead body, he was calling in people who were reps in the union, mainly the young union reps, all the union reps and kind of say look [the interviewee] only got himself to blame and all this kind of stuff, this is what he wanted, you know what I mean, he created this situation, all this kind of shit, so it all became really tense! Lots of tense phone calls, really difficult because I had to do stuff on the outside as well. But also there is that point as well where you worry about the momentum. If we don't do something quite sharpish, you know we will lose that momentum. But other things have happened, there was an article in the kind of third sector, in the magazine for charities. I was going round doing meetings in you know various union meetings to speak about my victimisation. I was in Oxford and invited to speak at [the union] branch there, I was on the way back from there, I heard that there was an MP who had raised it as an early day motion [laughter] This is disgraceful this kind of victimisation and so on. It was an attack on trade unionism. It was kind of very shortly after that they rang, I got a phone call that

said from the chief operations officer that, although he was spitting feathers, he gave me my job back. It is interesting I think it was the kind of pressure about how they would be seen, especially to the charities and so on, the bad press, that moralism flipped over the other way. And it was great returning, but they went for me a few more times after that again [laughter]. But then again I had done my five years at that point, which is about as much as I could take!

The example of how the campaign won the reinstatement raises a number of issues. The campaign was not limited to industrial action within the workplace itself. The workers sought to build links across other trade union branches but also more broadly within the labour movement. While these kinds of action are commonplace, they can play an important role in generalising forms of struggle and confidence. The use of what Unite (2012b) has called 'leverage' in campaigns – that is applying pressure outside of the workplace – had an important effect. The ability to exert pressure via customers, through the media, or in perception can be used to strengthen a campaign. Particularly in the example of charities there is a susceptibility to this kind of action due to the moral aspects.

The interview finished with a set of comments reflecting on the experience of trying to build organisation in a call centre. The interviewee concluded that:

> I hope that some of the work we did remains, you just hope that people who went on to other workplaces and that saw something in it and carry it on elsewhere. It was interesting though, it was always the threat of doing stuff and people were always up for doing it, and as it turned out, each time we got the desired result before it got to that, so we never got to test it out, I'm not sure what would have happened, I'm not exactly sure! [laughter] It is a lot of hard work, looking back I think that there was you know, if there was one thing that I could have done, it would have been to harden up more people you know, so there were more than a few keys individuals, because what happens if they are not there anymore. Well that is a difficult process isn't it.

The experience of the campaign that the interviewee led shows that successful organisation is possible in a high-volume sales call centre. What is particularly notable is the combination of traditional modes of trade union organisation and creative innovations relating to the labour process in the call centre. A number of challenges to organising are detailed specifically, but the high turnover emerges as the most important. As has been referred to before, Marcel van der Linden (2008:179) notion of 'the transition between "running away" and "fighting for better working conditions" is in reality rather fluid' applies in this case. The interviewee in the previous paragraph how they had 'done' their 'five years at that point, which is about as much as I could take!', which is significantly more than most workers were prepared to do at *Trade Union Cover*. However, the identification of how the experience of organising is not limited to a specific time or place is incredibly important. The interviewee applied their previous experiences from the civil service to the call centre, and hopes that workers in the call centre 'who went on to other workplaces and that saw something in it and carry it on elsewhere.'

Even projects that fail can form part of the process of organising in the future, lessons being learnt from failures as well as successes. The challenge at this stage is to understand how continuity can be achieved: both within the same workplace and between different workplaces.

7.6 *Inspiration from other workplaces*

There is inspiration that can be taken from recent struggles in other precarious workplaces. This part of the chapter will briefly examine the struggles of casual teaching staff and cleaners at universities and examples from the service sector in London.

The beginning of an academic career in university traditionally began with an apprentice phase during postgraduate study. Teaching was often given to students by supervisors in an opaque fashion, with the phase of the career being a stepping stone onto later stable roles. As Gigi (Roggero 2011:22) argues it is no longer 'a contingent phase' but has 'become a structural and permanent element' of the university. The temporary periods of casual work that were accepted due to offer of later stability have now become a generalised condition in higher education. The statistics for the 2010/2011 academic year collected by the Higher Education Statistical Agency show very high levels of casualisation in UK higher education institutions. 68.9% of research-only staff and 49.5% of teaching-only staff are employed on fixed term contracts, with little job security. This falls to 10.4% for more established staff with teaching-and-research positions (UCU 2012b). Recent research carried out by UCU (2013a) found that 53% of UK universities reported hiring staff on zero-hours contracts. These figure put higher education second only to the hotel and catering sector for levels of casualisation in the UK (UCU 2013b).

There have been a number of recent attempts to organise casual staff in university. One of the starting points was a national survey of the pay and conditions of postgraduates that teach organised by the National Union of Students (NUS). The main findings of the survey were that a 'third of postgraduate students who teach earn less than the minimum wage' and that around a third of those surveyed received no contract of employment for their teaching (NUS 2013). The use of surveys was later attempted at a number of different universities, broadening out the scope from only students that teach, with a recent successful example at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (SOAS). The local survey at SOAS found that fractional teaching staff were employed on precarious fixed term contracts and did not receive pay for all the hours that they worked. The actual hourly wage worked out

on average to be approximately £8.90 per hour, with 25% of tutors earning less than £6 per hour (Fractionals For Fair Pay n.d.). This stands in sharp contrast to the £9,000 tuition fees paid per year by the students that they teach.

The casual staff launched a campaign called 'Fractionals For Fair Play' to organise for better conditions. The survey allowed the collection of empirical evidence and also the building of networks and the development of organisation. There are similarities in the approach to that used by Roggero (2011) in his co-research project, drawing on the tradition of workers' inquiries. University workers, with training in various research methodologies, are well placed to undertaken collective co-research projects in the workplace. For example, at SOAS a postgraduate economics student was able to apply complex statistical techniques to the survey results in order to interrogate them further. The survey can therefore be an important starting point to a campaign, drawing together a disparate group of workers across departments who do not often meet collectively otherwise.

What is notable about the campaign at SOAS is that it moved beyond research to action. The workers organised a number of mass meetings and demonstrations on campus before moving on to take a form of work-to-rule action. The nature of the grievance around unpaid hours meant that the additional unpaid labour could be withdrawn without recourse to a union ballot for strike action. The workers refused to carry out the additional work, including marking essays at a decisive point of the academic year. The management at SOAS threatened to dock 100% pay from those taking part in the unofficial action, but the campaign continued. The most recent development has involved a negotiation between the union and management resulting in the offer of £150,000 compensation to fractional staff. The self-organisation of the workers in this campaign stands in contrast to the national UCU pay campaign. It ended recently with the acceptance of a 2% offer – despite a pay cut in real terms of 13% since 2008 (UCU 2014). The campaign involved one day strikes, two hours strikes, followed by a marking boycott which crumbled under the threat of 100% pay deductions at a number of universities.

The issues of low-pay and casualisation are certainly not limited to academic staff at university. There are a large number of administrative, cleaning, security, and catering workers who face deteriorating conditions. The 3 Cosas campaign was launched in 2012. It involved outsourced University of London workers fighting for three areas ("Cosas" or Spanish for "demands", widely spoken by the workforce) where there is greatest disparity between outsourced and university workers: sick pay, holidays, and pensions. A workforce that is precarious, low-paid, and is comprised of a large numbers of migrant workers suffers from numerous structural challenges, yet the vibrant campaign has had a number of successes:

Following more than a year's worth of strikes, demos, occupations and general pressure, all outsourced workers at the University of London now not only are paid at least the London Living Wage, but also receive 25 (increased from 20) days holiday and six months sick pay (dependent on length of service).

(3cosascampaign n.d.)

The campaign had workers self-organisation at its heart, but was also able to build links of solidarity with other groups of workers and students. Kirkpatrick (2014:257) argues that this is due to the 'IWW's focus on mass leadership development through education on the job and empowerment through collective direct action (as opposed to "one-step-removed" representation) – and "self-ownership" of that action.' This is certainly far removed from the general experience of Unison, a large trade union which represents cleaners on campuses across the country. The 3 Cosas campaign is still ongoing, with recent strikes against redundancies at student halls, and has the potential to go on to further successes that redefine what is possible with contemporary workplace organisation.

The proximity of researchers to the university means it is much easier to discuss struggles that take place on campus. The choice of the examples discussed so far is a result of that proximity, rather than attributing these struggles precedence over others that have taken place across London. For example, there has been a continuing dispute in construction over the past few years that deserve attention. It involved electricians on building sites being threatened with a 35% cut to pay as contractors in the British Engineering Services National Agreement (BESNA) group tried to leave the Joint Industry Board. The electricians fought back successfully against this with a campaign built at a rank-and-file level, often in opposition to Unite the union, and always with the backdrop of blacklisting (Keays 2011). The dispute involved early-morning demonstrations outside of building sites to build the campaign, particularly at the Crossrail project, with solidarity from students and activists.

There have been a number of successful campaigns in the service sector recently. The most notable has been a recent struggle for the living wage by workers at the Ritzy Cinema, in Brixton, South London. The art-house cinema is owned by Picturehouse Cinemas, which is in turn owned by one of the largest cinema chains in Europe, Cineworld. The workers have so far taken five days of strike action, with BECTU attempting to negotiate the living wage with management (Lezard 2014). The campaign has attracted solidarity from the local community, as well as film director Ken Loach and the recent appearance of footballer-turned-actor Eric Cantona on a picket line.

The various examples of struggles that have broken out are encouraging, but remain on the whole isolated. Part of the problem is that 'existing labor unions' – in the UK, as well as

globally – 'have proved incapable of mobilizing mass rank-and-file militancy to resist the ongoing deterioration in workplace conditions and the systematic erosion of workers' power.' Immanuel Ness (2014:1) continues to point out that despite this, 'workers are developing new forms of antibureaucratic and anticapitalist forms of syndicalist, council communist, and autonomist worker representation.' These experiments in new forms of organisation are important because they are 'rooted in the self-activity and democratic impulses of members and committed to developing egalitarian organizations in place of traditional union bureaucracies.'

These first steps towards new forms of organisation could offer the potential to break the deadlock of austerity currently facing down workers. However, the status of these as experiments limits them to potential rather than indicating something more substantial at this stage. It is important to remember, as Ralph Miliband (1982:13) argued, that 'left activists, generally speaking, have been a crucially important element in the labour movement and in the working class', yet at the same time they are not the labour movement, nor are they working class. So while these emergent struggles are bursting forth at particular points, they are not generalising across large numbers of workplaces at this stage. The attempts by experienced, creative, and already politicised workers to lead campaigns provide important inspiration, but can be particularly vulnerable to management strategies of victimisation. It is at this point that the conditions of precarity become particularly sharp. The attraction of the label of troublemaker, something which can happen quickly when a worker chooses to stick their head above the parapet, greatly intensifies the risk of being sacked. The longevity of these initial projects can be greatly reduced either by those at the core being forced out of the workplace or choosing to move on for other reasons.

7.7 *The challenges of working in London*

The large number of workers spread across London in precarious jobs often work in relative isolation. The cost of privately renting in London is extremely high, pushing the majority of workers out of central London and into the surrounding boroughs. The challenge of finding housing often involves exorbitant agency fees, unscrupulous landlord, and the pressure of so many other prospective tenants. Yet even moving further out in London attracts increased travel costs. The spread of the London living wage as a demand for precarious work highlights these further instances of exploitation. However, the problem with posing these solely in terms of wage rises is that it does not address why these costs are so high in the first place. Of course higher wages are worth fighting for, but if they signal to landlords that they can raise

the price of rent, they would not necessarily result in a higher standard of living. In a manner analogous to the problems of control in the workplace, many of the questions relating to transport, rent, and access to housing or public space are simply not being posed by existing organisation. The price of rent is treated as unavoidable, with the idea of rent-controls appearing as a near-transitional demand at this moment. However, as the examples of different precarious work discussed above highlight, this does not mean that a refusal is impossible. The act of refusal is the first step in the process of struggle and the task now is to identify what coordinates it might emerge from.

The contemporary urban environment has been deformed by 'the free market economy' which Trangoš et al (2014:195) argue emphasises 'the protection of private property and interprets welfare as the sum of individuals' wealth.' A clear example of this can be found with the domination of the financial centres of The City and Canary Wharf, with vast sums of money traded from their glittering office blocks. By day the city core is inhabited by bankers and the international elite, while poor, black, and immigrant populations get pushed to the periphery. The city is geographically marked by inequality, with striking difference often in close proximity. But it is also a site of struggle, as Trangoš et al (2014:191) have argued in a previous issue of *City*, since 2011 'London was a city strained by economic recession, unhinged by a wave of riots and occupied by demands for alternatives to austerity. The public presented a series of challenges to "business as usual."'

The moments of resistance in the urban environment can be conceived of in terms of Henri Lefebvre's (1967:158) notion of 'the right to the city' which 'is like a cry and a demand.' The content of such demands as explained further by Lefebvre's as:

> The right to information, the rights to use of multiple services, the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in urban areas; it would also cover the right to the use of the centre.
>
> (quoted in Marcuse 2009:189)

These are all issues that the overwhelming majority of the population of London have little or no say in. As Peter Marcuse (2009:195) argues this spatial focus can be useful, but it must be remembered that 'most problems have a spatial aspect, but their origins lie in economic, social, political arenas, the spatial being a partial cause and an aggravation, but only partial' (Marcuse 2009:195).

The translation of 'the right to city' into a demand in London could open up new possibilities. As Magrit Mayer (2009:367) has argued in *City* previously, the 'slogan has become a live wire material practice today.' The aggressive privatisation of previous years forms what David

Harvey (2003:157) calls 'the cutting edge of accumulation by dispossession', something felt particularly sharply in a city like London. The accumulation by dispossession 'has accelerated on heretofore unseen levels, which entails enormous losses of rights—civil, social, political, as well as economic rights' (Mayer 2009:367). Yet while London appears to be a site of huge inequalities and intense exploitation, it could also be a powerful field of struggle.

The geographic spread of workers means that there are not often collective points at which workers from a particular workplace meet outside of work. The pressure of high rents means that people will move regularly and are therefore not able to become meaningfully rooted in communities. Stuart Hodkinson and Paul Chatterton (2006:310) consider the tradition of social centres in the UK and note how different the tradition is from Europe, where they are much more common. Social centres are one possible form that could mobilise geographic demands. The defining feature of social centres is 'their simultaneous politicization of the very act of reclaiming private space and opening it up to the public as part of a conscious refusal and confrontation to neo-liberalism and the enclosure of urban space.' Certainly the conditions in London are ripe for the establishment of such forms, 'as in Italy, a common theme of city or town-centre-based social centres is their opposition to gentrification.' The examples of casual teaching staff and cleaners already have a shared location in the university. This has allowed for connections of solidarity to be forged between the two groups and also with students. In other examples of precarious work there are not workplaces comprised by a large number of different workers with opportunities to meet collectively. Therefore the challenge is to organise from the grievances and demands that emerge organically from the urban environment.

In Italy there is a particular tradition of social centres and urban struggle. Alongside the innovative approach to workplace investigation and struggle, the 'operaismo took the form of direct action in the workplace and in the community through the refusal to pay rent, and bills for electricity, and other necessary services' (Ness 2014:8). For many in London the idea of a rent strike is almost unthinkable, particularly if the demand for rent control seems outlandish at this point. At an individual level these forms of struggle would result in harsh sanctions that would be difficult to resist. This stands in contrast to the 'autonomist workers and community associations' that 'were engaged in a tactic, rather than wantonly jeopardizing the lives of workers and their families' (Ness 2014:8). The composition and conditions of the working class were not the same, along with different traditions of struggle. It is not possible to transplant tactics from one set of conditions into another, but nevertheless they remain possibilities. The tactic of inquiries can be used in local communities as well as workplaces. Again, they can form the beginning of a project of organisation that starts with the co-production of knowledge:

who lives in the area, where do people work, who do they rent from, and what kinds of grievances to people have?

7.8 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to discuss the challenges of organisation for precarious workers focussing on call centres. It started with a discussion of the possibilities for organising outside of the workplace and explored the relationship between trade unions and *Trade Union Cover* in more detail. The next part discussed the concept of precarious labour, considering different theoretical positions and implications. The concept of Precariat was rejected in favour of the heterogeneous category of precarious worker.

The next part of the chapter moved on to survey the contemporary state of trade unionism in the UK, particularly in the lack of organisation in the private service sector. These failures are understood in terms of the post-Thatcher defeats. The next part considered alternative sources of collectivity and the notion of community unionism. The dominance of the service model of trade unionism was discussed next, looking at the example of how unions promote membership. His was contrasted with the campaign from an Australian union that made insurance provision a demand rather than a service. The shift towards service provision from the leadership of trade unions was contextualised with examples of the sales calls from *Trade Union Cover*, providing services on behalf of unions. The final part of this section discussed what other strategies could be applied, focusing particularly on what an organising model would involve.

The chapter then returned to discuss call centres specifically with an interview that detailed an organisational project at a similar call centre to *Trade Union Cover*. In addition to the details about the labour process and behaviour of management, the interviewee detailed the prevalence of victimisation as a deliberate strategy to prevent workers from organising. The conclusion of the interviewees experience was that organising in call centre needed to focus on two components: detailed work to find and exploit every opportunity available inside and outside of the workplace and victories. Although the interviewee faced the problems of worker retention and eventually left the workplace the example is positive, highlighting a number of important possibilities. The chapter then included a number of examples from other workplaces: casual teaching staff, cleaners, electricians, and cinema workers. These examples indicate the importance of creative and innovative approaches that start from the workplace

level. The final part considered the specific challenges of working in London and how the geography contains both opportunities and further grievances.

The significance of *Trade Union Cover* as an empirical example stems from its position as an unorganised workplace that is closely tied up with the rise of service based trade unionism. The provision of specialised services has been targeted by companies seeking additional avenues of profit, treating it like any other customer segmentation. Despite the negative effects of a shift towards service unionism it is hardly a surprise that it is happening. It is a logical response on the part of the trade union bureaucracy to addressing the falling numbers of members and subsequent fall in income. Engaging in a combative organising drive entails a large risk for unions, especially during a period of austerity. Therefore, while the proposals for an organising model are of course important, it is necessary to ask what is the organising for. If the organising is based on a romantic notion of returning to a golden age of trade unionism it would be severely limited. For those in workplaces where there is an existing trade union – mainly in the public sector – it makes sense to organise within existing trade union structures. Density remains relatively high and in many workplaces there are democratic structures that can be organised within. However for the vast majority of workers – including those in call centres – it is not even clear which of the existing trade unions workers could join if they wanted to.

The critique of the current state of trade unionism in the UK is not intended as a generalised criticism of trade unionism. Trade unions have been the subject of a sustained attack since the 1970s and perhaps what is notable is that, despite how low the levels are generally, there is still organisation in the public sector. However, it is necessary to highlight how trade unions have effectively failed to challenge the agenda of austerity and most of their members are suffering from continuing attacks on their terms and conditions. The only signs of organised resistance have been the collection of one day strikes, symbolic moments of action. However as Zerzan (1976) notes, 'as far back as 1952 a sociologist was advising management that "yearly strikes should be arranged, inasmuch as they work so effectively to dissipate discontent"' (G. Taylor 1952). In this light the national strike days appear more of a cynical move by the trade union leadership. By giving up on the question of control of the labour process and instead limiting themselves to defensive campaigns, trade unions have failed to relate to the anger and resistance at a workplace level. They remain organisations in which arguments – at least to some degree – can be posed and organisational initiatives tried out.

The question is very different when considering the private sector. Workers who want to organise a strike will have to be members of trade union in order to gain legal coverage and

the right to organise a strike. This means connecting the workplace organisation to an existing trade union, then seeking approval from outside of the workplace for the strike. There are, however, examples of campaigns taking place that have sought to find alternatives for this bureaucratic petitioning. The 3 Cosas campaign discussed earlier was involved in strike action, while Unison the established trade union in the workplace did not (3cosascampaign n.d.). The workers joined a small worker-run trade union called the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain and have organised a vibrant campaign and a number of strike days. A further example was the establishment of a 'pop-up union' at Sussex university (The Pop-Up Union n.d.). It was a temporary trade union formed to oppose the privatisation of 235 jobs on the university campus. The aim was to bring together effected workers, regardless of whether they were members of existing unions, and ballot for strike action over the issue. While both of these examples remain fairly isolated, they are an indication of the possible creative solutions that are emerging to the problems of organisation today.

At *Trade Union* Cover the question of trade unionism is particularly complex. The workers main experience of trade unionism is being a part of the provision of services to members, rather than seeing it as a vehicle for struggle in their own workplace. The challenge for organising in this workplace is how to relate to trade unions which are also customers. While it may at first appear that trade union officials would rush to take advantage of this opportunity, in practice they were reluctant to discuss it, let alone take action. The need to leverage one's own union and employer to open up the space to organise in the workplace is a particularly unusual situation. The relationship highlighted in the example of the call centre is not an aberration, but rather a damning indictment of the state of contemporary trade unionism in the UK. Although the hypothetical situation at the trade union conference discussed at the beginning of this chapter never – as far as I know – came into being. There is a need to reveal further these relationships that the trade union bureaucracy focuses on instead of organising workers. Where there are existing trade unions workers should organise within them, but focus on the building of workplace organisation and democracy. Where there are not, new forms of organisation can come into being.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

The thesis began with a discussion of the BBC documentary *The Call Centre* (BBC 2013). This brief glimpse into a call centre leaves much missing from the picture, which is no surprise given its intention to entertain or amuse. It is interesting – in a depressing way – that this kind of work is presented as an object of humour, in a similar way to the example of *The Undercover Boss* (Lambert 2010) discussed earlier also. The proliferation of such programmes is closely tied up with questions of power, in part because the only time we tend to hear these worker's voices is during the scripted encounters that attract so much frustration, and partly as it is swept up in the drive to commoditise new sphere of social life through the lens of reality television. The narrator introduces *The Call Centre* by explaining that 'with a sales floor simmering with stress, sex, and success . . . there's never a dull day when you work at this Swansea call centre.' However, rather than this being an incisive analysis of work, it is indicative the reality TV format in general as 'it was clear that working class participants were being recruited for entertainment purposes' (Skeggs and Wood 2012:216). Therefore it is no surprise that a format which created a series like *Benefit Street* (Channel 4 2014) is unlikely to offer an insight into working class self-activity and the possibility of social or political change. The narrative of *Benefits Street* reinforces the class-based notion of an undeserving poor, in *The Call Centre* resistance to Nev seems futile.

The cold call is central to the experience of living under late capitalism. The regularity with which I received unsolicited calls from anonymous workers trying to peddle some pointless product is astonishing: PPI repayments, accident compensation claims, mobile or broadband packages, even some which are more straightforward scams. I seemed to invariably get a sales call while writing, as has been noted before. This adds a dimension to call centre work that it is almost universally reviled, both by those who have experienced working it or those on the other end of the phone. When presenting aspects of the PhD at academic conferences I am surprised at the number of anecdotal stories that people want to share afterwards. The call centre has become a symbol of post-manufacturing changes of neoliberal capitalism.

The aim of this thesis is different; it is neither an exploitation of the conditions for entertainment, nor is it limited to finding novel ways that customers have dealt with the annoyance of cold calls. Instead this thesis has sought to combine a detailed ethnography of a

particular call centre – *Trade Union Cover* – with a theoretical discussion of the implications of new forms of work and the potential for resistance and organisation.

8.1 *Reflections on the method*

The thesis examined a number of different moments of the workers' inquiry from Marx, the Johnson-Forest Tendency, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the *Operaismo*. The chapter on methodology sought to draw out a number of inspirations to inform a method to study a call centre in detail. The contribution from Marx was not limited to his call for the workers' inquiry (Marx 1880). The method that he laid out was not appropriate for this investigation, yet the theoretical justification for the inquiry is more useful. Marx's argument for the project is twofold: socialists need to develop an analysis of the conditions of the working class, but this is best achieved by workers themselves who are capable of transforming said conditions. Therefore while Marx's specific contribution to the method is limited, the analysis of capital and its silences provides the theoretical backdrop for the investigation.

I had no previous contact with workers in the call centre before becoming employed there which had implications for the method. While the contributions of the Johnson-Forest Tendency and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* represent important developments, it was not possible to use the form of working class documentary that Dunayevskaya described as the 'full fountain pen' method (Worcester 1995:125). To illustrate the difficulties of this, I met up with a group of workers from *Trade Union Cover* after we had all left the call centre. As a group we had tried to organise in the call centre and had met regularly after work, as described in the previous chapter. During my time at the call centre the question of research had come up a number of times: supervisors could not care less what I did with my time outside of work and the other workers were not particularly interested in the subject of my PhD. Researchers can often attribute a level of importance to their own research that is not shared by others, assuming that because they spend so much time on it others will want to know all about it too. I explained to the other workers that I was writing my thesis about *Trade Union Cover* and detailed some of the research questions. This was met with puzzled responses: why would anyone want to write about call centres? A few of the group thought that it might be worthwhile to consider our experiences of trying to organise, but none of them wanted to read anything that I had written. The refusal of work continued even after leaving the call centre. We continued to have discussions that informed the writing up of the thesis, yet the experience echoed Stephen Williams Hastings-King (2014:106) commentary on the difficulty in collecting worker testimony that faced *Socialisme ou Barbarie*: 'workers simply did not write.'

The lack of contact with workers in general at the beginning of the project posed an immediate access challenge. Not only did I not have access to workers to start an inquiry, neither did I have a sense of which workplace would be suitable to study. The method had to begin as an inquiry 'from above' (Rieser 2001:4). Applying to work at call centres through online applications meant the choice of workplace was relatively random, yet it followed the same route that other workers took to find casual call centre work. It is important to note that *Trade Union Cover* is an unusual example, the connection to trade unions unlikely to be found elsewhere. However, one empirical example is not going to be representative of call centres in general. In particular *Trade Union Cover* was a relatively small specialised call centre located in London. Therefore a comparison to a public sector call centre in the north of England would involve a number of different factors. However, there are a number of dynamics that emerged in the research that can be generalised, and these will be discussed in more detail in the next section. In particular the relationship between trade unions and *Trade Union Cover* provides an interesting insight into the growth of service based trade unionism that would not have been possible otherwise.

The debates in the journals of the *Operaismo* informed the development of the inquiry conducted for the thesis. It is clear that an inquiry 'from below' was not possible at the start of the research, as Vittorio Rieser argues 'it requires being in a condition where you are pursuing enquiry with workers that you are organizing or workers that are already organized.' The intention was to begin with the inquiry 'from above' and seek to move towards one 'from below' and develop a co-research project in the call centre (Rieser 2001:4). The decision to find employment in the call centre was taken with two objectives: to undertake a detailed ethnography of the labour process and meet other workers. By these measures the thesis achieved its aims. It produced a detailed and rich ethnographic account of the experience of the labour process, management, and the moments of resistance in the call centre. While I met and organised with different workers during my time at *Trade Union Cover* it was not possible to develop the thesis into a co-research project. I discussed ideas and strategies with a number of workers but this remained informal. The difficulties outlined before in trying to involve workers in a more formal manner are not surprising. The refusal of work was not limited to a rejection of working at the call centre itself. It also extended outside the workplace: not wanting to talk, read, or write about call centres after work ended.

This experience is similar to that of the Kolinko (2002) call centre inquiry discussed before. The intention of their project was to find struggles to engage and intervene in. Yet they conclude by saying that 'the absence of open workers' struggles limited our own room for "movement."' While there were the moments of resistance to relate to in the call centre the experience was

far removed from that described by the interviewee in chapter 7. The decision to begin organisation at *Trade Union Cover* was taken collectively by a small group of workers. However, it was catalysed by an intervention that I made. As Michael Burawoy (1998:14) argues 'interventions create perturbation that are not noise to be expurgated but music to be appreciated, transmitting the hidden secrets of the participant's world.' The attempts to build organisation would have been pointless if the other workers were not interested or prepared to be involved. The discussions that we had at the initial stages were particularly useful for the research

The inquiry conducted in the thesis had a secondary objective in addition to developing an analysis of call centres. The thesis intended to test out a method for conducting a close analysis of a particular workplace and argue that there is a need for further research of this kind.

8.2 *Research findings*

This section of the chapter summarises and reflects on the key research findings of the thesis. It is divided into five themes: the labour process, management, resistance, the refusal of work, and organisation.

8.2.1 *The labour process*

The theorisation of the labour process began from the ethnographic research. It provides an account of what it is like to be employed in a workplace that subjects workers to intense surveillance and aggressive sales targets. At *Trade Union Cover* this meant a non-stop process of making calls with strictly observed breaks counted to the second. It involved making terrible jokes over and over while faking laughter to them each time in the hope of securing more insurance sales. It demanded sitting through demeaning "buzz sessions" and excruciating "1-2-1" sessions that force the worker to auto-critique themselves, internalising management nonsense. It meant speaking to a trade union member on dialysis or another who had just lost their baby to leukaemia with a supervisor standing over you filled with glee at the prospect of an easy sale. The intention was to present, like Romano did for the manufacturing plant in *The American Worker*, an analysis that 'never for a single moment permits the reader to forget that the contradictions in the process of production make life an agony of toil for the worker' (Stone 1947).

The theoretical analysis of the labour process found that work in the call centre was organised along Taylorist management principles. For Frederick Taylor (1967:39) this meant that the 'task specifies not only what is to be done, but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it.' The scripting of the call encounters represents a clear example of the separation of conception from execution in the labour process. There was a contradiction between the qualitative demands for high customer service and the quantitative demand to increasing the number of sales, a feature identified by Taylor & Bain (1999:110) in their conclusion that 'even in the most quality driven call centre it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the labour process is intrinsically demanding, repetitive and, frequently, stressful.' The findings of the thesis confirm their conclusion that the labour process creates the experience for workers of 'an assembly-line in the head' (Taylor & Bain 1999:109).

The implication of this process for workers was articulated with the concepts of emotional and affective labour. When Nev explained that "happy people sell, miserable bastards don't", he hinted towards the complexity of this (BBC 2013). The transformations that have taken place in the contemporary economy have involved a shift from the exploitation of the bodies of workers during the Fordist mode of production to exploiting the minds and emotions of workers in increasingly larger numbers. While Hochschild's (2012) concept of emotional labour is an important starting point for this process, capturing the additional components of the labour process in service work, it is problematic in terms of the conclusions for authenticity and self. This is clarified further by the distinction between '*brain workers'* and '*chain workers*.'

While highly skilled '*brain workers*' use 'communication, invention and creation', the '*chain workers*' like those in call centres are 'people who sit at their terminals in front of a screen, repeating every day the same operation a thousand times', and 'relate to their labor in a way similar to industrial workers' (Berardi 2009:87). The call centre worker is therefore an appendage to a new kind of machine. No longer faced with the same physical demands of the assembly line, the new demand is for a repetition of the same performance trying to convince people to part with their money for insurance over the phone. The reaction to this is not the loss or alienation of some part of the self; rather it is a 'condition of estrangement from the mode of production and its rules, as refusal of work' (Berardi 2009:46). In the call centre, like many of the 'bullshit jobs' Graeber (2013) describes, it is not a question of seizing back the means of production in order to fulfil the workers potential, but resistance is more likely to take the form of refusal.

8.2.2 *Management*

The role of management in the call centre was detailed through the ethnographic research. The thesis began with the figure of Nev, declaring his 'Napoleon . . . a dictator' was his inspiration (BBC 2013). However, this ridiculous statement was not just a performance for the TV programme, instead it indicator how much power managers and supervisors have on the call centre floor. Goodrich's (1975) notion of the 'frontier of control' as a contestable line between workers and management in a workplace was difficult to trace. The use of technological methods of control and supervision in the call centre has increased the power of management: logging time on calls, recording all conversations for immediate playback, timing breaks to the second, and generating statistical report. The lack of trade union organisation has created the conditions at *Trade Union Cover* in which management power has developed relatively unchecked. In this context it is easy to over-generalise and Taylor and Bain's point that this 'represents an unprecedented level of *attempted* control which must be considered a novel departure' (Taylor & Bain 1999:109), is worth bearing in mind.

The metaphor of the Panopticon – which has been frequently referred to in the literature – was used to illustrate the process of surveillance and control in the call centre. By returning to Bentham's (1995) Panopticon writings before looking at Foucault (1991), the Panopticon was used as a theoretical metaphor to explore the empirical research in detail. The Panopticon, both physically and in terms of processes – maps easily onto the organisation of the call centre, however it is important to note that the 'factory and the office are neither prison nor asylum, their social architectures never those of the total institution' (McKinlay & Taylor 1998:175). The features of the call centre as a site in which the 'dynamic process of capital accumulation' takes place means that it can understate 'both the voluntary dimension of labour and the managerial need to elicit commitment from workers.' This leads to a problematic analysis, one which can 'disavow the possibilities for collective organisation and resistance' (Taylor & Bain 1999:103). However, as Chapter 5 argues, if these limitations are taken into account, the metaphor of the Panopticon can be used effectively to illustrate what management attempts to achieve on the call centre floor.

The example of the undercover consultant illustrates how supervision in the call centre remains a challenge despite all of the different methods at management's disposal. The computer surveillance methods create vast quantities of data; however a lack of knowledge about the labour process itself limits its usefulness. Therefore an undercover consultant was employed by *Trade Union Cover* to go through the training process and work on the call centre

floor to find novel ways to intensify the labour process. The process seemed remarkably similar to the reality TV show *The Undercover Boss* (Lambert 2010), yet without the cameras the consultant was prepared to offer insights into the thought processes of management – revealing a distain for trade unions in general and workers in particular. Management's undercover research follows in the footsteps of Taylor's Midvale Steel Company experiments, in which he argued that 'managers assume . . . the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulae' (F. Taylor 1967:36).

These challenges are clear from the ethnography on the call centre floor. The power of supervisors in *Trade Union Cover* tends towards creating a bullying and often sexist behaviour. Yet when the ability of supervisors to motivate workers to increase their sales is considered another picture emerges. The record of the "1-2-1" meetings I had with supervisors indicates a lack of knowledge about how sales are made or what kind of encouragement can be used. The task of management to motivate workers who do not want to be at work is captured by Cederström and Fleming (2012:10) analysis of the "buzz session" as an attempt 'to *inject life into the dead-zone of work*.' The reliance on empty rhetoric and a form of quasi-Maoist auto-critique indicates a management that is far from all powerful. The refusal of work – most often expressed as a high staff turnover – is recognised as a 'moderate concern' by 55% percent of call centres surveyed by Income Data Services, with managers offering thirty-four different responses to address it (IDS 2012:59). At *Trade Union Cover* this was clear from the widespread use of leaving work early as a motivational incentive. When this factor is focused on the power of management in the call centre seems greatly reduced: in the end, without workers on the phones it is certain that no sales will be made.

8.2.3 *Resistance*

The main aim of the thesis was discover whether workers engaged in resistance in the context of the call centre workplace. This required the development of an analysis that was sensitive to the wide variety of forms that this could take. It used a visual analogy to capture the difficulty of doing this and engaged in an active empirical inquiry. Chapter 6 began with a discussion of the connection between slavery and modern capitalism. This was not intended to equate call centre workers as slaves, but rather to understand how the 'deeply embedded connection of management to racial brutality and to hubris regarding racial knowledge had matured in slavery, settlement, and empire' (Roediger & Esch 2012:141). If there is such a connection

with management, the history of slave revolts and the struggles of indentured workers can also shed light on different forms of workers resistance. Of particular importance are acts of resistance that begin from a refusal: the slowdown, sabotage, and running away from work – whether temporarily in a strike or permanently.

Chapter 6 presented the research findings on resistance: there were a wide variety of covert forms of resistance used by workers at *Trade Union Cover*. In order to clarify the findings, Kate Mulholland (2004) identification of the 'repertoire of resistance strategies' used by workers at an Irish call centre was used. She described these as '*Slammin' Scammin' Smokin' an' Leavin*" – or 'cheating, work avoidance, absence and resignation' (Mulholland 2004:713). The first moment of resistance discussed by Mulholland was '*Slammin'*,' the process of faking a sales encounter. This moment is the only one that does map directly onto a form found at *Trade Union Cover*, other than one rare example. This is due in part to the application of financial regulations to selling insurance. However, frequently the topic was raised in conversations of how a sale could be faked, and the supervisors regularly pointed out that "selling on cancellation" was a disciplinary offence.

The second form of resistance was '*Scammin'*.' This involves the various attempts by workers to avoid work. This was found to be incredibly common at *Trade Union Cover*. During the shift were a number of opportunities to extend time off the phones: from the lunch break, "buzz session", training, to the shorter breaks. This should have not been possible due to the electronic surveillance; however the supervisors misused the system, for example, by logging training or "buzz sessions" as breaks. This meant that the actual time on the break was harder to gauge and could therefore be extended. Informal organisation emerged with strategies to stretch out the "buzz sessions", not inform supervisors of the leads running dry, or resetting the break timers. The third form is a specific kind of work avoidance by '*Smokin'*.' Almost all of the workers at *Trade Union Cover* would leave the workplace during the fifteen minute breaks, whether they smoked or not. The importance of this is indicated by Mulholland, who argues:

> the habit of meeting is also important for it encourages work group identity and a shared sense of grievance when workers discuss training, staff shortage, disappointments over pay, prize giving, the excessive monitoring, arbitrary discipline and not least productivity pressures.
>
> (Mulholland 2004:719)

This was the case at *Trade Union Cover*. The initial conversations about organising began during the smoking breaks, along with general venting about different grievances. The importance of smoking breaks was stressed by the interviewee in Chapter 7, as they provide an opportunity for discussion away from the supervisory gaze.

The final form of resistance is 'leavin',' or quitting the job. This was very common at *Trade Union Cover*, with every worker I started with leaving the job before the end of my research project. Although '*leavin*' might seem like the archetypal individual act it forms 'part of a more widespread pattern of work rejection' (Mulholland 2004:720), and as identified by Marcel van der Linden (2008:179) that the exit from work is not vastly dissimilar to a strike: the 'transition between "running away" and "fighting for better working conditions" is in reality rather fluid.' This final form is crucial for the analysis of resistance in the call centre conducted in this thesis. While it is often seen as an expression of the structural weakness of call centre workers it is possible to reverse the understanding in a way that returns agency to the workers. It is an indicator of a generalised refusal of work, which will be discussed in the following section.

These moments of resistance complicated the empirical research. My relationship to acts of resistance required an intervention, whether by choosing to take part or not. Michael Burawoy (1998:14), as discussed earlier, argues that 'interventions' do not need to be minimised. They 'create perturbations that are not noise to be expurgated but music to be appreciated, transmitting the hidden secrets of the participant's world.' If I had not been working on the call centre floor it would not have been possible to uncover the covert acts of resistance, although '*leavin*' is such a widespread phenomenon it is difficult to miss. The forms of resistance are reminiscent of Braverman's (1999:104) description of 'the hostility of workers to the degenerated forms of work which are forced upon them' and continue 'as a subterranean stream that makes its way to the surface' at certain points. The '*leavin*' that Mulholland (2004:720) refers to is the moment the water rushes upward – the event that consolidates all of the small acts of resistance that build up over time.

8.2.4 *The refusal of work*

The question of high-turnover and '*leavin*' (Mulholland 2004:713) as a form of resistance in the call centre was developed into the theme of the refusal of work. This is theoretically understood as an important phenomenon that represents workers exercising their limited choice, rather than an indication of their inability to organise. The phenomenon is characteristic of many service sector jobs but it is particularly prevalent in call centres. While it poses a significant obstacle to building formal organisation in a workplace it can also be an untapped source of collectivity. As a shared experience, which also leads to common forms of action, it holds the potential to catalyse informal organisation.

The thesis has sought to reverse the problem of high-turnover from an inhibiting factor to a potential strength. Through an investigation of the connection between Paul Lafargue and C.L.R. James, and the link that Christopher Taylor identifies between *Operaismo* and the Caribbean, an argument is posed about the possibilities of an anti-work politics. If there is a historical connection between modern management techniques and slave owners, the development of struggle between these forms is also important. As Christopher Taylor (2014:7), argues – and it is definitely worth reiterating – 'while labor in a plantation society and labor in Fordist society are qualitatively different, the plantation and the factory are both constituted through an antagonistic dialectic, pitting a workforce striving for "universality" against the regime of labor in capitalism.'

The search to uncover the subjects of revolt is therefore the search for those engaging in a refusal: from the slave, the Fordist worker, to the precarious worker seeking to regain some of their autonomy. The anti-work perspective provides a critique that is not limited to the question of control of the labour process – even though this is absent at this point anyway. In the context of Graeber's (2013) categorisation of 'bullshit jobs' it is possible, as Christopher Taylor (2014:17) argues, to go further than 'moralistic invocations of labor's value' that 'appear grotesquely comical.'

The analysis of the technology in the call centre has important implications for translating the traditions of trade unionism into new contexts. To pose the question of workers' control in the call centre is quite different to the factory, the hospital, or the university. It is difficult to imagine how the call centre could become part of a revolutionary process with 'workers' control and councils as the base of a self-determined socialist society' (Ness & Azzellini 2011:2). The refusal of work in the call centre is connected to its specifically capitalist organisation. The call centre strips the encounters over the phone of all the social dimension of communication that cannot be instrumentalised. There could be strategic uses during a period of struggle, for example mass calling to mobilise other workers, but would they continue after that?

8.2.5 *Organisation*

The theme of organisation tentatively emerged during the ethnographic research in Chapter 6 and was developed further with other examples in Chapter 7. No formal union organisation was created at *Trade Union Cover*. It is possible that a longer project at the workplace could have developed and tested forms of organisation in collaboration with other workers, but as

detailed in Chapter 4, my own exit from the call centre precluded this. The refusal of work and high turnover in the call centre combines with the precarious conditions in which workers are employed. This precarity should not be understood as an exceptional form of employment relation under capitalism. Apart from a relatively brief period of Fordist employment for men in Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, the working class has relied on insecure employment for its reproduction. However, the rise of neoliberalism and the collapse of the Fordist model has involved a transformation of employment relations, particularly with the way in which precarity is 'built into neoliberal capitalism' (Seymour 2012). The reserve army of labour has always generated a level of precarity. The extension of this beyond the traditional working class means that this phenomenon has now become more common.

The state of contemporary trade unionism is important to consider in two ways: the first is that given that trade unions have been facing a sustained ideological attack since the 1970s – alongside serious defeats for organised labour – the continued existence of trade unions can be considered a success. However, the resignation of trade unionism to the public sector entails a failure to relate to workplace resistance in the private sector. The context of this criticism is intended as part of a constructive debate about the future of trade unionism, rather than blaming rank and file trade union members for the class-based project of neoliberalism or the failure of the union leadership. As Taylor and Bain (2001:62) argue 'the future success of trade unions in call centres will depend in no small measure on their ability to contest and redefine the frontiers of control on terms desired by their members.' This requires a break from the conception of unions as service providers to a shrinking base of members, and a move towards combative organisations that are focused on workplace struggle. The example of *Trade Union Cover* provides a unique insight into the relationship upon which service unionism has developed and even become a source of profit for capital.

The interview conducted with a worker who led a struggle in a similar call centre provides a powerful example of workers self-organisation. Despite the threat of victimisation in the call centre, the workers developed strategies to build formal and informal organisation in the workplace. The combination of detailed, persistent work with tangible victories proved successful in this example. However, the approach relies on pre-politicised activists with the experience and drive to follow through the initial attempts. It is important to identify and analyse examples of successful projects, both in call centres, but also with the casual teaching staff, cleaners, electricians, and cinema workers discussed in Chapter 7. What is particularly notable is the combination of traditional modes of trade union organisation and creative innovations relating to the labour process in the call centre. A number of challenges to organising are detailed specifically, but the high turnover emerges as the most important. As

has been referred to before, Marcel van der Linden (2008:179) notion of 'the transition between "running away" and "fighting for better working conditions" is in reality rather fluid' applies in this case. The interviewee concluded that by the end, they had 'done' their 'five years at that point, which is about as much as I could take!', which is significantly more than most workers were prepared to do at *Trade Union Cover*. However, the identification of how the experience of organising is not limited to a specific time or place is incredibly important. The interviewee applied their previous experiences from the civil service to the call centre, and hopes that workers in the call centre 'who went on to other workplaces and that saw something in it and carry it on elsewhere.' Even projects that fail can form part of the process of organising in the future, lessons being learnt from failures as well as successes. The problem at this stage is developing an understanding of how that continuity can be encouraged.

8.3 *Conclusion*

To conclude, this thesis has provided an in-depth ethnography and theoretical analysis of a call centre. The account of *Trade Union Cover* is a different representation to that found in *The Call Centre* (BBC 2013), focusing the analytical lens on the resistance of workers. The class composition of the workers is understood through two dimensions. The technical composition in the call centre involves a highly regulated labour process to which advanced technological methods of surveillance and control have been applied. The relationship between workers and supervisors is one defined by the relatively unchecked power of management. The political composition that is related to this, but not defined by it, is more complex. The workforce is young and predominantly female. There were no traditions of trade unionism or organised politics. Despite this the workforce was *political*. Although few had any experience of taking part in organised workplace struggles or social movements the temporary but repetitive expressions of the refusal of work were almost universal at *Trade Union Cover*. These workers were unburdened by the experiences of working class defeats, not feeling the 'tradition of all dead generations' weighing 'like a nightmare ' upon them (Marx 1852). A process of political recomposition takes place with the experiences of struggle – whether successful or not – in the workplace. The creativity of these workers – also found with the interviewee and the other examples in Chapter 7 – holds the potential for a new wave of struggle to organise the unorganisable.

The central argument of this thesis is that the workers at *Trade Union Cover* did resist in the workplace. The thesis develops this point to consider how the labour process creates the opportunity for different forms of resistance and how these could be connected to forms of

organisation. The significance of this argument is that the majority of workers in the UK are employed in jobs with no recognised trade union. The average trade union density in 2011 was 26% across the economy, falling to 14.1% in the private sector (Brownlie 2012:11). So far the transformation of contemporary work has not been met with new and innovative forms of workers' organisation. It does not matter if workers see themselves as 'fully conscious agents engaged in class struggle, in seeking to control, management did' (Thompson & Ackroyd 1995:617). In the context of continuing austerity the question of where resistance will come from and who could be potential subjects of social change are both of great importance.

The analysis of the methods of surveillance and control confirms much of the other research in the fields: management has been able to create a highly controlling environment in call centre, often without an organised response from formal trade unions. The precarious employment conditions have been conceptualised as part of the long history of struggle between capital and labour, a relationship which is always precarious to some degree for workers, yet can become more or less intense. In a situation in which workers are not organised into formal trade unions the experience of precarity is particular sharp. It is for this reason that finding small acts of resistance in the call centre, like those identified by Mulholland (2004), are so important. The thesis has gone beyond just identifying these moments of resistance, analysing each as expression of a refusal. The implications of this extend beyond *Trade Union Cover*: even when workers are faced with numerous challenges and obstacles the possibility for resistance remains.

8.4 *Direction for future research*

The thesis has opened up further avenues for research. In terms of the case study at *Trade Union Cover*, research could interrogate the relationship between the private profit-making call centre company and the trade unions further. The initial attempts to follow this up with trade union officials was unsuccessful, hinting at the possibility that the relationships developed for the delivery of membership services may be problematic. Whatever lies behind the reluctance of the officials to discuss this further, the service union model has involved subcontracting a private company with anti-trade union practices to profit from insurance provision. This factor alone is a revealing contribution to the debate on different union models.

In addition to direct follow up research from this thesis, further projects could be developed that deploy a similar method. Call centres are certainly not the only workplace that employs workers on precarious contracts with low pay and poor conditions. There is a pressing need for

in-depth studies of workplace resistance in other contexts that can shed light on the challenges of organising in contemporary Britain. As discussed earlier in the chapter there has been a renewed interest in the workers' inquiry. There are a number of debates about the use of the method and its potential role in the analysis of contemporary work. What is need are further attempts at workers' inquiries. These can either be conducted where we work ourselves, where we have contact with workers already, or in workplaces where we want to make contact with workers. They should follow on from Marx's (1843) call for a '*ruthless criticism of the existing order*, ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries, nor from conflict with the powers that be.'

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