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Enda Brophy, **Language Put to Work: The Making of the Global Call Centre Work Force**, London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 306 pp., $34.99 (paperback), $24.99 (ebook).

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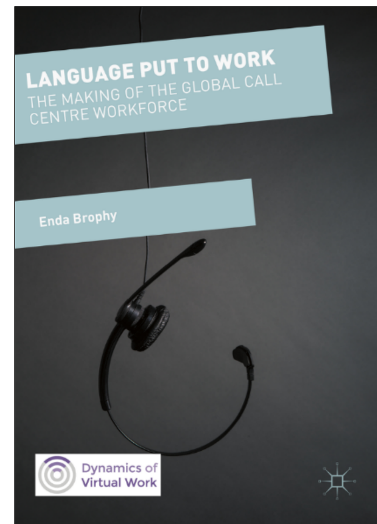

The news of ***Language Put to Work*** is not that call center work is awful. It is not even that call center work is awful everywhere in the world. Even those who lack direct experience of life in call centers have at least a vague impression of this type of labor derived from frequent media representations of small armies of bleary-eyed women and men wearing headsets, answering call after call under the watchful eyes of floor managers, speaking from scripts, and chained to their desks by strictly enforced call quotas. A brief Internet search yields a litany of complaints by current and former call center workers about health problems resulting from constant stress and sitting for long periods of time and eating junk food at one's desk; about circadian rhythms and social lives severely disrupted by servicing customers many time zones away; and about low pay, no paid time off or benefits, and stunning turnover rates. Long gone are the days when early advocates of the new "knowledge economy" could credibly sell call center work to the educated, young workforce as an opportunity to hone one's communication skills and creativity while making a decent living.

To be sure, Enda Brophy's book will dispel any lingering hope readers may harbor about the dignity of global call center work. He painstakingly documents the exploitation of workers at call centers on three continents. The book paints a bleak picture of an industry that epitomizes the neoliberal mantra of doing more with less. In the 1970s, corporations began to acknowledge what Brophy calls the increasing "communicativity" (p. 9) of the global economy—namely, the growing pressure to collect information from, and to share information with, customers. At first, companies responded to this demand by establishing in-house customer-service telecenters. Call centers were born when, in order to cut costs, companies started outsourcing the work done in telecenters to local (national) call centers in the 1990s. The 2000s brought with them international outsourcing and the emergence of the "global call center capital" (p. 133), a network of increasingly consolidated transnational call center companies attracted to deregulated markets and an educated workforce concentrated in urban areas. These companies employed virtual migrants whose schedules and speech were adjusted to those of their customers living in other countries. As a Morocco-based employee of the multinational call center company Sitel, who took calls from France, explained, working at the call center felt like leaving his country and language behind in the morning and working on a different planet (p. 136). Today, in order to cut costs even further, call center companies hire freelance agents who work from home. The movement of call center labor from in-house telecenters to national and transnational call centers to the home is accompanied by ever-diminishing employment protections.

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Brophy's Marxist critique of the management-friendly discourse according to which everyone is an entrepreneur in the knowledge economy, and hence tensions between employees and the management will dissipate, sets the stage for his innovative investigation of the dynamics of communicative capitalism. For Brophy, communicative capitalism encompasses the global economy's communicative sectors—including call centers, cultural industries, advertising and public relations, new media, telecommunications, and video games—and communicativity. In call centers, the natural human capacity to communicate is transformed into a source of profit through processes of routinization (standardized speech and call times), intensification (increased call speeds and productivity), surveillance (quotas, the strict control of breaks and movement), and the subjective shaping of labor (organizing workers into teams in which competition enforces management priorities). The increasingly unregulated transnational call center industry becomes a site of class formation, which Brophy terms "language put to work" (p. 5). This process adds an underclass of educated, urban, often multilingual workers laboring under the constant threat of outsourcing to the ranks of the global cybertariat.

To formulate a comprehensive account of call centers as key sites of communication capitalism, and of language put to work as a particular type of class formation, Brophy argues, it is not enough to provide testimony of the exploitation of call center workers. To fully understand the making of the cybertariat, one must approach it as a contested process that produces new types of subjectivities beyond "the oppressed." The main contribution of the book is the author's ambitious and detailed documentation of various forms of worker resistance in call centers around the world. In doing so, he is following the theoretical and methodological lead of autonomist Marxists who "see relations between labor and capital as inescapably exploitative and conflictual [and] begin their analysis of this relationship with labor's resistance and search for autonomy, a force that they maintain anticipates and provokes capitalist restructuring" (p. 43). This intellectual orientation prompts Brophy to ask a particular set of questions:

> Why are workers resisting? What kinds of workers are organizing? What tactics are they using? What are the challenges they are facing? What are the allied groups and organizations they are connecting with in these struggles? What organizations are they forming? What is the outcome of their efforts? (p. 78)

Brophy's preferred research method, worker inquiry, prompts the researcher to study the inevitable class struggle from the perspective of the lived experiences of the workers engaged in acts and practices of resistance. To that end, Brophy conducted more than 60 interviews with call center agents, trade unionists, labor activists, and industry observers in Canada, Italy, Ireland, and New Zealand, and collected relevant reports and policy documents. Using these materials, he highlights, compares, and contrasts the ways in which workers and their allies use communication to mount resistance against the communication industry.

Chapter 1 provides evidence that, for better or for worse, call centers are not going anywhere. The communicativity of the global economy is unlikely to decrease, and the call center industry has managed to create a low-cost, global workforce capable of meeting the demand for human communication. Brophy adapts and slightly modifies Jodi Dean's (2009) concept of communicative capitalism in chapter 2 and defines abstract (instrumental, homogenous, quantifiable) communication as one of its constitutive features. He also reviews relevant scholarship on call center labor by knowledge work theorists from the fields of

business, management, and occupational psychology and the criticism of their views formulated typically by sociologists. Brophy argues that his findings build on, and extend, this latter scholarly tradition. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the forms of resistance in call centers such as flight, detachment, slacking, sabotage, teaming up (including the creation of informal and formal collectives and unionization), and striking. Resistance as a response to exploitation, Brophy cautions, is the exception rather than the rule. Call center work breeds social isolation among workers and is thus quite successful at precluding collective action. Chapter 4 introduces the central thesis of the book: informational development (e.g., the business-friendly deregulation of the telecommunications industry) and the emergence of a cybertariat are inseparable processes. Not all call centers operate as sweatshops, Brophy notes, but the processes that bring about the formation of a communication underclass are similar around the world. The chapter uses the example of the 2004 strike at Aliant, a Canadian telecommunication company, to illustrate the book's central thesis. In chapter 5, the reader is given a glimpse of international labor organizing practices that respond to the appearance of global call center capital more effectively than traditional labor unions. Brophy uses the example of Unite's organization of young low-wage workers, including call center agents, in New Zealand against transnational call center operator Synovate in 2009 to demonstrate this new form of resistance. Forging labor identities in communication factories is the central theme of chapter 6 in which Brophy documents the work of Collettivo Precari Atesia (CPA), a self-organized labor advocacy collective at the Atesia call center in Italy. The chapter captures how, in 2005, CPA tapped into workers' anger to mobilize a politically disinterested workforce and to bring about policy change. Chapter 7 summarizes the book's main arguments such as the need to approach call center work as a type of immaterial labor and the warning to labor organizers that the call center industry's move to employ freelance in-home agents will further atomize the workforce. Brophy ends with practical advice for labor organizers related to three key features of call center work—namely, that such labor is gendered (i.e., done primarily by women), precarious, and mobile.

The book targets a specialized readership with an interest in communication industries, labor studies, and political economy. The vivid case studies of workers organizing and resisting are likely to be of interest to students in communication studies (especially cultural studies), sociology, and labor studies. In addition, the book can appeal to a secondary audience of which I count myself as a member: students of observable language use in various sociocultural, institutional, technological, economic, and historical contexts. Brophy's book, which acknowledges this line of research, can be read as a study of emerging transnational institutional contexts that engender and cultivate new, global forms of expression. Viewed in this way, the book is a valuable contribution to the ethnographic and sociolinguistic study of standardized institutional speech (Cameron, 2008), globalized ideologies of communication (Boromisza-Habashi, 2016; Cameron, 2003), global speech (Aneesh, 2015a, 2015b), and discourses of resistance among supposedly nonpolitical speakers (Huspek & Kendall, 1991), not to mention the political economy of language (Graan, 2016). In particular, the book contains indispensable insights for scholars interested in transnational communication practices of labor activism.

An ethnographic approach to talk in call centers could address two of the book's blind spots, both of which derive from its focus on workers' exploitation and resistance—namely, the relative lack of attention to workers' communicative agency and identities prior to engaging in practices of resistance. Brophy posits a stark distinction between the standardized talk of agents slavishly following standardized call center

scripts— producing "communication that isn't communication" (p. 223)—and the creative, autonomous, authentic talk of agents engaged in resistance. This view underestimates call center agents' creative agency in the enactment of scripts in the context of actual calls (Woydack, 2019). Additionally, call center workers bring a complex array of identities and related language ideologies to the workplace (Rahman, 2009). Attention to the interaction between existing worker agency and identities on the one hand and emerging political and labor identities on the other could strengthen our understanding of the discursive and sociocultural foundations of communication practices of resistance.

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