

***CALL CENTRE: ÉCRASEZ L'INFÂME! REVIEW OF
JAMIE WOODCOCK'S WORKING THE PHONES:
CONTROL AND RESISTANCE IN CALL CENTRES***

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Abstract: This is a review of Jamie Woodcock's study of the call centre as a workplace, *Working the Phones*. The text discusses the methodology of co-research and the results of Woodcock's engagement with forms of control and resistance in call centres.

Keywords: co-research, call centre, control, resistance, *operaismo*.

There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons.

Gilles Deleuze, *Postscript on the Societies of Control*

For six months Jamie Woodcock, like millions of people around the world and a significant percentage of students, took up employment in a growing sector of the contemporary economy, one that has become somewhat symbolic of today's capitalism. The job he took was one that people do not want to do, but that, along with a few other jobs, is relatively easy to get: an operator (telephone consultant) in a UK sales call centre (the research that he carried out there formed the basic material for his PhD thesis). His study of this particular sector of the economy, which the majority of workers try to keep away from as far as possible, certainly provides for eye-opening observations about the world we live in. However, the book's greatest advantage lies in its unique approach, that of *co-ricerca* or "co-research". This "extravagant" approach by no means pretends to be "apolitical" or "objective." On the contrary, the essence of it is "ferocious unilaterality" (Tronti 1966a).¹ As Mario Tronti, one of the main proponents of this approach, puts it: "class science was to be no less partial than that of capital; what it alone could offer, however, was the possibility of destroying the thralldom of labour once and for all" (as quoted in: Woodcock 2017, 29–30). The science of capital, which in its rudest form is called *human resources management*,² aims at an efficient management of alienated labour, i.e. increasing the exploitation of the working class, while the *science of working class aims at the destruction of all society based on alienated labour*, i.e. abolishing the exploitation of the working class.

Co-research is rooted in a radical Marxist tradition that emphasizes the importance of active, equal and partner relations between the "researcher" and the "researched," and moves towards sublating the subject and object of study. It stems from a general assumption "that the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves" (Marx 1950, 350), rather than led by some expert or scientist. This tradition

¹ This certainly does not mean that the researcher can distort or ignore any facts or phenomena encountered during the study. It simply means that the interpretation of these facts occurs from the perspective of the working class as part of the struggle to liberate them from the power of the bosses and capitalist social relations.

² Human resources management is not the only science of capital nor even the main one. The mainstream social sciences have done capitalism an enormous favour by presenting capitalist society as an objective thing that can only be described (albeit sometimes critically), and not understood as the outcome of human activity (or lack thereof) and as *the matter of class struggle*.

endeavours to identify the strengths and weaknesses of workers in their struggle against capital, and not simply to passively contemplate or describe this struggle. Indeed, it aims *to magnify the destructive power of workers in a bid to bring the kingdom of freedom, that is to say, communism, nearer* (because the power of destruction and the destruction of power is also the power of creation and the creation of counter-power). The “red thread” of this insurgent methodology leads from the sort of “workers’ inquiry” that Marx himself proposed, through the attempts made by American Trotskyists of the Johnson-Forest Tendency (e.g. the legendary book *American Worker* co-written by Paul Romano, who worked in the automotive industry, and Grace Lee Boggs, who used her party pseudonym Ria Stone) and the French group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which included many now famous members (Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort, and Jean-François Lyotard among others) and was active from the 1940s to the 1960s. Finally, the main inspiration for the approach is *operaismo*, a major current of Italian Marxism, formed in the 1960s in radical leftist milieus around journals such as *Quaderni Rossi* (Red Notebooks) and *Classe Operaia* (Working Class), which tried to investigate the real experience of the working class struggle in the factories, and attempted to build an anti-capitalist organization in partnership with workers (Wright 2002, 32–88).

So, how does Jamie Woodcock use the tools of this tradition? Is his research able to give us any insight into workplace realities, or attain that famous “hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there stares us in the face *No admittance except on business.*” (Marx 1909, 195), the descent into which is described by Marx using categories that parallel Dante’s descent into hell? By understanding this *hellish reality*, can we give renewed impetus to class struggle? Does establishing a direct relation with workers lead to the creation of an organization?

Jamie Woodcock, in keeping with good Marxist tradition, places the call centre within capital’s cycle of valorization.³ The development of this “inhuman” organization

³ The sales call centre where Jamie Woodcock worked is vital for the realization of surplus value, which takes the form of selling of services and/or commodities. In this respect there is a certain difficulty or contradiction in the author’s perspective. For orthodox Marxists surplus value is created by the production process (even if it is the production of services) and through selling the value is only realized. By selling commodities the capital is once again transformed into money form (third part of the famous money-commodity-(more)money triad, by which capital achieves extended reproduction). So, as Jamie Woodcock writes “there need to be ways of selling them [commodities] to consumers to realize their value” (Woodcock 2017, 15). But on the next pages the author writes about the “extraction of surplus value in the labour process” from workers in the sales call centre (Woodcock 2017, 17). If value is only realized through selling, it is not extracted from the workers in the call-centre, because these workers do not create it (it’s the production workers who do so), but they only realize it. However, probably this distinction does not have such importance,

is understood as the result of the class conflict. Indeed, according to Romano Alquati, one of the co-makers of co-research, technological and organizational innovations are “the expression of capital’s past victories, an obscure flow chart of centuries of social war” (Williams 2013). This phrase finds fascinating confirmation in the pages that Woodcock devotes to *computerized Taylorism*, such as in the passage describing the “assembly-line in the head,” according to which the capitalist call centre is organized along the lines of a *panopticon*, i.e. as a space where bosses use the most modern technologies to monitor and control the workers’ moves, words and – this is the ultimate goal – their feelings and emotions. The workers are entrapped – not only are their bodies forced to sit in obligatory positions, but so also are their souls. Humiliated and infantilized during “buzz sessions,” the workers become appendixes to the great machine that connects telephones, computers, customers, and that transforms the flow of words and emotions into profits. The book’s passages about work in the call centre echo research about work in related industries, “never for a single moment permitting the reader to forget that the contradictions in the process of production turn the life of the worker into an agony of exhaustion, whether her/his remuneration is high or low” (Romano, Stone 1972, 41), whether she/he uses machine tools or a telephone and computer.

However, the most characteristic feature of *operaismo*, and what constitutes its *Copernican Revolution in Marxism*, is its constant search for a workers’ power – a workers’ activity and subjectivity – where other currents see only subordination and overwhelming oppression.⁴ Its rejection of working class victimization, and its giving agency to workers both in its historical explanations and in present descriptions of the situation, is likely the reason why there has been renewed interest in Autonomist Marxism. In this respect Woodcock manages to identify workers’ modes of resistance, and even includes an interview that he conducted with an activist who successfully organized his workplace comrades to take the fight to the bosses on this very difficult terrain...

Nevertheless, this book’s most important contribution is perhaps its analysis of the role that call centres (especially sales call centres) will come to play in post-capitalist

because capital treats workers in call centres just as it does workers on production sites. It minimises the share of value (wherever it is produced) paid to workers in wages and maximises the amount of work, of selling (in this case it is the amount of sales, determined by *sales targets*).

⁴ Here lies the greatest difference between the co-research perspective and *critical theory*, which is equally negative toward power and capitalism, but is so focused on denouncing some totalitarian system that it in some sense encourages passive sadness and grim contemplation of the enemy's power.

societies, which is precisely *no role at all*. In a future communist society, the creation of which is the explicit aim of co-research, every workplace will be worker- (and perhaps consumer-) controlled, and any socially useless and not gratifying activity will be abolished for want of justification; activities that do not create useful products and services to society, or the satisfaction of those who produce and perform them, will be eliminated. Sales call centres are one example of this type of work. *The destruction of sales call centres will free workers not only from work that they hate, but also customers from the unwanted cold calls that they detest*. Using the Marxist categories, we can say that since all work in this kind of call centre is focused solely on realizing surplus value for capital, from the customer's point of view the utility value of such (unwanted) "services" is *below zero, i.e. has minus value*.⁵

In the context of meaningless jobs, the famous operaist slogan of "refusing work" imposes itself with logical necessity. What else should we do if not reject bullshit jobs and refuse work that makes the world worse? Starting from this, we can easily grasp how the strategy of refusal is linked to the new goals of the radical movement. People who have no access to the means of production have to work, because by selling their labour they obtain income in the form of wages, which enable them to reproduce themselves as labour force, that is to survive. If we think that their work is socially harmful and we want them to stop doing it, we have to offer them another source of income, one not based on wage labour, and this leads to the demand of a *guaranteed income*.

However, if we are to deal with this book *dialectically* and *politically*, it is also necessary to identify its weaknesses and limitations. The intention here is not to detract from the importance of its contribution, or to discourage the author, but instead to *sharpen the blade*

⁵ The call centre is not the only sector of late capitalism whose product and service utility value is highly dubious and seems to have *wholly parasitic character*. One need only mention advertising, public-relations, finance, corporate bureaucracies with their endless procession of managers, directors, and supervisory board members, as well as secretaries who help them in their useless duties. Another example is "market research" in which social scientists find employment gathering information about consumers in order to manipulate them better. The multiplying of these curious categories of employment has provoked David Graeber to write a popular essay on "The Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs", which examines the enormous growth of "huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, (who) spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed." (Graeber 2013, 10–11). It is hard not to realize that this looks like a perfect confirmation of Marx's thesis that "at a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters." (Marx 1977, 425). The development of forces of production has reached such a level that relations of production based on wage labour became obsolete. But as they still exist, there is still the need for wage labour to meet the basic needs, which produces such strange results as "bullshit jobs", meaningless job, call-centre jobs...

of critique and make it more useful in the fight against the capitalist enemy. First of all, we need to make an objection that applies to all studies that describe “modes of resistance” or insubordination. The operaist tradition considers these “moments of non-collaboration” in order to aggregate or generalize them, and combine individual passive resistance or sabotage into *a collectively organized action and, in the next step, a collectively active organization.*

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 organized. (Tronti 1966b)

Passivity in call centres is quite easy to identify and, as the author observes, takes forms such as “slammin’, scammin’ smokin’ an’ leavin’”⁶ (which means: cheating, work avoidance, absence and finally resigning altogether). But how can we generalize this behaviour in a bid to create an organized rebellion or a rebellious organization? It seems that a detailed study of workers insubordination no longer provides us with any useful information for building resistance or creating an organization today. Workers also know their own behaviour, so it seems useless to present it to them. Analysing the potential benefits of this *ethnography of resistance*, we suspect that the only effective use to be made of it is by the management class! Thus surveillance techniques are regularly employed to minimise potential acts of refusing to work, forms of passivity towards work, and to fully subordinate workers. “If the labourer consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist” (Marx 1909, 257). Thus, if the capitalist knows how a worker “robs” him, he can take means to prevent such a “crime.” Let us summarize: it is unclear how we can use this kind of knowledge in the fight against work or in the *autovalorizzazione* of the working class,⁷ but it is all too clear how it may be used in the *self-valorization of capital*...

In fact, the working conditions of operators in call centres, rather than being the proof of the main assumption of operaismo, namely the power of the working class, seem to be *evidence of its weakness*; control remains in the hands of the management and management faces no opposition. By refusing to work, workers can usually gain only a few minutes of free

⁶ First described by Kate Mulholland (2004) in an Irish call centre.

⁷ “(...) positive side to revolutionary struggle is the elaboration of the self-determined multiple projects of the working class in the time set free from work and in the transformation of work itself. This self-determined project Negri calls self-valorization.” (Cleaver 1991: XXV–XXVI)

time a day. Cheating is immediately punished by expulsion and a high turnover rate probably only results in a change of job from the call centre to an equally alienated one (see Zielińska 2018).

It seems that hostility towards direct supervisors, which was typical of previous stages of class conflict (the previous form of “leader” or “supervisor” was the *foreman*, and in periods of turmoil in large factories persons in this function in the capitalist chain faced contempt, threats, and verbal or physical attacks, not to mention acts such as those of the Red Brigades in Italy⁸ or of James Johnson, a worker in Detroit, who shot two foremen with a M1 carbine ...) has disappeared, or the book reveals no sign of it. Workplace violence, which takes the form of threats of losing one’s job in buzz sessions, or in one-on-one disciplinary meetings with forced quasi-Maoist self-criticism, is one-sided and performed exclusively by call centre bosses. Those who force workers to engage in self-criticism, who shout and impose work and humiliating rules, and who monitor goals, are only a small minority and could be forced to conform to the rules imposed by the working majority, but *nothing like this happens...*

When we think about taking the initiative in the confrontation, it is possible to see the call centre floor as a site where, at this moment of the class struggle, a successful conduct of the social struggle is impossible. But perhaps worker power can be regained with the help of external groups.⁹ By exposing the attack against the management, external groups can (without the risk of losing a job) use the social media, street graffiti, or hand out leaflets to reveal and spread information about the shameful and inhuman practices taking place in call centres in order to cause fear and put pressure on management. The choice is clear: either *workers are afraid of managers*, as is currently the case, or *managers are afraid of workers*.

Social scientists have only described the call centres, in various ways; *the point is to destroy them. Écrasez l’infâme!*

Linguistic consultation: Anna Dolińska, Steve Corcoran

⁸ “The first activities of the Red Brigades were geared to this factory-based conflict” (Lumley 1990, 281). The victim of the first kidnapping conducted by this organization in 1972 was manager of Sit Siemens. The brutality of its’ actions escalated during the 1970s, leading to shootings and murders (Lumley 1990, 279–292).

⁹The development of operaismo took place during a period of intense class struggle, but the experience of external groups in relation to workplaces appears in almost every memory from this period: “I have never forgotten the lesson we learned at the factory gates, when we arrived with our pretentious leaflets...” (Tronti 2012). Antonio Negri recounts similar memories, in (Negri 2016).

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przemysłowej klasy robotniczej, wyłonienia się „nowej klasy pracującej”, rozwoju sektora usług i deregulacji prawa pracy.

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TYTUŁ: *Call centre: Écrasez l'infâme!* Recenzja *Working the Phones: Control and Resistance in Call Centres* Jamie'ego Woodcocka.

ABSTRAKT: Artykuł recenzyjny dotyczy książki Jamie'ego Woodcocka *Working the Phones*, poświęconej call center jako miejscu pracy. Autorki tekstu podejmują zagadnienia metodologii współbadań oraz omawiają przedstawione w książce analizy form kontroli i oporu pracowników call center.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: współ-badanie, call centre, kontrola, opór, *operaismo*