



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

## **Call Centre Operators and Knowledge Economy. An Empirical Study of Career Paths in Two Companies in South Italy**

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### **Article first published online**

October 2016

### **HOW TO CITE**

Antonazzo, L., & Vignola, M. (2016). Call Centre Operators and Knowledge Economy. An Empirical Study of Career Paths in Two Companies in South Italy. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 8(3), 30-55. doi: 10.14658/pupj-ijse-2016-3-3



**PADOVA UNIVERSITY PRESS**

## **Call Centre Operators and Knowledge Economy. An Empirical Study of Career Paths in Two Companies in South Italy**

*Luca Antonazzo\* and Marta Vignola\*\**

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*Abstract:* The aim of this essay is to explore how the transition to knowledge economy and to a cognitive capitalist regime has pushed further the issues related to professional and existential uncertainty and has given rise to modern forms of insecurity and alienation. The connection between education and social condition appears to be, in contrast with the EU proclaims, looser than ever and the investment in skills appears often to be, for “weak” graduates, a professional and economic failure. In such a scenario, call centres embody the most widespread example of a cognitive capitalist company within a post-Fordist regime. They also represent the most common landing place for weak graduates. Through this survey we intend to put in evidence how economic contingency may lead weak graduates to fragmented professional paths, job dissatisfaction and modern forms of alienation that separate the worker not only from the product of his own work, but also from its cognitive and affective characteristics, and from his future perspectives.

*Keywords:* cognitive capitalism, knowledge workers, call centres, post-Fordism

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### **The call centre within the dimension of cognitive capitalism**

In this research we study cognitive capitalism and knowledge workers. But talking about new morphologies of work we do not rediscover any macro difference between the categories of persons employed in material jobs and persons employed in non-material jobs: merely, the capital relation perpetuates itself as a relation of exploitation. We are dealing with a single project of expansion and modernization of neoliberal capitalism that puts a strain on workers' society as we have known it, experienced it and described it so far. The de-materialization of the capitalist market hasn't put an end to Taylorism. The disciplining of bodies has moved also to minds, often making knowledge workers "happy and exploited", to use Formenti's expression (Formenti, 2011). The modern forms of alienation involve a colonization of the unconscious of the worker, who not only sees himself alienated from the product of his own work, but also from its cognitive and affective features, and especially from his vision of a desired future. Autonomy, conflict and self-organization are bartered in exchange of full contractual security: Christmas' bonuses, holidays, maternity leave, health care and pension coverage. Working time becomes prevalent in relation to life time; the production of subjectivity materializes itself in bio-capitalism making it difficult for workers to distinguish between an "outside" and an "inside" within the exploitation device.

In our research approach, the call centre becomes a paradigmatic site for the production of neoliberal subjectivity; the class of knowledge workers, the phone operators we have interviewed, have introjected the bio-capitalist device into their daily lives. These "factories of voices", despite the greater contractual stability and security achieved in the recent decades, still remain a laboratory through which we can observe the disciplining mechanisms that from bodies move to the identity of workers.

Over the last fifteen years, the volume of scientific papers devoted to call centres has increased exponentially. Research in this field has been channeled mainly into three branches. Without any claim of offering a comprehensive overview of the literature on this topic, we limit ourselves here to remember some illustrative contributions. The first branch, which developed starting from the second half of the Nineties, has looked at the organizational dimension of work in call centres, in particular, management of human resources, organization of space and integration of human resources and ICT (Baldry et al., 1998; Taylor & Bain, 1999; Palamara & Campi, 2002; Taylor et al., 2002; Sharp, 2003). A second branch, primarily developed in clinical and psychological studies, has analyzed the impact of

working conditions on the level of stress and operators' risk of burnout (Ghislieri et al., 2012; Emanuel et al., 2014). A final branch has focused on the study of occupational trajectories, inner relational dynamics, satisfaction of operators, as well as the relevant question of professional identity (Corigliano & Greco, 2009; Maltese, 2011; Fortunato & Palidda, 2012; Avola & Palidda, 2013).

In sociology, the interpretations used to decode this field have been essentially two: on the one hand, the work in call centres is read in the view of a highly computerized neo-Taylorism, on the other, there is the proposal of understanding the call centre as a knowledge based organization, the ending nerve of a cognitive capitalist system and of a knowledge-based economy. Our belief is, however, that these interpretations are not mutually exclusive to one another and may be used in combination. If we consider valid the idea of a call centre as a new type of "service factory" with an intrinsic Tayloristic dimension, we cannot ignore at the same time that it pertains to a socio-economic circuit which is definitely based on information and knowledge. Moreover, the interviewed operators, also because of their higher education, in many cases clearly perceive to be part of such a system.

We believe that, despite the particular characteristics of their job, call centre operators are, as a matter of fact, knowledge workers. Yet it is often found difficult to consider them such, both because the agent is not recognized as a profession in its own right and, above all, for a reluctance to consider also the use of information among the activities that end up producing knowledge (Maltese, 2011).

If we assume that the call centre operator falls within the general conceptual framework of cognitive capitalism and immaterial labour, the fact that he accuses at the same time a situation akin to the "mass-worker" of the typical Fordist factory is even more significant. The association with factory work, suggested by several interviewees, finds confirmation in many scholars. Gallino (2014), for instance, speaks of a rationalized work constrained by technical and organizational factors, such as job description, and by the working pace set by machines or by the customers and constantly controlled by supervisors, with or without the aid of computer technology. In this perspective, Gallino detects the obvious analogy between the work pace in these type of companies and the assembly line of the typical sixties' factory: it concerns situations where, although the "Office of pace and methods" is no longer in the foreground, Ford and Taylor seem to be more than ever the actual inspiration behind the modern organization of work (Gallino 2014, p. 26).

The Fordist industrial paradigm implied, beyond a purely productive dimension, also a regime of accumulation of material goods and a specific form of social life. Production was intended to standardized goods on moving assembly line by using dedicated machinery and semi-skilled labour. The national system of accumulation took the form of a circuit of mass production and mass consumption. Finally, as a form of social life, it was a culturally leveled society which provided for mass consumption, mass media, mass transit, mass politics, and so on (Turner, 2006).

The transition from a Fordist regime to a post-Fordist one is caused by a combination of factors including the gradual exhaustion of the mass production growth potential, the saturation of the emerging market for durable goods, a decreasing rate of profit and a declining capacity of economic management of nation-states due to the increasing internationalization. Key features of the new regime appear to be the flexible production process, based heavily on computerized systems, the decentralization of production and the network approach to what was once called the linear production chain.

The post-Fordist industrial paradigm is engaged in a process of transformation of the economic system as a whole. This process led to the emergence of what is identified in literature as cognitive capitalism, based on the accumulation of intangible capital and on the propagation of knowledge. The concept of cognitive capitalism embodies the wealth generated in terms of new knowledge by the reflective performance of work: it is, so to speak, the value produced by work which innovates its own production methods (Cillario, 1996). Basically, cognitive capitalism is characterized by a sort of circuit of self-implementation of processes: part of the capital/labour invested into knowledge is combined with the previous existing knowledge and pushes the worker to produce new knowledge. Cognitive capitalism does not eliminate the material dimension of industrial production, rather reorganizes it by configuring in a new way its “nervous centres” (Moulier Boutang, 2011, p. 48). The physical product becomes of secondary importance compared to its relational content. The needs related to communication, information, participation and sociability acquire an increasing value within the attention economy (Tiddi, 2002).

Cognitive capitalism and its post-Fordist corollaries trigger a knowledge-based economy in which the knowledge needed to produce goods is a good itself, which can be bought and sold on the market as any other good (Rullani, 2004). The result is a nearly circular process in which the output (the new knowledge obtained through the process) must regenerate its own premises, restoring the starting conditions of the

production cycle. But the new knowledge must not only duplicate its input (which is the previous knowledge). It must also innovate, adapt, build on earlier knowledge to maintain the conditions that justify the propagation and re-use in settings that are always different. The result is a ‘diffused factory of knowledge’ that through its channels and its sub-systems links the context of production of knowledge, to the many contexts in which it is used. The same single knowledge is ‘processed’ in the production chain, and so transformed. The original knowledge, characterized by its uniqueness, becomes first connective knowledge and then practical knowledge: propagation is a reflexive activity that keeps changing its premises (Rullani, 2004). It follows a socio-economic apparatus primarily aimed at the continuous circulation of information avoiding any “bottleneck”. At the same time the tendency to total communication is the tendency to total market, intended both as the extension and the possibility of converting anything into goods (Ponzio, 2004). In this sense, customer care services are offered as complementary goods, collateral to a product already acquired.

Working in the call centre appears to be paradigmatic of the communicative dimension of cognitive capitalism, to the extent that it brings together: replicative use of information and recursion of experiential learning processes, pronounced flexibility and insecurity, human capital rhetoric, use of well-educated workforce for relatively simple tasks, production of value through rizomatic communications (Maltese, 2011).

Drawing from this theoretical framework, we will analyze, within the paradigmatic dimension of call centres, the dynamics related to professional paths and the modern forms of alienation to which weak graduates, in a cognitive capitalist regime, are subject to.

### **Context essentials**

Call centres are an essential component of any business that has to deal with frequent requests by its customers and requires the integration of several technologies to maximize the use of information and rationalize all operators’ activities (Sharp, 2003). Today, the implementation of ICT and the use of management software provide immediate access by the operator to all the customer’s information that are presented on the display, as well as the ability to real time edit these information during the session. The call centre provides a single point of contact for customers who can reach the

company through multiple channels, including e-mail, web chat, fax or phone.

As Sharp observes, companies have several factors to consider in their daily relationships with customers: mainly it comes to keeping customers satisfied before and after sales, manage their data, schedule resources to invest in customer loyalty. Implementing an internal call centre may be feasible only for large companies. Today outsourcing is normally considered a better option as it can significantly reduce costs, turning to specialized companies to which commission the management of certain services' packages, fixing with them objectives and parameters.

In Italy during the last 10 years universities and other public research organizations have developed several relevant surveys on the topic of working in the call centres, with the ultimate aim of providing qualitative and quantitative insights about the working dimension within these companies. A relevant research funded by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (through the PRIN<sup>1</sup> programme 2007), entitled "The dimensions of organizational well-being in call centres", have been carried out in the field between October 2009 and March 2010. It was attended by the University of Rome 'La Sapienza', the University 'Statale' of Milan, the University of Catania and the University of Calabria. Analyzing a sample of 21 companies, the research unit found out that the incidence of graduates was higher in the South, confirming the tendency of call centres to recruit operators with a higher level of training in presence of a composite basin of supply. The research also revealed a widespread feminization of the sector (in spite of a higher male presence in the south, presumably due to a lower availability of alternatives) and a high presence of young adults. The data also show, regarding the suppository transience of the employment in the call centres, that only for a minority of the interviewed operators that was the first job. For a substantial portion of them working as operators was not of short course and was the most relevant working experience of their career. This although most of them admit doing so for lack of alternatives (46%) or, to a lesser extent (31%), to have a job that is more compatible with the non-work commitments.

As reported by Istat (National Institute for Statistics)<sup>2</sup>, the industry has had over the past 10 years a rapid development, going from 935 companies

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<sup>1</sup> Projects of Relevant National Interest.

<sup>2</sup> ISTAT, Fact-finding survey on working relations in the Italian call centres, hearing by the XI Commission "Lavoro pubblico e privato", Camera dei Deputati, June 2014, Rome. Retrieved from <http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/125372>

for a total of 12.000 employees in 2003 to 1.400 units in 2002 for a total of about 51.000 workers employed (excluding external collaborators).

On the geographical side, there has been an increasing weight (in terms of number of units and employees) of the southern regions, especially Calabria and Apulia, compared to the overall national situation. This is easily understandable considering that, as is evidenced also by Isfol (Institute for the Development of Vocational Training of Workers)<sup>3</sup>, among the features that have marked the development of call centres there is their placement in areas where prevail over-educated labour supply and favorable conditions in terms of wages and infrastructures. In Italy the placement in southern areas of the country was particularly favored by the incentives provided by the law 407/1990 on preferential hiring.

Again referring to the data provided by Istat, we record that more than 3 out of 4 workers are employed in large companies (250 or more workers). Also significant is the presence of external staff or project workers and part-time contracts.

Regarding the type of contract by which operators are hired we must distinguish between those who work in inbound, where almost the entire workforce is framed within open-ended contracts, and those who work in outbound mode, where are common fixed term and project contracts. The current regulatory structure is derived from the initiative of the Minister of Labour and Welfare, at the time Cesare Damiano, in 2006, aimed at clarifying the use of contractual arrangements adopted in the sector. Larger companies tend to make more use of open-ended contracts, while smaller companies prefer short-term and project contracts. The latter form of work is almost absent in in-house call centres, while it is used for just under a third of the services provided through outsourcing.

The sector is also characterized by a strong spread of part-time contracts and low qualification profiles. Three-quarters of employed women and more than a half of men have reduced working hours, for an overall incidence of 70% and about nine out of ten employees have the basic qualification of operator. Employment in call centres is also characterized by a strong presence of young adults: 39% of total employment (internal plus external) have less than 30 years and the proportion of employees with more than 50 years only amounts to 5,1%. Among external workers the

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<sup>3</sup> ISFOL, Fact-finding survey on working relations in the Italian call centres, hearing by the XI Commission "Lavoro pubblico e privato" della Camera dei Deputati, May 2014, Rome. Retrieved from <http://isfoloa.isfol.it/handle/123456789/879>

share of under 30 rise to 56.2%. It has been observed, moreover, a very high proportion of women (71%), particularly in the South (73%), data which have already been reported by the above-mentioned PRIN research and by a former Isfol survey in 2008.

Finally, Istat data underline that in 2013 call centres' workers showed a higher level of education compared to the average of those employed in the macro sector of reference (business services): over two-thirds had a diploma and more than a fifth had a university degree, in comparison to 44% and 10% of those employed in the business services sector. In the South the proportion of graduates rose to 70%.

### **Methodology**

The context in which our research has been carried out is the province of Lecce. Our attention has focused, in particular, on two call centres, *Comdata* and *Call&Call Salento*, which are the biggest organizational structures in the area. Geographically they are located respectively in the north (in the city of Lecce) and in the south of the Salento peninsula (Casarano). The choice has been operated primarily for the greater importance of the two companies in question compared to other contact centres found in the province of Lecce. This importance lies in the size of the companies both in terms of number of employees and in number of orders that they are called to manage at national level. This gave us the possibility of expanding the front of the study to a higher number of issues compared to what could have been analyzed within smaller companies. Also the location of the companies appears to be significant since they represent, on the one hand, the urban context (Lecce), and on the other, the semi-urban context (Casarano).

Comdata mainly operates in outsourcing of help desk services, back office, document management, contact centre and IT services; it has been active in Lecce since 2008. Currently it counts about 1.400 employees and is active in the following markets: telecommunication, energy, financial services, media & others. Comdata has also an extensive nationwide presence counting 14 locations throughout Italy.

Call&Call is a leading Italian BPO<sup>4</sup> operator, focused on marketing processes, customer care and sales. It has been active in Casarano since 2007 and employs approximately 1.000 workers. Call&Call operates in

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<sup>4</sup> Business Process Outsourcing.

utilities, manufacturing, retail products & e-commerce, finance, media communication and has a total of 7 locations in Italy.

A total number of 15 interviews, 10 for Comdata and 5 for Call&Call, have been carried out between October 5th and December 6th 2014. The open-ended contracts on all respondents are 11 (7 out of 10 for Comdata, of which only 3 full-time, and 4 out of 5 for Call&Call).

Regarding the gender distribution of the interviewees, 9 of them are women and 6 are men. In that we wanted to respect the already detected feminization of the sector.

With regard to training programs, 14 of 15 respondents holds a Master's degree and one of them holds a Ph.D.. About the subject areas, 7 respondents come from sociological area, 5 from communication and 3 from political science. At the time of the interview only 3 out of 15 respondents were found to have a superior position to that of phone operator (team leader).

The survey has adopted the tool of the discursive interview since the aim was to highlight firstly the way in which the interviewee, through recounting, contributes to construct his experiential reality and personal identity. For this reason, in creating the structure of the interview, it was avoided an excess of stiffness in formulating the questions. The interview began, therefore, asking the interviewee to tell freely about his/her training and working biography up to the current professional position. After this, there were in-depth questions aimed at the description of the organizational context of his/her job and the interweaving of his/her working history and personal history.

The loose structure of the interviews generated in a first phase a discontinuous amount of data which has been first read literally and interpretively (Mason, 2002). Following, the transcripts have been segmented into three sections:

- a) academic path
- b) working experiences
- c) role in the call centre and personal considerations about it

The patterns and themes that have emerged from each section have been then cross-sectional indexed and analyzed separately. Finally, the patterns and themes have been recomposed in the following four macro-areas:

- 1) investments in knowledge and the danger of ineffectiveness
- 2) flexibility and risk
- 3) control and the factory metaphor
- 4) a glimpse on the future

### **Investments in education and the danger of ineffectiveness**

A knowledge-based economy must be, of course, also a learning economy: it seems normal, in a context of cognitive capitalism, to appeal to training as a generative element of human capital and a functional factor that provides the conditions for reviving the chain of generation of wealth by means of knowledge (Maltese, 2011). In the foreword to the European Commission's White Paper on Education and Training (1995) entitled *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society*, it is stated that the purpose of the proposals contained in the volume is "to prepare Europeans to pass smoothly to a society based upon the acquisition of skills, where one continues to learn and to teach throughout life. In other words, a learning society" (European Commission, 1995, p. 3). The socio-economic paradigm proposed by the Community policies is brought out even more clearly in a later step of the document in which it is claimed that "everyone's position in society will increasingly be determined by the knowledge he or she has built up. Tomorrow's society will be a society which invests in knowledge, a society of teaching and learning, in which each individual will build up his or her own qualifications" (European Commission, 1995, p. 5). But this marked emphasis on the indispensability of education and its direct and indisputable correlation to a qualification and to a social and professional position appears to be actually disappointing. The idea of 'investing' in knowledge to achieve a 'position' shows a series of structural contradictions. In fact, while training today seems to permeate every context, creating an 'ongoing ubiquitous feature' (Franceschini, 2008), it involves at the same time the concrete danger of ineffectiveness: it seems like its spread in every vital context ended up eroding the power of institutional training systems (Maltese, 2011). And thus, if education becomes an asset in which to invest but that does not give any solid economic return, it is simply a fraud (Standing, 2011). It is a situation that cannot fail producing a state of frustration which is in some way endemic:

Both high school and University, have been a successful path from the human point of view, cultural and personal...I'd do it a hundred times from the point of view of skills and knowledge. Then from the point of view of employment and job opportunities, it has been catastrophic. But unfortunately in 2002, when I started the University in Lecce, the labour market conditions were certainly not those that we are now (M., male, 32 years old).

There's a part of me that would not have studied...in the sense that I would have continued to study on my own for personal culture (N., female, 43 years old).

This considered, it can be said that “weak degrees” appear not to be profitable assets from the economic point of view. The investment in knowledge of the interviewees gave them little payback in terms of life security. Job insecurity is the condition in which there is an employee in an occupation with little prospects for career progression and/or for transformation in permanent work, in a labour market characterized by high and chronic unemployment. The uncertainty comes when the work has no career prospects and when the transition from one job to another involves medium-long periods of unemployment (Panara et al., 2013). Therefore, a guarantee of economic stability and self-sufficiency appears to be, according to the data collected, very often the only anchoring element to a job which is not wanted, but more and more often sought, in which people do not identify themselves, but mostly passes through for shorter or longer periods, waiting for windows of professional opportunities that a feeble labour market appears unwilling to grant, especially for so-called weak degrees:

Right now the need is to have a steady paycheck. First survive and then philosophize. The need is this” (D., male, 37 years old).

A job, however, is necessary. It is essential in order to survive and to be able to enjoy everything else that's outside (G., male, 33 years old).

I need only the money and this was the fastest way to get them, because Comdata is well known, pays on time, pays well, so I said -okay, I need it- and then they proposed me a permanent contract after a few months because I got in in August 2011 on temporary contracts, and in February 2012 they... so I had not even finished the extensions that they have offered me a permanent contract, part-time to 20 hours and for me it was perfect because I can spend the morning doing one thing and the afternoon doing another (R., female, 31 years old).

But a relative economic stability guaranteed by the surveyed call centres through a punctual and rigorous contractual status, however, combines with an almost total loss of professional identity. As detected by Standing (2011), these men and women are usually hired in positions that do not give career prospects, there is no tradition or shared professional memory and so

they do not feel the sensation of belonging to a community framed in consolidated employment practices. The main outcome of this is a sense of professional disaffection:

I do not feel realized from a professional point of view, but I do not spit into the pot where I eat and I also said it in the employment interview because it was the only company currently in Casarano and surroundings that guarantees a job, you give something to the company and the company recognizes you as you give (M., female, 33 years old).

It is not the typical job for which you wake up in the morning and say "ah how nice" because it still does not give you satisfaction...definitely from the professional point of view (G. male, 37 years old).

This, concludes Standing, can only increase the sense of alienation and exploitation in carrying out their duties. Speaking of alienation is inevitable since, as Harvey (2014) points out, the amount of output in terms of productivity and profit arising from any highly rationalized company through a high degree of organization and detailed social division of labour is detrimental to the mental, emotional and physical well-being of the worker. Workers reduced to 'fragments of human being', they become machine-operators, appendages of the same:

The negative facts are that it is still a very alienating work. [...] Given that every 5 minutes you talk to people of all kinds, of all cultural backgrounds, however, that you always repeat the same things every day...that is the way I see it, an important bombing on your brain because anyway you become almost a machine, because you always say the same things. Unless you do it with the right look, even a little ironically, even a little joking, you might come out crazy (A., male, 37 years old).

About the negativity of the work itself, the negativity regarding the tasks I perform is, despite having started a little over a month, the repetitiveness of work despite having to learn so many things...every day I still discover new things, new management, aspects of the job that did not know before, in spite of this, the repetition also of the opening and closing sentences is something that wears you down a little. After 4-8 hours always saying the usual opening and closing sentences, always using the same arguments to bring the customer into your arrivals, it is something that is a bit alienating (M., male, 32 years old).

### **Flexibility and risk**

These conceptual premises are useful to focus on the background on which our social actors move. As observed during the interviews, the call centre is certainly a workplace able to absorb graduates in so-called weak disciplines and it appears as a de-skilled routine employment context, in which the ethos of flexibility as an opportunity for skills' development is hardly justified. Call centres' operators, especially in southern Italy, are often university students or graduates, young people who have educational credentials that nevertheless do not safeguard them from the limbo of uncertainty, but rather are preconditions for the rise of a cognitive reserve employed in a nodal point of the economy based on knowledge (Maltese, 2011). While, on the one hand, the increasing complexity of the work of connecting businesses and users that call centres are called to play has enhanced their ability to absorb young workforce with medium-high education (taking advantage above all of their language and computer skills and interpersonal and communication skills), on the other hand, the generally adopted organizational models have fueled up to now an evident workforce turnover (Fortunato & Palidda, 2012). The working theory of flexibility implies an indictment of bureaucratic wastes and of "blind routine" (Sennett, 1998). Workers crystallized in static professions are being asked to surrender to a greater versatility, to change, to take risks. Career, a term that implies a long-term perspective and a definite direction, is replaced by job, in which employment blocks can be managed by executives with greater ease and often with prospects of medium-short course. As noted by Sennett, today the term flexibility is used opportunistically to circumvent the negative connotations of capitalism supporting the view that, opposing the rigidity of bureaucracy and paying greater attention to risks, flexibility allows individuals much more control over their lives (Sennett, 1998). And yet, though it has been attempted to convey the concept of flexibility in positive terms (as an opportunity to exploit), the contact point between precariousness and flexibility is the inevitable sense of alienation that both generate, an alienation rooted in a substantial lack of solid future prospects, in the impossibility of a long-term planning and of a defined professional identity. In fact, as Longo (2008) observes, labour flexibility is one of the causes of the loss of biographical stability in the sense that individual biographies become increasingly fragmentary. Individual biographies become made of separated work experiences, which may occur in different geographical places, often involving re-definitions of skills, tasks and competences. Actually, this

dogma of flexibility consists in the overlapping of a series of succeeding jobs, often not consistent with one another or with the overall workers' experience (Longo, 2008).

As stressed by Gallino (2014), too often flexible working does not earn to the individual significant professional experiences that are transferable from one employer to another and does not allow the individual to build a career and a professional identity. But such professional identity does not represent an additional element of personal and social identity; as a matter of fact it is its very foundation. In this perspective the following statements can be seen as evidences of the loss of this identity:

I find it hard telling what I do. Until I've been working for a publisher I said only -no, I work in a publishing house, and stop-. Now it happens that I try to derail the conversation...I still have problems with this thing. Or maybe I say -no, but it is a temporary thing, however I will not do this for long (R., female, 31 years old).

I always mention it as a second job, before I always say that I am a theater operator and then, if needed, I specify (M., male, 31 years old).

We must not forget that the International Labour Organization's Report entitled *Decent work* presented in 1999 in Geneva states that one of the cornerstones of the economic and social security of the worker is the professional security, understood as the possibility for workers of enhancing their identity through the development of professional skills and the construction of a stable and recognizable professional profile<sup>5</sup>.

It is inevitable to observe that the one of the call centre is an experience that it can be crossed several times and in various stages of the working life cycle, without ever being considered a long-term landing place or the work of the life (Fortunato & Palidda, 2012). Yet some researches highlight how in recent years it has been in place a sort of plastic adaptation of the professional lives of workers to what are the intrinsic conditions of the labour markets in which they use to move. For instance Corigliano and Greco (2008, 2009), drawing from a research conducted in a call centre located in the city of Bari, in the north of the Apulia region, show how young people in the South of Italy still perceive the work of telephone operator as unsatisfactory and transient, the stage of a journey that should lead to a more desirable job. But this assessment changes dramatically

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<sup>5</sup> *Decent Work*, Report of the Director-General, International Labour Conference, 87<sup>th</sup> Session, Geneva 1999.

when they are not at their first employment experience and have accumulated a more or less long trajectory in the local labour market. It is therefore the personal working history that changes dramatically the tone and the content of professional aspirations: in situations of long, fragmented and incoherent professional journeys call centres become a 'good job', a 'place not to leave', chosen consciously by people to improve their working conditions (Corigliano & Greco, 2008):

Comdata is well known among people of my own age, it is the only fixed place that is known as guaranteed in the city (G., male, 33 years old).

Given the current situation, I'm not complaining at all ... a sort of ... just surrender to what is [...] All aspire to work in a call centre because it is the only sector that actually continues to create, in some cities, new jobs... is the only sector (L., female, 52 years old).

If you live in Lecce you know that in any case after the Post Office, Comdata is the company that gives more jobs ever, so paradoxically now also people come to tell you - Oh, you're so lucky that you were able to get in there (F., Male, 37 years old).

It is not accidental, in this sense, the recent attention given to the regulation of contractual arrangements, believing that stability can overcome the difficulties and meet the expectations of young workers. But not forgetting to report also the ambiguity of the fact that security and stability are sought in companies that offer jobs with low professional content and characterize themselves, in the new economy landscape, as quite "volatile" organizations (Corigliano & Greco, 2008, p. 15).

If it is certainly true that call centres are inherently characterized by a high level of flexibility/insecurity and turnover, to limit these conditions can still contribute both endogenous and exogenous factors: on the one hand, the corporate strategy aimed at building loyalty from the side of the operator through the adoption of permanent contracts, pay incentives and career prospects, on the other, the limited availability of alternatives in the local labour market (Fortunato & Palidda, 2012). In this perspective, the data highlight another element that deserves attention: the acceptance of a job in a call centre as a relatively safe place to work and therefore worthy of consideration activates a process of separation of work from life. The individualization processes, on the one hand, and globalization and diffusion of ICT technologies, on the other, have had, in recent years, a great impact on the labour market in which workers pass through different

occupational statuses during their biographical path. Not any more a linear professional path with one and only job during the whole lifetime, but different jobs done under different employers, spaced out by training periods, phases of active presence in the sphere of social reproduction and periods devoted to other activities such as cultural and associative. Call centres are emblematic of this, as a high percentage of workers chose the part-time regime to facilitate other activities as training courses or less profitable jobs (Greco, 2005). The personal identity is built no longer through work, but through anything that there is outside of the working life. It is, in a certain sense, a choice of perspective: the interviewees' dream of a job through which establish themselves and express knowledge and skills acquired through years of studies remains, but somehow it is "frozen", put on standby, while waiting hopefully for a window of opportunity. Until then, the inevitable choice is to seek for their identity and their establishment elsewhere, in the "life outside":

This is the challenge I'm trying to win, to turn, slowly, collateral activities that are qualifying but are not a source of income, into a source of income. I also saw that many people, many boys and girls in Comdata, do the same thing, i.e. dedicate the extra-hours to personal interests, their passions, their hobbies but also, small businesses, who may not generate much income but that are more rewarding, more satisfactory from the professional point of view (M., Male, 32 years old).

I hope as much as possible, if I were to stay in Comdata in Lecce, to continue in Comdata and in the meantime to mature the whole series of activities that now gratify me much more from a personal and professional point of view but not in terms of income, make them grow more and more in order to make them become a paid job. Meanwhile Comdata serves perfectly as a mattress (G., female, 32 years old).

I'm writing a book [...] I continue to write and to study for hobby. Now I do it as a hobby. Before I hoped for ... but now it came... after 10 years, came the realization that there is nothing more to do and so I do it only because I have spare time [...] For the rest I will continue my hobby of writing and doing ... I do not know if it will help to do something but I'll continue until it will annoy me" (D., male, 37 years old).

The personal and professional identity deconstruction takes place simultaneously with the deconstruction of solid modernity. Referring to the work of Parsons, Longo states that the concept of solid modernity concerns a social system that can overcome the limits of attribution, in which the

subject, socialized within the family in a process of definition of its basic personality, is prepared to assume an occupational role within the universal structure of the differences (Longo, 2007). At this phase, from a mostly linear biographical path normally emerges a coherent and stable professional profile that plays an important role as the basis for the construction of the identity and the relationship between actors. But solidity, as Bauman teaches us, belongs to the past: all the landmarks that gave solidity to the world and favored reason in the selection of life strategies appear now in full transformation. We have the constant feeling that many games are played at the same time, and that, while playing, each one of them is changing its own rules (Bauman, 2001). We are witnessing a systematic complexification of reality on every level. This leads to a compulsion to the flexibility that comes to coincide more and more with a kind of existential precariousness, an almost-ascriptive character (Longo, 2007) of the role of the precarious.

The second modernity, when it becomes reflexive (Beck et al., 1999), triggers the perception of risk. It could be said that modern individuals are socially compelled to be flexible, in the sense that they have to run risks connected to choosing among alternatives of actions in a social structure where social position and identity were no more determined by birth (Longo, 2008). But the effect of a high exposure to risk is a situation of vulnerability that affects mainly the family and the professional bonds (Greco, 2005). Despite this, risk seems to constitute a daily social situation, in high percentage assimilated without generating special “states of alarm”, but, much more, a constant sense of anxiety and tension. This constant unease becomes a mental fatigue that affects ordinary daily life, an uncertainty that characterizes individual and family balances marked by a sort of “constant suspension” of life (Ranci, 2002, p. 337).

Our impression is that the stories of the interviewees tend to converge on an attempt of risk reduction through the reconfiguration of a life stability which, however, requires the sacrifice of the professional identity. This sacrifice seems to allow in some way to reunite the biographical path, fragmented after the entrance in a disjointed labour market:

I had to develop a plan b, which is to secure a source of income whatever it is and go on like this, always, and seeking in parallel for more skilled work [...] The positive aspects are a certain salary, fair and in line with the made hours and overtime are all paid ... that is, from that point of view ... then the fact that I have a contract that is not always given for granted (M., male, 32 years old).

At least they pay you. There are professional sectors such as the University where they use you and without paying you [...] Here you have a regular contract and this is a positive thing, from my point of view. I've done many jobs where I was contractually framed in a way but exploited in many other tasks, or had no contract at all, like the restaurants do very often (G., male, 37 years old).

### **Control and the factory metaphor**

The interviewed sample confirms us that the biographies of these knowledge workers have suffered of continuous readjustments of their professional identity related to the more general processes of individualization that accompanied the end of the Fordist society. There are perpetuated the characters of the industrial model and of the taylorist prescriptive logic as the control over time, bodies, space, and the neutralization of the autonomy of workers closed in simple and routine tasks far below their training.

The disciplining mechanisms that we have seen through the interviews can be immediately identified in at least two dimensions: the first, over body and space (a dimension that still belongs to a Taylorist logic); the second, over time and word (a relatively new dimension that affects the most intimate cognitive sphere of the worker). In relation to the first dimension an operator is very clear:

Taylorism is a term that comes to my mind right now, that is staying in your seat, perform repetitive actions, not mechanical...we are not talking about physical actions, but some are [...] then the timing, the fact that everything is marked by team leaders voice [...] is something that reminds me a bit of a factory" (M., male, 32 years old).

Taylor and Bain, 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. Monotony, repetitiveness and stress can be exacerbated by the imposition of stated or indicative targets" (Taylor & Bain 1999, p. 109).

The same interviewee goes on describing other control devices:

You have to ask permission to go to the toilet. I think that's a thing a little humiliating [...] that any action should be justified in any way, any derogation from the assembly line must have a good reason, and otherwise

you must go ahead. Those are obviously the productivity needs of the company; I would not even say that there is exploitation, but the fact that you have to ask for a permission to go to the toilet outside the pause seems a little excessive, or the fact that you cannot pull the cell phone out of your pocket even if you're in the corridor of the company you cannot pull it out, only in the break area, or outside. That's another thing I do not understand very well or the fact that you cannot go to the bar which is in another building when you are paused because you're not insured [...] I mean, you're insured, but only within a few meters around the complex where you are, so they forbid you to go elsewhere even just for a coffee (M., male, 32 years old).

While not wishing to be “apocalyptic”, considered also the complexity of the organizational model under examination (in agreement with the analysis of Fortunato and Palidda 2012) the majority of our interviewees continue to recall the metaphor of the call centre as a modern Taylorist factory. A woman tells us:

I start comparing the call centre to the old factories of the industrial revolution, you know? XIX century paintings, in England. [...] We are in 2014, we have reached the moon and the comets! But we're going back to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution speaking in terms of rights (L., female, 52 years old).

In the same way two operators:

It's an actual factory! It is like working in a factory; I think that today call centres are like the automobile factories of yesterday in which our parents went to work, maybe that's more manual work, ours is more a head job [...] But the end is a factory work in all (R., female, 31 years old).

I don't know, it seems a bit like a factory ... it's like we produce, but instead of mounting machines or produce bolts we answer the phone: each one of us has its booth, has its own monitor in front of him, he clicks the button and all day responds to people (D., male, 37 years old).

The organization of space is an additional device control in the call centre and is expressed in many forms. Urban spaces in which the companies are physically located are generally outside the centre of the city, in suburban or industrial areas, modern buildings with few public places of refreshment or neighbors. Comdata is in fact a relatively new building located on the eastern outskirts of the city of Lecce. The interior

space is made of a large lobby with small cells attached to each other where up to a hundred operators work simultaneously. The workstations are not reserved spaces for personal use but are used by several workers in the day at shift rotation. Only a few operators who have the indeterminate full time contract may have, but not always, a personal use station where to leave personal objects. The outdoor area and the internal space, as in the automated taylorist industry, are therefore, impersonal, flat, and neutral. There is an almost total inability to grasp traits of familiarity, affection and beauty.

Another dimension of the discipline is that which is achieved by controlling time and words. Fordist organization of labour that forced the workers to a permanent repetition of specific tasks on the assembly line has produced a telephonic taylorism that routinizes communication through the constant repetition of words and scripts. The control devices of the call centre resize, to almost make it disappear, the unexpected and the contingent that is in conversation.

The use of scripts, either in the form of typewritten prompt or on-screen template, is an attempt to structure the very speech of workers into a series of predictable, regulated and routinised queries and responses. To the extent that such scripts are utilised, they represent a qualitative transformation in the degree to which management attempts to exert control over the white-collar labour process. The use of tightly-defined scripts combined with the taping of each operator's every conversation, to ensure compliance, represents an unprecedented level of control which must be considered a novel departure (Taylor & Bain, 1999). The absence of spontaneity within the communication, its constriction within a predetermined time and with a productive goal imposed by the company transforms the call centres into a "talking assembly line" in which are employed "linguistic machines" (Marazzi, 1994, p. 17). This standardization of discourse implies a subjective loss of quality in the use of language, its trivialization and a weakening of its contents (Fumagalli, 2007). The computerized taylorist processes and their impact on emptying the most significant qualities of the speech are the new forms assumed by the estrangement within contemporary capitalism. Call centres, in fact, are not characterized by the use of complex cognitive skills, thus the estrangement is not generated through the expropriation of the worker's knowledge but through the appropriation and exploitation of its basic subjective capacities.

The use of in recent decades of mass communications' technology has revived a work rationality that restricts time and increases human effort.

The need to stay into an average operation time required by the company, the standardization of the starting and ending phrases - always a sort of script that the operator is required to comply with - becomes a pervasive control mechanism.

We have to manage a call in less than five minutes [...] but then at the same time we are demanded a high quality of the service and sometimes you cannot do both (M., male, 32 years old).

On the same line there is another interviewee:

Every time you put on the headphones all calls are more or less standardized, or is a problem on the invoice, or is a problem like, "I want this service, my friend saves money and I don't", then after a while you say "okay, enough". [...] This causes me a lot of stress. [...] I call it the "chicken coop" in the sense that you get there and sit in your box, you put the headphones on [...] is not an office environment where you can turn up and go to the colleague for an advice [...] this no" (R., female, 31 years old).

Uniformity of talks, constant availability, the request for friendliness and kindness, the "phone smiling": it is the appropriation of ever more intimate subjective capacities of individuals. This skills and virtues are required, however, with such uniformity that it doesn't make sense talking of a profession but more of a widespread vagueness in the productive activities (Tiddi, 2002).

In this perspective, drawing on Hochschild's study on flight attendants' labour process, in which the author proposes the definition of emotional labour, a labour which requires one "to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7), Taylor and Bain (1999) argue that the range of appropriate telephone manners and behaviors (particularly the ever-present necessity of the operator to "smile down the phone") may be also included in the category of the emotional labour.

This last reflection leads us also to explain why this form of computer Taylorism while using knowledge workers is not actually able to generate new knowledge but is, however, capable of generating profound changes in the reconfiguration of worker's subjectivity. A trade union representative speaks about this penetration into the most intimate sphere of identity:

the electric service customers call you, of course they don't call to say "hello", but for some problem with the power unit of for some mistake in

the invoicing [...] you have to be responsible and to not lose your temper, you have to be waterproofed in the sense that you must have the ability to not move yourself in front of that person who maybe is in a bad economic situation (L., female, 52 years old).

### **A glimpse on the future**

No narrative of resistance, conflict or possible reaction. The interviewees show a total inability to hold the course of their own biography; the pathways by which they arrived to a job in the call centre are often long, difficult and fragmented. Yet the breaking of their life projects built with fatigue along the biographical path is hardly perceived as a serious defeat, or as a loss of meaning; the control mechanisms that the workers themselves denounce do not generate anxiety, suffering or rebellious actions, at least not in their words. The new morphology of labour have made the individual a “chameleon” once again available, as already observed by Gallino (2001, p. 41) to repeatedly adapt the organization of his existence to the changing needs of the productive organizations, whether private or public, that employ him.

You enter in the workplace with a load of normalizing awareness both in relation with the loss of the past, understood what has been before, and with to the loss of the future, understood as what you would have wanted to be. There is the impression that these workers carry on “memories of the future” (Jedlowski, 2013) in the sense that they can still remember of a future that was promised and then betrayed when they report the rough path that led them to work in the call centre. But then they evade deeper, existential questions, related to their very wishes; it is the own future that almost no one is allowed to design, to dream, to imagine. This is undoubtedly the most intimate penetration of capitalism, the more carnal result of capital in this age of “sad passions” (Schmit & Benasayag, 2013). Below we report a series of responses to our question about the future:

Future prospects...a good question because in any case [...] okay, I am a very ambitious person; unfortunately I had to deal between my ambition and what is the reality of facts, so I figured out maybe before some friends who still have the illusion that one day someone will arrive and say “Hello Mr. please this is your desk, sit down, work”. Unfortunately I realized that that's just a pipe dream. But I have no illusions that much because, as I said, the situation now is quite clear to my eyes (A., male, 37 years old).

I don't know why, now personally I feel I am at a turning point [...] I have made plans, imagined a future, but this imaginary fell down because the very conditions have changed. So now I'm living my life day by day, I cannot tell about the future" (M., male, 39 years old).

My future perspectives: try to keep the job because it's the only thing that gives me a minimum guarantee for the future (L., female, 52 years old).

A son (M., female, 33 years old).

Well, I do not imagine: that is the problem. In the sense that however I have wishes, I think like everyone else. I'd like to leave this job; however, with another security anyway to do something that I like, in which I can invest. That's it" (R., female, 31 years old).

Workers, with no past and no future, who are also required to be happy to the extent that a positive attitude is more productive not only in the working day but in the very existence (Standing, 2011). In the effort not to complain, to stop fighting to see reaffirmed their rights, to leave home anxieties and frustration, not to think about the future but just of tomorrow, the step toward self-deception and then toward the annulment of the horizon of the ambitions is short. There is the absolute perception of being replaceable, again, easily interchangeable pieces of a gear, resigned "in the meantime" to the emptying and sinking of their identity.

We are numbers [...] I mean that we are a matrix, you know? So if I can swap the shift with you, for example I need the morning, we exchange the turn and nothing changes. The important thing is that there is that element that sells, that answers the phone and takes calls in those four hours. [...] Very mechanical, very [...] I do not know how to tell the difference between you and an automatic respondent apart for the fact that you may interact and answer questions; But then in the end you are a surrogate in the work that we do (A., male, 37 years old).

Elements of a production system in which individual skills are reset and then standardized; numbers and surrogates of a modern impersonal assembly line where there is a permanent repetition in the use of the word and a progressive loss of the knowledge accumulated during the years of education and training.

### **Concluding remarks**

The themes that emerge from the interviews lead us to a series of considerations. For our respondents, the worry that their educational choice has been inadequate is based on a direct and immediate reading of their actual labor context. The struggle with local and national labor market and the comparison with peers give respondents crude and subjective data. The aggregate figure that emerges before their eyes shows the poor professionalization of the paths taken and the degrees achieved. At the end of their studies they have seen alternate periods of paycheck and periods of contractual and human insecurity. The professionalization implodes in a fragmented path made of low qualification and lack of continuity. The degree awarded is consequently stigmatized; it becomes increasingly weaker, almost useless. It is at this point that, we believe, it is possible to track down the trigger of that fear of exclusion from an increasingly close-meshed labor market that becomes stronger in relation to the length and discontinuity of the working experience. In such a scenario human and professional gratification lose their value, giving way to the one main theme, emerged recurrently in the reported excerpts of interviews, that is contractual security and the continuity of a paycheck. Therefore education appears far from the intentions contained in the European Commission's White Paper. The link between education (which is imagined lifelong and life-wide) and social position appears to be loose in the eyes of respondents in the light of their own experiences. Investment in skills appears to be, for the weak graduates, a failure, which they feel victim of. The educational system should be considered partly responsible for such situation. Standing, in a very powerful way, speaks of commodification of education (Standing, 2011), referring to education aimed at enhancing human capital, which however has no actual economic return for many of the graduates. In other words, an academic path which does not lay foundations for the future may be considered a wrong choice that affects the whole future life, and this is, ultimately, one of the strongest complaints that respondents move both to themselves and to the educational system.

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