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[Book Review] Enda Brophy, Language Put to Work: The Making of the Global Call Centre Workforce

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Author: Enda Brophy

Book Title: *Language Put to Work: The Making of the Global Call Centre Workforce*

London: Palgrave, 2017, £24.99 pbk, (ISBN: 9781349957729), 306pp.

Reviewed by Aditya Ray

Enda Brophy's book *Language Put to Work: The Making of the Global Call Centre Workforce* is an important book for our times that conveys the centrality of communicativity in today's world, focussing on its role in shaping the 'global call centre workforce' and the different modes of labour resistance that are emerging in its wake. To broadly reconstruct one of the book's central arguments we are living in the era of 'communicative capitalism' (Dean 2009) where one of the primary drivers of corporate activity relates to the maintenance of a close and constant line of communication between businesses and their customers. This need for communication has led to the mass expansion of the 'call-centre model' on a world scale, so much so that call centre workplaces today provide 'one of the fastest-growing forms of employment, and have become emblematic of processes that have characterised the broader transformation of work in communicative capitalism' (p. 229-230).

Early in the book, Brophy highlights contrasting sets of views on call centre work and labour process that dominate existing literature – from positive accounts that render call centres employment as an integral part of a wider constellation of professionalised knowledge work, to those that view call centres as digital sweatshops whose growth is largely predicated on *flexpolitation* (exploitation in flexibilised employment regimes) of a socially and geographically segmented 'informational underclass' (p. 5). In evaluating the nature of call centre labour process and its overall impact on workers, Brophy however sides with Harry Braverman's original (1974) thesis about the degradation of work under Taylorist mass-production. Following Braverman, Brophy views call centres as promoting 'proletarianisation rather than professionalisation' in communicative capitalism (p.11, p. 78). For Brophy, call centre labour is a part of the contemporary 'cybertariat' (Huws 2003) that can be found toiling in the lower echelons of the 'network media industries' and which includes everyone from warehouse sorters for E-commerce giants like Amazon to assembly workers in Chinese Foxconn factories; from digital micro-taskers and freelancers working for companies like Mechanical Turk to frontline retail workers of electronic behemoths such as Apple (p. 11).

While Brophy maintains that Braverman's (1974) thesis continues to prove incisive for understanding the cybertariat's subjugation in the contemporary capitalist labour process, he asserts that it tends to overlook subjective forces of class-formation, including how workers routinely organise against and fend-off the different pressures exerted by capital. Brophy's response in the book, is to turn towards the 'workerist' post-*operaismo* tradition of the Italian autonomist Marxists, asserting that its focus on 'subterranean streams of labour's resistance can provoke a different picture of workers' class formation, one that foregrounds workers' capacity to oppose, frustrate and transform the conditions they encounter in the contemporary workplace' (p. 14). Consequently, it is the passionate retelling of different stories of call centre workers' organisation and resistance that becomes the living and breathing core of Brophy's book.

Brophy provides several accounts based on his extended research with call centre workers and labour organisers in Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and Italy, weaving-in insights from work done by scholars and activists in other locations such as Argentina, India, Pakistan and the UK. Each account makes us aware of the degradation of work resulting from the process of 'callcentrifcation', whereby firm's *abstract* communicative labour on the call centre floor through different techno-bureaucratic means, simplifying and routinising 'online' (phone-based) interactions and maintaining strict control of the workflow, often at the expense of workers' autonomy and overall wellbeing. This is followed by accounts of workers' struggles to organise against and resist the degradation in their status and roles as employees. The empirical discussions shine important light on both conventional *and* unconventional strategies that call centres workers adopt in different contexts including organising strikes and pickets, undertaking 'digital sabotage', engaging in 'brand tarnishing' etc. Brophy specifically highlights new forms of employee collectivisation that have helped consolidate union presence in the call centre industry across different locations - for instance different creative forms of 'nomadic' and 'free-market unionisms' deployed by Unite in New Zealand (pp. 147, 241). Brophy concludes the book on a prescriptive note, boldly arguing for the 'unmaking of the global call centre workforce' as it currently exists (p. 213). Citing his case examples, Brophy argues for the urgent need to explore and engage with novel possibilities of call centre organisation by 'paying closer attention to moments of occupation, progressive de-commodified applications of call centres and democratic forms of worker organisation within them' (p. 254).

Whilst Brophy's effort to document labour resistance in the book is commendable for the sheer breadth of its coverage that spans different case examples of call centres labour's organisation and resistance from multiple countries and contexts around the globe, it is worth mentioning that the book's *workerist* approach does not interrogate the distinct positionalities of workers beyond their (assumed) primary identification as employees, waged-workers and subsequently as members of a collective (union) resisting capital. This approach, it can be argued, hampers an even more *horizontal* framing of workers' subjectivity and agency that accounts for specific socio-cultural and political terrains outside the direct ambit of the firm or capital, on which struggles for labour's emancipation must also be mounted. Indeed, since the issue of workers' class-formation is processed predominantly through the broad structural logic of the call centre's political economy and labour process, it encumbers from view other 'structuring structures' (to use a bourdieusian term) related to spheres of wider socio-spatial and gendered forms of reproduction that shape resistance amongst workers.

However, even with the above designed limitations of its approach, the book remains a force to reckon with. The book delivers a powerful critique of prevailing modes of the cybertariat's exploitation by call centre capital, whilst also bursting some of the popular myths of these being somehow radically different from earlier modes of exploitation of industrial labour (p. 221). What is most pertinent however, is that the ubiquity of communicativity in today's world is helping fashion new avenues for the cybertariat to connect, collaborate and form new alliances generating a vision for alternative forms of emancipatory labour politics, and it is here where the real contribution of the book can be found.

References

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