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# Language put to Work: Cognitive Capitalism, Call Center Labor, and Worker Inquiry

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## Abstract

This article considers the growing convergence between labor and communication in the digital economy. Taking the rapid growth of call center employment as its focus, the article argues that the approach taken by the political and theoretical tradition of post-operaismo, or autonomist Marxism, has produced promising encounters between labor activism and communication inquiry. Through its theory of cognitive capitalism and its focus on labor resistance, the article suggests, post-operaismo offers communication scholars a set of tools through which to move beyond the limits of both liberal-democratic theories of the knowledge worker and Marxist labor process theory.

## Keywords

post-operaismo, autonomist Marxism, call center work, cognitive capitalism, worker inquiry

In the decades following Canadian political economist Dallas Smythe's (1977) lament that labor was a "blindspot" for media researchers, the digital economy has been the scene of uncanny convergence between labor and communication. For communication scholars prepared to take Smythe up on his challenge during the 1980s and 1990s there were two established readings of this convergence on offer, one dominant, the other antagonistic.

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The dominant tradition of analysis, circulating through the economics of Fritz Machlup (1962), the sociology of Daniel Bell (1973), and the management theory of Peter Drucker (1959), depicted the growing similarity between how we work and how we communicate in celebratory terms. These liberal-democratic theories, of which Richard Florida's (2002) creative class is only the latest incarnation, saw the "knowledge worker" as the purveyor of a better future, free of the drudgery of the factory, the alienation of labor, and the hierarchies (and conflicts) of the Fordist workplace. "The knowledge society," promised Drucker (2006), is one of "seniors and juniors, not bosses and subordinates." From the sociology of postindustrialism, to *Wired Magazine*, through new economy management mantras, this perspective announced that communication had overcome work, making it more playful, expressive, and fun.

For communication theorists concerned that this narrative sounded just a little too good to be true in a world of growing exploitation and unprecedented inequality, the most established alternative interpretation was to be found in labor process theory. After Marx, the intellectual roots of this antagonistic tradition lead back to the American independent scholar Harry Braverman (1974), who in *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* documented the ways that new forms of control and exploitation were being devised for those performing what he called "mental labor." Braverman took aim at Bell, Drucker, and others by cataloguing the ways management was routinizing, deskilling, and generally dehumanizing the brain worker's labor process. Central to this restructuring was management's separation of conception and execution, a process in which work was planned by managers and reduced to a series of repetitive gestures for employees. Echoing the Taylorization of manufacturing during the first half of the 20th century, labor process theorists pointed out, worker productivity and management's command were being imposed through an all-too-familiar discipline on the factory floor. In this interpretation it was work that had subordinated communication to the production of surplus value.

The arrival on the scene of the theoretical and political tradition of post-*operaismo*, or autonomist Marxism—of which Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's trilogy (2000, 2004, 2009) is a key expression—has offered communication scholars a set of tools through which to move beyond the limits of both these visions. More important, it has produced powerful encounters between labor activism and communication inquiry. Post-*operaismo*'s authors have increasingly described our new regime of accumulation as one of "cognitive capitalism" (Fumagalli, 2007; Roggero, in press; Vercellone, 2007). Within it, they have suggested, the production process has mutated, incorporating knowledge at its core with unprecedented intensity. Such a transformation has had profound effects on employment, a process philosopher Paolo Virno (2003) summarizes as one in which language is "put to work" and labor tends toward the production of information, communication, and knowledge. Within cognitive capitalism the exploitation of workers has hardly disappeared, autonomist theorists point out, but neither has labor's capacity to respond. Capital's move into the production and reproduction of immaterial commodities has created a different set of vulnerabilities and an

additional set of antagonisms, all of which remain to be explored. Neither entirely new nor merely old wine in new bottles, according to Virno under capital's cognitive regime labor appears as kind of a "World's Fair" (p. 106) in which forms of work organization that were prevalent during other periods of capitalism are juxtaposed and blended with one another. In just one example, the vastly diverse forms of work that go into smart phone production (Brophy & de Peuter, 2011) include the highly conceptual and collaborative labor of technical design in tech production zones, the war-fuelled artisanal mining of minerals such as coltan in the Congo, the rigidly disciplinary factory-based production of handsets in China and Mexico, the "free labor" (Terranova, 2004) of Internet end-users building web 2.0 in their spare time, and the toxic labor of e-waste disassembly in Ghana and China, among others.

Call center work, a classic example of what Virno (2001) has called "the production of communication by means of communication" that marks capital's new phase, is an eloquent symptom of this condition. Emerging in America during the 1980s and exploding in the 1990s, call centers have since spread through the fabric of the global order Hardt and Negri call Empire. Call centers have become an essential apparatus for mediating the relationship between the institutions and the subjects of cognitive capitalism, gauging public opinion, offering us assistance through technological mishaps, and registering our numerous complaints. These factories of communication offer health advice, financial products, and telecommunication services amid a bewildering array of applications. Mirroring our era of hyperextended consumer credit, call centers first act as tools for selling products, and subsequently, as long-distance digital debt collectors, calling us when we fall behind on our student loans or mortgage payments. Underscoring their importance to the economy's intensifying communicative requirements, the growth of call centers over the past two decades has been nothing short of stunning. If by 1998 employment within them was expanding by 20% a year globally and 100,000 jobs were being added every 12 months (Deery & Kinnie, 2004), since then some 15,000 call centers have opened in Europe alone (Burgess & Connell, 2006), fuelling the continent's fastest-growing form of employment (Huws & Paul, 2002). In Ireland and the Netherlands during the first decade of the 21st century one out of every three new jobs was a call center position (Cugusi, 2005), and in America more than 4 million people (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007), close to 3% of the working population, are estimated to toil in one. Such employment has grown rapidly in India, the Philippines, Barbados, China, South Africa, and other countries as well. Through hundreds of millions of discrete transactions a day, call centers knit together relationships between institutions and consumers across the information relays of the global economy.

The study of call center work has been a source of serious debate between knowledge worker enthusiasts and labor process skeptics. If the former have stressed how call center work can be a rewarding job, marked by autonomy, relatively high levels of employee satisfaction, and a workforce that identifies with management's objectives (Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire, & Tam, 1999), the latter have denounced the ways that force and consent are combined in the exploitation of call center workers'

communicative abilities (Callaghan & Thompson, 2001; Taylor & Bain, 1999). Knowledge worker scholars have pointed to the technical expertise and affective abilities that are required in the call center, but labor process scholars have seen this ultra-technological workspace as the latest update of the Taylorist separation of conception and execution. And while knowledge worker theories have been rather disingenuous in their portraits of engaged call center workers in friction-free informational workplaces, labor process critiques have largely served up the dispiriting image of a subjugated workforce in return.

The autonomist approach offers communication scholars a different way to engage with this newly loquacious factory floor. Encounters between post-*operaismo* and the growing world of call center work have occurred through variations on the *worker inquiry*, an autonomist method that traces its roots back to Marx (1880). In 1880, Marx was asked by the *Revue Socialiste* to investigate the labor conditions of French workers, and the result was a document containing 101 questions that was to be distributed through workplaces across the country. In his preface to these questions, Marx proposes the collective production of knowledge from below as a means to confront these conditions. Over the course of its history the militant method he sketched out was adopted by the *operaisti* in Italy, who produced detailed studies of the changing composition of labor in the factories appearing in the north during the 1960s. Early autonomist inquiries not only included the extensive use of the interview and the questionnaire in order to record the experiences of workers but also led to the formation of reading groups, the coproduction of texts, and self-organized forms of trade unionism. The worker inquiry shares many features with openly partisan approaches to knowledge production such as feminist standpoint theory and the Foucaultian genealogy, but three of the method's defining characteristics have stood out with respect to other perspectives: First, it begins from the premise that the search for workplace democracy demands a focus on labor, its composition, and its struggles. Second, it aims to produce a collective counterknowledge of the labor process. Third, though it can be enacted cooperatively with the organizations representing workers, it considers a broad spectrum of forms of resistance, mindful not to equate it with established trade unionism. These qualities have given the worker inquiry great adaptability over time, and it is currently experiencing a resurgence among feminist, student, and labor movements in Europe and Latin America under a variety of names such as *conricerca* (or coresearch), militant inquiry, and others.

Indeed the worker inquiry has already been used in call centers: In 2002 the German labor activist collective Kolinko (2002) published a rich inquiry into call center work, and the *Cátedra Experimental sobre Producción de Subjetividad* [Experimental Chair on the Production of Subjectivity] (2007) is a project developed by a group of students and lecturers in Rosario, Argentina, which has examined the types of subjectivities call center labor is producing in collaboration with local trade unionists. As Kolinko explains in their introduction, these efforts seek to combine an analysis of exploitation with that of the struggles aiming to move against and beyond it. Activist research such

as that carried out by the German collective and the *Cátedra Experimental* project offer compelling examples of ways labor resistance in the call center is being examined from below through the creation of networks between workers, labor activists, trade unionists, and their allies in academia.

Such research has, therefore, approached the way communication has been “put to work” in the call center from the perspective of the conflict and collective organization this process is producing, what Negri (2005) refers to as the “self-valorization” of labor. And there is much to research, for along with the growth of call centers there has followed an efflorescence of labor resistance in both traditional and strange new forms. Call center workers have been the protagonists of labor-organizing drives, collective bargaining, walkouts, demonstrations, international solidarity campaigns, hunger strikes, flexible strikes, “stand-up” strikes, and more subterranean forms of resistance, including digital sabotage, cheating, loafing, stealing, and simply leaving the job or industry altogether (Brophy, 2009; Brophy, 2010; Guard, Steedman, & Garcia-Orgales, 2007; Mulholland, 2004).

Call center work is, of course, neither the liberatory fantasy presented by knowledge worker theorists nor the mostly accomplished domination of labor denounced by Braverman’s heirs. As one of the more insightful labor process depictions of the call center has suggested, the control it produces is “chimeric” (Sewell, 1998), blending older and newer forms of command: The assembly line is digital, productivity is ensured through the production of compliant subjectivities, and surveillance operates through “teamwork.” But the labor that produces this “communication by means of communication” is also productive of unpredictable and even ungovernable difference. *Post-operaismo* forces us to abandon our preconceptions and begin our inquiries with the antagonistic subjectivities being produced in the call factory. Worker inquiry is the tool the tradition offers through which to access, engage, and accompany these subjectivities in the moments when they become something other than the dominated object of labor process theory. And like the management that seeks to secure control, and the labor that keeps the call center humming, the refusal, resistance, and collective organization emerging within this workspace are *also* chimeric, a mutant recomposition that combines older and newer forms of conflict. These struggles point to a very different relationship between labor and communication, one that is completely immanent and has the potential to overflow the confines of the measured, monitored, and disciplinary call center of 21st-century cognitive capitalism.

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