04 2005

A Callcenter In London - A Montage

Marion Hamm

"Precarisation" is what the mobilisations for EuroMayday[1] and many publications[2] about the issue of precarity come up with in their search for a missing link between very different life situations in neoliberalised Empire – and maybe even a basis for a shared, radical consciousness. The picture emerging from writings about cognitariat and migration, from the struggles of the US-based "Justice for Janitors" campaign and the intermittents in France, from the intoxicating demonstrations[3] of the EuroMayday Parades and their connectedness with mobilisations for migrant rights, seems to lend justification to the more theoretical reflections.

Here is a report about the callcenter where I have worked on and off since 2001 – quite happily falling back on it whenever other jobs didn't materialise, but also increasingly frustrated about the demands of this monotonous and increasingly controlled occupation. I would have found it easier to write a leaflet about the issue of precarisation, rather than this report. Everyday experience in a callcenter is somehow reluctant to being used as an illustration of political convictions. The connections between boring everyday life at work and the colourful practice on planet activism obviously don't emerge by themselves.

Therefore, the concern of the following montage is humble: To describe work in one of the many callcenters in London from the perspective of some collegues and my own. It is based on the notes in my diary, conversations and interviews with collegues. All names have been changed.

"We are all in London trying to make the best of it"

To make it clear right away: I am not a callcenter worker. *Actually*, I am like most others in this place, something completely different. We are actors and webdesigners, marketing-people, social workers, sound-engineers, students, filmmakers, artists, journalists, writers and many other things.

"Most people who live in London who are speaking foreign languages, who are young and therefore who would want to do this job, are living downtown. They are right in the thick of it."

Many people here in the callcenter have been attracted by the promises of metropolitan London with its lively music, entertainment and media scenes. In a small village in Sicily, its not that easy to live as an openly gay man. For a punk musician, it is easier to find likeminded people in London than in provincial Germany. Anyway, a job in a callcenter in London is better than no job at all in the north of England, in Cuba, Poland or Portugal.

"[The job is suitable for] somebody who has not been on a career beforehand or anything like that, a student for instance, who is doing it as a means of getting by, and it is a downside of getting another job. It is also nine to five, in fact many think they have a good deal, because they get 3 pds over the minimum wage, which allows a social life"

We are working in the callcenter, because, other than in catering, we get paid more than the minimum wage, which wouldn't even pay for a daily travelcard in London; because *actually*, we are busy with completely different projects, and we don't want to commit to a permanent job; because we don't have any formal qualifications beyond our multilinguality and our friendly telephone voices; or because we are new in London

and can't sell the qualifications we might have.

"The callcenter is used as a stepping stone to whatever the individual who passes through doors is in between and going to."

Jasmin and Erdem from Germany have just finished studying law and are looking for a proper Job. Eduard from Ukraine is a business student and always turns up in a formal suit. Dean is teaching himself to make websites. Meanwhile, his work in the callcenter earns him more than his old job as social worker – and it is less stressful. Simon and Russel lost their well-paid jobs, because their companies folded. Sabrina wanted to get out of the provincial town in Germany, where she was trained as a clerk.

"...whereas someone who was doing it as a proper job... it is not going to work."

However, some people are still with the same company after four years. Some have been promoted to supervisors, or are even hoping to get a permanent contract. After all, our managers have once started as interviewers as well...

Working Procedures

We are seated in 8 rows with 6 Terminals each. On both ends of this block of terminals, there is a supervisor. No matter where you sit, one of them always has her sights on your screen and on yourself. Neighbouring screens are arranged so that they are facing away from each other. If you want to talk to your neighbour, you have to turn around. Partitions between the screens opposite one another prevent us from seeing each other. But they don't prevent us from chatting through the partitions.

The callcenter does market research. More than 40 interviewers are calling companies to ask employees responsible for a certain area about their opinions and the practices of their companies. Only rarely do we have to call people at home, and we don't need to sell anything.

The standard procedures are always the same, 80, 100, 150 times a day:

"You bring up a new piece of sample on the screen, enter the phone number into the phone, wait for a connection, say your little sentence: "hello, my name is soandso from xy, can i please talk to the person responsible for electrotransmittercyclification?", bear with the dreadful music in the electronic queue, ask the same question to the next person, being turned down, enter a note into the system: respondent not in office, call back. Respondent on holiday, call back. Refusal – company policy. Refusal, too busy." Put down the phone, close the sample, bring up new sample, make the next call."

If you have the names of potential respondents, it is easier to get through. Sometimes you find something useful in google. After a while, you get to know your way through the various company structures, you lern the magic formulas that help you to get past the gatekeepers of the individual departments.

More than 100 calls per day rarely result in more than five Interviews. The questionnaire must be read verbatim from the screen. If you are caught using your own words, you get told off by the supervisor. The answers – ratings on a scale from one to five, answers to multiple choice questions etc, are entered directly into the computer. Then the program brings up the next question.

Cyborgs: "like Charly Chaplin in Modern Times"

While you are making phonecalls, eight hours a day with one hour for lunch, your body is locked in technological gadgets:

"Your eyes are stuck to the screen, an earpiece is plugged into your ears, a microphone in front of your mouth, your fingers are on the keyboard, the numberpad, the mouse. Seeing, hearing, talking, touching are made available for work, reduced in an almost chaplinesque way to the requirements of the Caty system. "Taste" is disabled, for you need your mouth for talking."

Even after work, this cyborglike condition can remain inscribed in your body:

"After the first week of incessantly staring at the screen, my eyes could not focus anymore. When I tried to keep eye contact with people during conversations, my eyes hurt. As a consequence, communication became difficult altogether. I found it irritating to talk to people without eye contact, for a while, I avoided conversations. By now, my eyes have got used to this. Acknowledging this, the company provided a special offer for glasses – two pairs of glasses for 50 pounds. "

"When I'm making calls in the evening, after work, or during the weekend, my fingers still automatically type in the prefix "9" before the number. Sometimes I nearly continue my little recital from work, as soon as I am at the phone."

Some are nurturing a downright hatred against the headset:

"There is the headset, which I always found embarrasing as well, that was callcenter uniform. And I always used to worry wearing that damned thing that it (laughs) would be obvious at the end of the day if I went out into town, that someone would see that I had been wearing a headset all day, from what it had done to your hair."

"... almost like being in the military"

Every evening, we have to clear our desks and put the minimal paperwork in a special basket. Apart from the phone and the computer, nothing must remain on the desks: no paperwork, no mug, no pens, photos, folders, hole-puncher, bits of paper. Offences are being avenged by way of little yellow post-it notes, which we find the next morning on the keyboard.

"It's almost like being in the military, where they take away your individuality, down to the... they might as well shave off your hair as well. And uniform – you are not allowed to have anything on the desk that is personalised. There is nothing personalised."

We are not allowed to eat at the desk. For this activity, we are asked to use the kitchen, which is separated from the office by glass panels. What happens in the kitchen can be viewed from the office. Some collegues are heating up their lunches in the microwave, which produces a whiff of spaghetti with tuna or veggie-rice between the desks. The management is always at pains to train us to get our supply of coffee or tea only in the assigned breaks or before work.

The office manager decides who will sit at which desk. In some companies, the desks are assigned daily on a first come, first served basis. Here, at least we have the same desk for the duration of one project.

Like in the military, there are small victories: One collegue fought like a lioness for a permanent desk. Another one has managed to secure the only screen in the office, which cannot be seen by a supervisor.

Some supervisors are not exactly happy about this quasi-military regime. One reproved me for a coffee-cup trifle, only to add: "I feel like a policeman".

"You are being monitored!"

"It's always measured, thats the thing about that job, its measured at every turn. One, you get can your telephone conversations listened to, secondly, somebody else can see your screen. So the level of stress, because you are constantly under scrutiny, is vast. I mean, the first few weeks you sweat, you are worried the whole time. So at the end of the day, by the end of the day, you get, your neck hurts, and your back hurts, and your ears hurt, and your eyes hurt, and everything hurts, for something that is actually quite thankless."

A collegue looks over my shoulder and says: "Why, you are being monitored!" I ask her: "How do you know?". She point to a small icon at the bottom of the screen. When I put the cursor on it, the name of my watcher appears. Not everybody in the office know to interpret this icon:

"I would imagine that those people who come from the agency don't understand that that's the fact. So they just live in fear and get on with things, because they don't know if they are watched or not, but experienced people can tell wether someone is logged on to their screen and is watching what they are doing."

It is a matter of routine to have supervisors listen to some of the interviews. But I was not aware that the screens are being watched as well. According to a new law, you cannot be supervised without you being aware of it. At least, now I know who can follow every single step I do on this computer. I just hope that nobody was watching when I updated the Indymedia Website, and that nobody realised the open chatroom-window...

The Kolinko call centre inquiry describes how agents have to enter even the breaks you take to have a pee into the system, or how the system switches itself to "absent without reason" if a call doesn't get taken although the agent is logged on.[4]

However, in this call center here, a weird combination of highly technological and antiquated methods of control prevails. Technically speaking, the management is able to generate statistics about all sorts of things: How long we surfed the web, how often we failed to come to work as a percentage of the standard monthly hours, how many minutes on average someone was late, how many interviews every agent completed on average and in comparison to others, and so forth. Sometimes, statistics for each project are being printed out on the colour printer, displayed on the office wall and consequently ignored by most interviewers.

There is no mechanical or electronic time clock. Its function is assumed by the supervisors, who manually make a note of the arrival of every single interviewer, then transfer the data into a spreadsheet. If you are late, you are being called back while heading to your desk and asked to justify yourself:

- You are four minutes late – why?

- I missed the train.

- Why didn't you call?

- Because I didn't want to miss the next train as well.

- Please remember next time: If you are going to be late, you must call.

- Alright.

"It rains from the top" : Distinction und preservation of the self

Each individual's position within the complex internal hierarchy is denoted in the signs provided by everyday life in the office: Where you are being seated, which rules you have to keep and which ones you can flout, which projects you get assigned to, which kind of contract you have, with whom you go for a smoke. Or rather, these are also the signs we use to define our own position within the hierarchy.

At the bottom of the pile are the people from the temping agency. One step above are those who receive their contracts directly from the company, and those who are not assigned to projects that require the use of the Caty call center software, for example those who conduct so-called qualitative Interviews. A collegue highlights the difference:

"That's qualitative stuff. You are not on a script anymore. You are expected to use your mouth, you are expected to be an individual, that's a completely different ballgame (...) When you are talking to CEOs, you can't be scared. You have to talk to them as if you are a CEO yourself. "

He makes a point of holding his ground when it comes to preserving a certain degree of freedom, to which he is in his oppinion entitled:

"And actually having two different sets of rules side by side is a struggle in the office, because there is one rule for one and one rule for the other. Now and again, they try to correct that balance, and bring those old caty rules back into the in-depth, or qualitative research. And that just doesn't flow. Because you can't have somebody who is expected to use their own initiative to then follow guidelines about coffeecups."

The working environment in the call center blatantly contradicts the task of talking to senior managers of large corporations on a peer to peer level:

" When you are dealing with executive interviews, you have to steer away from it coming out of what seems to be a callcenter. (...) So it becomes a bit of a sham. And the whole thing feels fake, well, it is fake. It is. And you have that sense all the time, if they could actually just see you on the other end of the phone, see what is going on in the environment of the other end, they'd put the phone down and never deal with us again. (...) But they don't see your desk, they don't see your shabby outfit, they don't see that you haven't shaved, they don't see your headset, (laughs) that would kill it. That would definitely kill it."

Supervisors are clearly separated from interviewers. Here is the perspective of one interviewer:

"The supervisors are all blocked off and walled off, and they face you as if they are going to battle. That is what it looks like. It's this sea of interviewers, and then this wall of supervisors. (...) It's a walled society, there is "us and them" kind of thing. You might as well put them on a platform with glass-screens and let them look down on the callcenter."

The office architecture reflects these metaphorical walls: Larger desks with blinds for the supervisors, a separate office for a handfull of programmers and managers, and on top of the pyramid is the head of the department in his own office-cubicle. The wall facing the rest of the office is a glass panel, partly frosted, so that it allows him to view the entrance area, the length of the office and the entrance to the kitchen.

One collegue was promoted from interviewer to supervisor. For him, many things have changed:

"As a supervisor, you loose touch with your collegues. You can’t laugh with them anymore. You have all these meetings and you realise that it is all about profit. You continue thinking about work, even when you are not

working. Your personality changes."

Demands and Creativity

We are expected to work with the precision and predictability of a robot. Standardisation of working procedures is an important concern for the management. Interviewers should be replaceable at any given time. Standardisation measures begin with the clear desk policy and extend as far as the colours to mark various Excel spreadsheets. Every activity should be logged in the computer. We are instructed to conclude every interview with the same sentence. Specialised knowledge about the respective topics is not necessary:

"You are not expected to know, that's not your job. There are bigger and better people than you, called analysts and consultants, who are expected to know, and the people that you are calling are expected to know what you are asking about. You are just the monkey in the middle, who is repeating things parrot-fashion, hoping that whoever has designed the questionnaire, or whoever has designed it, generally does know what they are talking about, and isn't making you look like a fool."

Some collegues are countering being effectively reduced to the role of an answerphone by preserving a sense of responsibility:

"One thing about being on the end of the telephone, you still feel responsible as an individual or as a human being, about getting something right."

Even though it is monotonous, the job requires creative communication skills. Interviewers must be able to give the person at the other end of the telephone line the impression that their concern is in any way valid to be transferred. Receptionists and departmental secretaries are often instructed not to transfer market research or sales calls. They, as well as the afflicted respondents, need to be convinced to participate by all means possible: tone of voice, charme, (pretended) competency, authority. A collegue presents her strategy:

"Your mind concentrates on BEING that really interesting representative of a high-profile research company. You concentrate on finding the study you are working on REALLY interesting. You make your voice sound truthworthy, excited, professional, nice, serious. You rephrase, reformulate the arguments provided by your employer on WHY people should give you 30 minutes of their valuable time, or you invent new ones. I found that one of the inherent arguments in my strategy was social – we understand each other, we are really interested in the same subject."

While you are reading out the often repetitive questionnaire, you need to keep the respondent happy. Here is one way of doing this:

"You have to keep up the fiction that you ARE a real person, you make remarks about the weather or the upcoming weekend, you say encouraging things like very interesting, yes, that connects to my next question. If you have finished the interview, you press "complete" and feel rather good – your reputation within the office relies on "getting" many interviews"

As an interviewer, it is possible to achieve a sense of professional self-esteem from your own communication skills. However, this can be ambiguous, for example, when an interviewer is using a flirtatious approach:

"Nice female voice being incredibly interested in the important work of an important professional. It felt almost like a mild form of prostitution.When I realised this, I switched my strategy. I had sold my language skills, but not my charme, the soft tones of my voice, my sense of humour. Not for this pay."

Men have to deal with gender relations as well, although in a different way:

"When I have females on the other end of the phone, flirtation comes into play. When it's a male on the other end of the phone, I have to talk to them peer to peer, which is very difficult to do. I find it very difficult to do caty-interviews with men, because I felt, ehm, the underdog. I felt a they were probably having a private laugh on the other end of the phone, who is this idiot, who is on... you know."

While hunting for willing respondents, many rules are being subverted. Some interviewers are "reserving" the contacts they have traced down for themselves, by "hiding" them within the shared database. Some are keeping notes on paper. In a "paperless office", this is not desirable and contradicts the "clear desk policy" as well as the request to log all activities. One collegue avoided the headset and conducted interviews simply on the receiver. Another one can spend hours designing standardised emails. She argues that this will help her to convince respondents to participate in market research.

On one hand, such breaching of rules is being avenged, however on the other hand, it is also silently being tolerated. This way, the management can have the cake and eat it: The strict regime is kept intact, breaching it is being tolerated if it leads to results, and the interviewers are bearing the risk of being caught. I presume that this also explains why the many small ways of rulebreaching selfmotivation are to a certain degree being tolerated: secretly surfing the web, writing personal emails, unannounced private phonecalls and so forth. Maybe it is this tension, which led one collegue to make the following statement about his work in the call center:

- "What did it make you feel like, when you first started working in the callcenter?"

- "Embarrassed. I was very embarrassed about where I was working. Couldn't tell anyone what I was doing. I was mortified."

"You pay peanuts, you get monkeys"

Those who are directly paid by the company rather from a temping agency receive a temporary, so-called "zero hours contract". This contract determins that we should be on call at all times, but are not entitled to regular work:

"A: It's so noncommital, the contract. The contract is such that the employer has any right and you have none, basically. They are able to call you into work, they are able to have you work fulltime, they are able to treat you like a fulltime employee, without any of the benefits. (...) In the same breath you have to run the risk all the time of actually not having any work. (...) And that, that is a very anxious state of affaires, for everybody. It doesn't matter how many years you've been there, there is a constant feeling that next week, you might be out of work. (...) You don't have time to react to that, and get a job somewhere else. You need to have a second job, if that's the kind of environment you work in. And in the same breath, you don't get holidays, you have to call in sick, you have to call in and say you are not coming in, you have to give notice if you want a day off, whereas the other way round, they don't have to give you notice at all. That's it."

At the beginning, introductory trainings to call center work took place outside working hours:

"You have a days induction, on a saturday, unpaid, which is another unnecessary about these sort of things, everything is done to protect the bottomline, everything is done to protect the dollar-interest. So, you give up your time on a saturday, you go and get trained."

Under these circumstances, motivation plummets to a minimum. The gap between the company's demands to the interviewers and what it offers in exchange is growing:

"It's almost cheeky from the company to expect any sort of commitment from the employee to treat their timekeeping properly. Because if you're not there, you don't get paid. (...) You don't get paid for an hour late, but you still get a telling off."

Consolidation of Hierarchies

Since I worked for the first time for this company in 2001, it has changed office twice. The work remained the same, but each time, the internal hierarchies have become more defined, and control was intensified.

In the first office, hierarchies were relatively flat. Supervisors, management and interviewers had the same type of contract, sometimes with largely minimally different wages. Occasionally, interviewers were used as supervisors, and managers would conduct the odd interview. The then office manager made sure that the tea-kitchen was always stacked with nice herbal teas, and organised occasional excursions to the recycling box around the corner.

We had acces to documents on the company servers and to our own harddrives as well. When the computers were being checked due to the move to another office, it emerged that we had appreciated the access to the internet and found ways to use it: Vast amounts of software, images and mp3s were found on the harddrives, including standard applications like realplayer and acrobatreader as well as gaming and image manipulation software.

This doesn't come as a surprise, because after all, the office turned into some kind of internet cafe after 5pm. Those who are still around at this time are lighting a cigarette, write some mails or make a phonecall, someone plays Kylie Minogue songs on the computer, someone else finishes the design for a party flyer. People show each other how to download and install programs, how to open a hotmail account, how to manipulate images or post to indymedia. Most people have their own, personlised wallpaper on the screen. Later, we go for a drink to finish off the day – Silicon Valley. Many collegues have used this time to get some basic internet and computer skills. The dream ended when an evening shift was introduced.

The second stop was a luxurious "managed office". Young women in office suits replaced the stocks of tea and coffee. Ergonomical desks made from light wood were pleasingly arranged in accommodating small groups, without partitions, thus encouraging communication. When we had moved in and had, still in the spirit of silicon valley, connected our boxes, the office manager made a point of personally wiping every single receive with a desinfected piece of tissue. We had lockeable drawers at our desks. The tea kitchen was small, but outside the office proper, so that you didn't constantly feel under surveillance. You could help yourself to stationary – only for office use, of course. We had cards that allowed us to open the main entrance – we didn't need to ask for admission through the intercom. Those who felt like it could cherish the illusion to have a "proper" job.

After two years, the management concluded that a lack of control had lead to interviewers taking advantage of their employer. Consequently, the next office was laid out in a way to resemble the plans for a foucauldian panopticum: welcome to the call center!

1 http://www.euromayday.org/

[2] See the collections on eipcp.net/transversal/republicart.net: http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704. Also Arranca 31, spring 2005, is titled: "age of precarius - prekär und permanent aktiv". Fantomas 6, published winter 2004/05 is titled "Prekäre Zeiten".

[3] On EuroMayday in Barcelona, 2004, see Gerald Raunig: La inseguridad vencerá. Anti-Precariousness Activism and Mayday Parades. Republicart Juni 2004. Online: http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704/raunig/en

[4] Kolinko: hotlines – Call Centre. Inquiry. Communism. Duisburg 2002, here chapter: Work steps - login and kiss your dreams goodbye, S.54 and S. 65. Online: http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/lebuk/e_buk_5.htm - 5.4.