

**LIFE IN A NORTHERN TOWN:  
CALL CENTRES, LABOUR MARKETS & IDENTITY IN  
POST-INDUSTRIAL MIDDLESBROUGH**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Since the late 1970s, many towns and cities across the UK have faced processes of deindustrialisation thoroughly transforming the social and cultural landscape for the local population. Middlesbrough, in the North East of England, underwent transformation from labour markets dominated by iron, steel and chemical industries to a reliance on new forms of insecure, flexible service sector employment, typified in this study by call centres. Call centres emerged in the 1990s as a cost-saving efficient delivery system for companies to handle customer contact through the marriage of telecommunications and new information technologies. As a new form of employment, call centres have become popular among academics and journalists. This study aims to explore how the changing nature of capital accumulation, prompted by an ideological shift towards neoliberalism, served to change the fabric of society by placing value on competition, consumer culture and individualisation whilst shifting Britain from a manufacturing economy to a service economy.

In specific locales such as Middlesbrough this radically altered the social landscape. Call centres emerged as a lifeline for those seeking employment in a town with historically high levels of unemployment. This study, based on covert ethnographic work as a call centre worker and in-depth interviews with call centre employees, will show what call centre work is like; how management strategies work towards efficiency, productivity and targets, how employees feel working in often stressful and difficult circumstances, and how technology dictates the work process thus preventing employees from controlling the pace of work. Furthermore, this study will investigate how social change central to the emergence of the call centre also created a culture which traps young people into a cycle of earning and consumption limits their options for future betterment and alters the very nature of their identity and perceptions of social class.

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## INTRODUCTION

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“Change is inevitable in a progressive country. Change is constant.”

- Benjamin Disraeli

This study considers the tight relationship between capitalism, labour and identity. Essentially, I will investigate how contemporary forms of capital and capital accumulation are reshaping labour markets and the forms of governance that exist in the field of paid labour. I am particularly interested in workplace identities and work cultures in low-level service employment, and I will attempt to make a theoretical connection between the subject of this new economy and its meta-organisation, its global flows and its ‘naturalised’ ideological content (Jameson, 1991). Specifically, this study takes place in Middlesbrough, a small town of around 135,000 people in the North East of England. A traditionally working class town, built on iron and steel and petrochemical industries, Middlesbrough has been beset by myriad problems since the onset of deindustrialisation in the late 1970s. High unemployment and few job opportunities were compounded by social problems including rising crime levels, drug dependency, teenage pregnancy, low educational achievement and poor standards of health (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; MacDonald et al, 2008; also Murray, 1990). In many respects it would appear that Middlesbrough is the perfect site for an investigation of the current state of western liberal capitalism for several reasons. Firstly, deindustrialisation ripped apart the fabric of the town and forced Middlesbrough into rapid change in order to survive (Beynon et al, 1994). Secondly, the social problems associated with rising levels of social exclusion in the wake of widespread upheaval make Middlesbrough an interesting site of analysis (Webster et al, 2004; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Finally, Middlesbrough is perfect for this task because there is nothing unique about the place. Middlesbrough is representative of many other post-industrial towns and cities with nothing to offer, it has no great historical past, no special place in the fabric of British social life. This ‘everyman’ characteristic makes possible an analysis of wider social trends. The reasons for choosing Middlesbrough have been demonstrated publicly in recent years; the social problems associated with deindustrialisation and the declining fortunes of the town contributed to Middlesbrough being voted the worst place to live in the UK in 2007. In 2010, Middlesbrough was also rated the town least equipped to deal with public sector spending cuts deemed necessary to overcome the recession. When we talk about declining fortunes of

former industrial centres, Middlesbrough serves as a good example of a town struggling to come to terms with the conditions created by the changing global economy.

Like many other places in the UK, in the wake of deindustrialisation, Middlesbrough's economic survival came at least partly as a result of the growth in low paid service sector jobs, particularly call centre work. Representative of a new economy increasingly dependent on the service sector, call centres have become a hot topic in both academic and journalistic circles over the last few years (Ellis and Taylor, 2006; Kinnie, 2008; Richardson and Belt, 2001; Taylor and Bain, 1999; 2005). Combining new technology and telecommunications, call centres offer efficient delivery systems for customer care. In the last two decades, companies have turned to call centres in order to consolidate business, enhance productivity and thus increase profit. In many depressed areas of the country, outsourced call centres emerged offering companies the staff and facilities necessary to handle customer enquiries (Richardson, Belt and Marshall, 2000; also Kinnie, 2008). Outsourced firms battle for contracts by offering efficiency and productivity at reasonable costs. Given their reliance on efficiency and productivity, many early analyses of call centres made claims about 'electronic sweatshops' or an 'electronic panopticon' of close supervision and surveillance (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Fernie and Metcalf, 1998). However, few studies or articles on call centres benefit from prolonged exposure to the daily routine of life on the call centre floor.

### *Objectives*

With this in mind, it would be appropriate to state some of the aims and objectives of this research and the reasons and justifications for these questions. Initially, this study aimed to describe and understand the everyday life in a call centre in Middlesbrough. I had become aware of the plethora of call centre jobs springing up in my hometown and I was interested in uncovering the reality of life inside this truly postmodern occupation. What is it like taking calls all day? What is it like on the call centre floor? I had engaged in a primitive form of call centre work in the late 1990s, cold-calling for a double-glazing company whilst at college and had not enjoyed the experience. At that time, large call centre operations were uncommon in Middlesbrough but the sector had blossomed in the years since my early exposure to telephone-based operations. At this point, I was interested in finding out what these large call centre operations were like and what the people working there thought of it.

Did they enjoy the job? What were the managers like? What kind of management practices were in place?

My earlier studies had opened me up to discourses surrounding the nature of market capitalism, consumer culture and the impact on individual identity. Call centre work had the added bonus of acting as a lens through which these issues could be analysed and discussed. What conclusions could be drawn about the nature of market capitalism in its consumer phase when local labour markets such as Middlesbrough are dominated by low-paid service sector jobs? I already held to a structural view of the world, that the economy moulded the social, that the global affected the local, therefore by focusing on the particularities of my hometown labour market, I felt an analysis of the universal, the state of market society and consumer capitalism was possible.

Although I knew that the daily realities of the call centre floor, the management attitudes and working practices, would play a central role in this thesis, the opportunity was there to produce something much broader than a small-scale study concerned with interaction in the workplace. By looking at the lives of my co-workers and their attitudes towards work, I could draw conclusions about identity; what do the young men and women living in post-industrial Britain, engaged in low-paid, insecure service work, identify with? How do they define themselves? At the outset, these were the main objectives of the thesis. As time went on, these aims opened up other issues that I had not initially considered, specifically the continuing debate surrounding class, or the death of class. By the end of the project, call centres had come to play a small part in a much broader analysis of the big issues of our time; the nature of identity and subjectivity, the death of class consciousness, the restructuring of the labour market, the centrality of work to everyday life, the nature of capitalism and liberal democracy. While I set out to uncover the reality of the call centre floor, through the course of this study I was able to uncover much, much more. However, much of that comes later.

### *The Study*

This is an ethnographic study of Middlesbrough, of the local labour market and the call centre work central to the local economy. I spent six months working full time for an outsourced call centre named Call Direct, dealing with broadband enquiries for their client Internet Plus. The rest of the data is drawn from discussions and semi-structured interviews with co-

workers and other call centre agents I was put in contact with. Their attitudes and opinions on their work and lives in Middlesbrough form the bulk of the data. From this base we can begin to look at the people engaged in this new form of employment and begin to draw conclusions regarding the nature of identity and subjectivity in a postmodern world. How do the young men and women engaged in call centre work define themselves? From what is their identity shaped and created? How do they view the local labour market, the world at large, and their place in it? The answers to these questions allow the opportunity to reveal fundamental issues at the heart of the class system in contemporary British society; can we still talk about class in the same way we traditionally did? What does the working class look like in the face of an economy no longer functioning around industrial labour and manufacturing?

First of all, it is crucial to note that the world has changed. At the heart of this thesis lies the contention that processes of deindustrialisation throughout the late 1970s and 1980s fundamentally altered the social, cultural and political landscape of the country, and Middlesbrough specifically. Without these changes and upheavals, this study would not have taken place. In order to understand the contemporary landscape, we need to look to the recent past. First, we must consider the idea of change and determine exactly what we mean when we say ‘the world has changed’. Is it fundamental change or cosmetic change? Is it progressive or regressive? By examining some of the core issues behind the social change of the last three decades, we can begin to get a picture of how these changes specifically impact upon the location and the people in this study.

### *The Times They Are A-Changin’*

The social world, over the last three decades, has changed on every level (Gray, 1998). The progressiveness of social change will reappear later in the chapter yet the notion of social change is not a new phenomenon. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus mused 2,500 years ago that ‘everything flows and nothing stays’. However, over recent years, it is the pace of change which has surprised, delighted, and frightened many observers (Friedman, 2000; Castells, 2000; Bauman, 2007a). Bauman (2005a) describes a ‘liquid society’ whereby everything we previously held as concrete and self-evident has been eroded and undercut in favour of the fluid, ephemeral hyper-real world of contemporary market society. Previous generations followed the traditional, well-worn paths of their predecessors with little

variation, however in our global, hyper-individualised world, the opportunity is there for everyone to break free from the bonds of tradition and be whomever they choose to be (Bauman, 2001). Or so we are led to believe. Not only has the social world changed, the landscape of contemporary society has been altered in such a way that many have considered this epochal shift to be both evolutionary and revolutionary (Angell, 2000; Zizek, 2000; also see Savage, 2009 for a discussion on ‘epochalism’ within sociology). The global changes that have taken place over the last quarter of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century have had an impact upon every aspect of social life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The aim of this thesis is to map these changes onto a specific locale, the former industrial working-class town of Middlesbrough, situated in the North East of England. As a consequence of the social upheaval faced by Middlesbrough over the last thirty years, the local labour market has seen a fundamental shift from manufacturing and heavy industry towards service based employment, typified in this study by the rise of call centre work. However, in order to focus on the particularities of call centre work in Middlesbrough, wider social change needs addressing, starting with the rise and dominance of a neoliberal system of governance. The post-war consensus, built around full employment and inclusivity and often referred to as Keynesianism, had dominated the social and political landscape for thirty years. By the late 1970s, this consensus had begun to break apart and a new set of ideas emerged as the dominant configuration in British (and American) society. The ascendancy of neoliberal ideology is central to this change therefore a definition of neoliberalism is useful at this point,

“Most generally, neoliberalism is a philosophy viewing market exchange as a guide for all human action. Redefining social and ethical life in accordance with economic criteria and expectations, neoliberalism holds that human freedom is best achieved through the operation of markets. Freedom (rather than justice or equality) is the fundamental political value. The primary role of the state is to provide an institutional framework for markets, establishing rights of property and contract, for example, and creating markets in domains where they may not have existed previously. Consequently, neoliberalism accords to the state an active role in securing markets, in producing the subjects of and conditions for markets, although it does not think the state should – at least ideally – intervene in the activities of markets.” (Dean, 2009: 51).

This chapter will aim to outline the changes brought about by the neoliberal defeat of traditional Keynesian economics and the next chapter will demonstrate how they have impacted upon a specific locale, Middlesbrough, in the north east corner of England.

When we talk about change, it is important to understand what we mean by the term. Contemporary cultural studies routinely ascribe the verb ‘change’ to a range of social phenomena without taking the time to examine whether the things they cite as examples of change is actually fundamental alterations to the social structure or simply surface change, the appearance of change and cultural fluidity. As Jameson (1991) argues, this fixation on change is indicative of a postmodernism that undermines historical continuity thus making us ignorant of the past. Postmodernity, for many, is a new era in which grand narratives and overarching theories no longer apply (Lyotard, 1974). As many postmodernists argue, the social world is too complex and diverse to be reduced to grand narratives, the ideas that dominated the past no longer hold sway; the social world today becomes a site of freedom and change. Rejecting previously held truth claims causes this historical break with the past and tradition. We also become bored with the present and fascinated by the new therefore the idea of changing into something new becomes central to contemporary society. Ultimately, as Jameson (1991) suggests, what we find is that despite the fascination with change, there is no ‘new’, only the rediscovery and reiteration of what already exists; high culture collapses into pop culture and change is simply a regurgitation of previously existing styles. Postmodern rhetoric often leaves one with the impression that there has been deep-seated change in the fabric of sociality at the start of the twenty-first century. We are repeatedly told that we have freedom of choice and individual empowerment over our future, increased social mobility and the chance to progress and move beyond class boundaries, and the opportunity to create ‘do-it-yourself’ biographies. Is the postmodern ideal of freedom of choice, movement and social mobility a cause of the social upheaval seen over the last three decades or an effect of wider processes and structures?

Ian Angell (2000) perceptively remarks that many people blame particular issues for societal ills when in fact they are the *effect* of larger processes rather than the *cause* of social upheaval. With this in mind, how do we decide what constitutes a cause and what is merely an effect? Whilst wildly unpopular in certain academic circles, particularly since the collapse

of communism heralded the ‘end of history’ and the resounding victory of liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1992) largely discredited Marxism as a political doctrine, Marx is the place to begin. Whilst acknowledging calls of reductionism, the economy and organisation of society around the accumulation of capital act as the keystone around which capitalist society is built (Althusser, 1971; Marx, 1999). Following Marx, and others who have developed his ideas, I will argue that history bears witness to the fact that the organisation of the economy has determined the structure of the rest of society (Marx, 1999). The rise of postmodernism, as noted above, has seen a growth in scepticism towards meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1974) therefore the growing sense of fluidity, freedom and change associated with our times cannot be adequately grasped by the grand theory of modernism. Marxism is certainly one of these meta-narratives and has been subject to some useful criticism, as well as some mindless analysis. Essentially, the belief in liberal diversity and individual fluidity and freedom stems from a postmodern dismissal of grand narratives which ironically displays the very traits of ideological narrative deemed passé in contemporary society (Zizek, 2000). In dismissing meta-narratives and ideology by saying the world is too diverse for grand theories, the prevailing hegemony of liberal capitalism, espousing a belief in diversity, freedom of choice and cultural fluidity, solidifies its position as the dominant ideology of our times (ibid).

Despite this criticism, in economic terms, many of Marx’s predictions turned out as he suggested. For example, Marx and Engels (1998: 6) contended that ‘modern industry’ had established a ‘world market’ where ‘the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe’. One hundred and fifty years later, we refer to this as globalisation. The constant expansion of needs recognised by Marx and Engels as critical to capitalist societies has seen capital push into fields previously exempt from market forces as well as creating new fields for capital accumulation. Marx also theorised the importance of surplus value for capitalist production; the amount an individual is paid for their labour is overshadowed by the amount of work done or number of units produced thus increasing the surplus value for the employer (Marx, 1999). As we shall see, a contemporary economy organised around efficiency and productivity places great emphasis on surplus value thus further highlighting Marx’s importance to any study of modern economy. Whilst it is crucial to note the importance of the economy in terms of the structure and organisation of society, how and for what reasons the economy takes a certain shape is also important. Williams (2005) contends that all societies build their structure around social

intentions, usually those of the dominant class, and these intentions form the base of social organisation and production, influencing, among other things, the labour market. Furthermore, Marx suggested that the dominant economic class was also the dominant political class; something Harvey (2005) believes applies in terms of the neoliberal ascendancy at the end of the twentieth century. Harvey (2005) regards neoliberalism as the return to power of the dominant class in the western world. Re-establishing their dominance through the ideological victory of neoliberalism, the social intention behind liberal democracy and consumer capitalism is providing the freedom for those with capital to pursue unhindered capital accumulation and, over recent decades, changes have taken place to allow this to occur on an unprecedented level. This has had a profound effect upon the social landscape, altering it both locally and globally in ways that need to be examined in detail.

With this in mind, the social change heralded by postmodernists is an *effect* rather than a *cause* of social disturbance. Beneath these changes and advancements in social life rests the same economic logic of capital that has been running through the fabric of social life since the birth of capitalism (Harvey, 2010; Arrighi, 2010). The economic foundation of everyday life remains the same. Certainly, as a self-revolutionising organism, capitalism has changed itself from within in order to remain viable, moving towards a more ‘ethical’ capitalism in which the world’s problems can be solved by the market (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Zizek, 2009). Despite this, the core principles of liberal democracy and capitalism remain unaltered. The economic makeup of society is still geared around the pursuit of capital, what passes as ‘change’ can often serve as a distraction that hides the durability of the existing social structure (Zizek, 2000; Badiou, 2000). The biggest ‘change’ the contemporary social world has seen is the coronation of liberal democratic market capitalism, fuelled by consumer spending, as the undisputed system of governance in the Western world (Zizek, 1989; Stiglitz, 2010). The ideological victory of the current system was underlined in the wake of the global recession of 2007-08, despite the clear failings of an unregulated market capitalist system and the urgent necessity for governments to bail out ‘too big to fail’ banks, the system remained intact with very few modifications to prevent another catastrophe from occurring in the future (Harvey, 2010; Zizek, 2009).

The underlying power of liberal democracy lies in its ability to make us believe that as individuals our democratic choices shape our collective destiny, when in truth, as individuals,

we have little power in terms of changing things (Zizek, 2000; Badiou, 2007). Capitalism is a self-revolutionising system which changes from within in order to prevent reaching a crisis point which may force change from outside and the production of a realistic alternative to market capitalism (Zizek, 2009; 2010). Traditional social democratic capitalism which recognised unionism and maintained a belief in inclusivity was, over time and at varying speeds and degrees, abandoned and replaced by unrestrained free market capitalism with an emphasis on individual responsibility and primitive capital accumulation, which in turn overcomes its own criticisms and potential external challenges by morphing into ‘ethical’ market capitalism which convinces us that the market can solve the world’s problems (Zizek, 2008a; 2009). Rather than remaining stagnant and risking proper intervention, capitalism follows its own self interest and remains one step ahead, transforming from within in order to stay viable, each ‘new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) serving to distance itself from meaningful interference. In fact, rather than altering the existing system, the veneer of change serves to breathe new life into the system, strengthening the control liberal democracy has over contemporary society (Fisher, 2010).

Take, for example, political change. Despite assertions that we have entered a profoundly different political age, a post-Blair politics where things are done differently, politics has become shorn of all ideological meaning (Zizek, 1989; 2000), working within the horizons of liberal democracy rather than seeking a better system of governance (Fisher, 2010; also Featherstone, 2007). When political commentators and politicians herald our ability to enact our democratic right to change the system every four or five years by electing a new government, we are simply replacing one set of liberal oligarchs with another (Badiou, 2008). Despite the veneer of freedom in choosing our elected representatives, the inevitable conclusion is that whomever we elect will continue along the current trajectory of ‘centre-ground’ politics, masking an authoritarian, neoliberal hegemony (Hall and Winlow, 2007). During the 1997 election campaign, Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown described his rival’s campaigns as ‘synchronised swimming’ such was the ideological similarity between the Labour Party and the Conservatives. The idea that Barack Obama or David Cameron is capable of providing governance qualitatively different to their predecessors is, to say the least, utopian (see Zizek, 2008b; Seymour 2010). Mario Cuomo (1985) once said ‘you campaign in poetry, you govern in prose’ and even a politician as paradigm-shifting as Barack Obama bears this out. His campaign rhetoric about a new politics and cleaning up

Washington gave way to the same old political log-jam once he entered office. Despite all the talk regarding radical change, accepting the liberal-capitalist horizon is not a radical position (Fisher, 2010). The logic of liberal-capitalism is so total it makes any alternative unthinkable (Valentic, 2008). If there is a problem, capitalism can solve it; if capitalism is the problem, we can change the nature of capitalism. This logic induces thinking that prevents seeking alternatives to liberal capitalism, resigning many to a utopian realism whereby they achieve their utopian goals within the framework of liberal democracy (Featherstone, 2007). Traditional notions of a social utopia, imagining a better world and trying to achieve it, change into a personal utopia, of succeeding personally within the world we encounter around us rather than trying to change the world or create something different. The declining influence of trade unions and the apathetic response of my respondents to collective participation detailed later in the thesis underline this; the idea of working for collective improvement has withered away in favour of accepting the normality of our social world and system of governance and looking for individual satisfaction within the confines of liberal democracy. Returning to the global recession of 2008-09, politicians of every stripe and commentators spanning the entire political spectrum offered proscriptions as to the best way of fixing a broken system yet nobody offered a solution that lay outside the boundaries of liberal democracy. Indeed, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism (Jameson, 1991; also see Fisher, 2010).

Philosophically, in terms of dialectical progression (Hegel, 1977), many regard our current epoch as the end of history. History cannot progress without an antithesis, an opposing idea to the received wisdom of the day; without politics and the march of history we remain circulating within the cultural, social and economic constellations of liberal capitalism (Fukuyama, 1992). In Hegel's (1977) formulation of the dialectic, the initial thesis is too abstract to succeed and lacks the negative of trial and error. Only by passing through the negative of the antithesis does an idea overcome its limitations and the synthesised idea holds onto the useful portions of the earlier formulation. In contemporary society at large, the blind acceptance of liberal capitalism as 'the way things are' has stifled critique and divergent voices, the opposing idea no longer exists and therefore the dialectic remains incomplete, liberal capitalism goes unchallenged by alternatives and no change or progression takes place. Meanwhile, despite many criticising Fukuyama for proclaiming the end of history, Zizek (2009) argues that we are all Fukuyamean now. The dominance of the liberal

democratic ideology is so complete and total that we accept liberal democratic capitalism as a finally found formula of the 'least worst' possible society (Badiou, 2000). We know liberal capitalism has flaws and is not perfect, but it is not as bad as other systems of governance that have had their chance throughout the twentieth century, for example communism and fascism. This leaves us with the sole task of making that system more just and tolerant, rather than conceiving of an alternative.

Arguably, rather than progressive change, we have, over the last thirty years, reached a period of 'dialectics at a standstill' (Benjamin, 1999). Benjamin (1999: 264-265) contends that 'thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallises into a monad'. The ascendancy of neoliberal market capitalism has coincided with a retreat from critical thinking and an acceptance of an indestructible, omniscient entity that clouds the politico-economic horizon. Whilst there was undoubted change during this period, what we actually saw was a restoration of classic liberal capitalism, the reawakening of a former doctrine rather than the birth of something new and progressive (Harvey, 2005; Badiou, 2000). Given that the next real historical shift may be, as many currently argue, a retrograde step (Gray, 1998; 2008), it raises questions about the actual progressiveness of the changes that took place a generation ago. Gray (2008) argues that 'progressive' movements such as the Enlightenment were founded on ideals and therefore are utopian and unrealisable. Some of the worst atrocities of the last century had their roots in progressive Enlightenment thought whilst the recent failure of the utopian project of democracy in the Middle East has seen a retreat to primitive versions of religious fundamentalism, both within Islam and Christianity (ibid). Hegel's (1977) notion of a society constantly moving forward and progressing on an upward trajectory becomes problematic given the fact that we are locked into the cultural and economic boundaries of liberal capitalism, constantly floating in a world of 'hyper real' symbolic exchange (Baudrillard, 1981) without the means or capacity for actual progressive political change.

Given that many believe society to no longer travel on an upward, progressive trajectory, this thesis contends that not only have we seen the restoration of classical liberal capitalism (Harvey, 2005; Badiou, 2007) but also the return of forms of 'primitive accumulation' of capital in conditions of 'surplus labour' (Marx, 1999; Harvey, 2010; Hall and Winlow, 2007).

While classical political economists such as Smith (2003) and Ricardo (2004) saw early or ‘previous’ accumulation as a largely peaceful process, those with the will to work hard could accumulate the initial money needed to invest in production as capital, facilitated by a state operating under a laissez-faire approach to the market, Marx (1999) saw the process of primitive accumulation as a violent process involving what Harvey (2010) calls ‘accumulation by dispossession’.

For Marx (1999: 376), the original accumulation necessary to turn money into capital for investment might take the form of resource extraction, conquest or plunder, and enslavement. According to Marx, the aim of primitive accumulation is to privatise the means of production thus allowing those with capital to make money from the surplus labour of those who lack the means to work for themselves. Harvey (2010) contends that the term ‘primitive’ denotes a one-off phase of capitalism when in actuality the process of primitive accumulation is not only an ongoing practice but is still clearly visible in contemporary society. Harvey (2003; 2010) sees primitive accumulation taking place in recent economic dimensions such as intellectual property rights, privatisation and environmental exploitation and predation (see also Hardt and Negri, 2004).

Privatisation, for example, serves as ‘accumulation by dispossession’ insofar as formerly public services are taken from the hands of the public and placed into the hands of capitalists for enormous profit. Belonging to the public sector, no profit exists; selling it to private interests generates huge capital accumulation through the dispossession of the people. The series of Enclosure Acts in Britain throughout the nineteenth century serve as a clear example; public or common land was placed in the hands of the political class who, as land owners, were capable of generating profit through private property and the extraction of rental income from their newfound acquisition. Primitive accumulation works almost like Robin Hood in reverse; taking from the people to give to the rich who are then free to make further profit from their gains.

Harvey (2005) sees neoliberalism as an attempt to restore classical liberal capitalism, restoring the capitalist class to their ‘rightful’ place by removing restrictions and regulations in order to create conditions conducive to increase levels of capital accumulation (see also Badiou, 2007; 2008). The privatisation seen since the 1980s serves this function. There are

many other examples of accumulation by dispossession; the privatisation of the clean-up and restoration of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the privatisation of Iraq in the wake of the coalition invasion serve as examples of primitive accumulation (Klein, 2007). Naomi Klein (2007) refers to this as ‘shock therapy’; taking advantage of either man-made or natural disasters and devastation in order to impose a market solution and a means of accumulating capital, Schumpeter’s (2010) ‘creative destruction’ at its most basic. Shell’s attempts to privatise the Nigerian oil fields and their virtual infiltration of the Nigerian government in order to control their natural resources (Okonta and Douglas, 2003) also demonstrates primitive forms of accumulation; political opponents of Shell’s environmental policies, including Ken Saro-Wiwa, were executed by the Nigerian government in order to stifle opposition to Shell and their accumulation of capital off the backs of Nigerian natural resources (Pilkington, 2009). The \$15.5 million lawsuit Shell paid for the killing of Saro-Wiwa is still a drop in the ocean compared to the vast profits they make from the Nigerian oilfields. As Bakan (2005) suggests, this indicates that ‘pathological’ corporations regard sanctions and fines as ‘the cost of doing business’. Taking from the public to generate capital for private interests indicates the presence of primitive accumulation in contemporary society.

In terms of this study, exploitative forms of capital accumulation take place on a smaller scale. In the relations between employee and employer at Call Direct, there are clear examples of the company dispossessing the individual of rights, benefits and services in order to accumulate profit. Clear examples of theft by the company against the employee go unchecked, indicating that primitive forms of accumulation take place not only in the developing world, but also in supposedly developed, civilised countries. In terms of ‘surplus labour’ and ‘surplus value’, consolidation of the means of production in the hands of a few inevitably results in the multitude being forced to sell their labour power like any other commodity in order to make a living. Surplus value is the difference between what the worker produces during a shift and the money the worker is paid for their labour-power (Marx, 1999). By viewing the worker as a commodity with a value, in terms of what their labour is worth, the capitalist can increase the surplus value of a commodity and thus make a profit in the marketplace. That profit is then reinvested in the pursuit of further capital and the cycle continues (Marx, 1999: 94-95). Accumulation by dispossession can also take place through the capitalist reducing the cost of inputs in the production process and intensifying the work process. Cutting pay and intensifying working practices is seen as a legitimate

method of increasing profit, however, not paying employees adequately reduces their ability to act as consumers thus profit rates fall, the cycle of boom and bust continues and economic crises are forever on the horizon (Marx, 1999; Harvey, 2010). The 'pathological' nature of capitalism (Bakan, 2005) ensures the pursuit of profit above all else and thus makes capitalism too narrow-sighted to see that higher pay ensures the ability to consume and thus economic growth. Instead, short-termism predominates in contemporary capitalism and therefore cutting costs and inputs comes to be regarded as key to increasing 'surplus value'. Low wages and highly intensive labour processes, as indicated throughout this study, increases surplus value and thus profit for the capitalist, at the expense of the worker. By focusing on forms of 'primitive accumulation' in the conditions of 'surplus labour' in post-industrial towns such as Middlesbrough, we can connect these practices to wider social processes and global trends that have come to predominate in contemporary society.

In terms of progressive change, for many critics, the destruction of traditional industry was a necessary act of 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter, 2010) in order to build something better. Furthermore, this period also saw an increase in tolerance and equality in terms of, among other things, gender and race therefore despite the unemployment, deindustrialisation and rising social inequality, this was a period of progress for western civilisation. Essentially, some things got better whilst other things got markedly worse. One of the key features of liberal democracy is the notion of equality, that gender and racial equality has become possible through liberalisation. However, is it possible these equalities would have been achieved, given time, under the previous social democratic system? Why do we believe that equality and other positives could only come about through liberalising the economy? The language of liberal democracy equates liberalisation with progress. When looking at Middlesbrough, this study will aim to determine whether social progress was made, on the whole or in part, despite fundamental changes to the make-up of the local social structure or whether any claim to progress is fundamentally misguided and serves to mask the significant social harms visited upon both community and subject as a result of the social upheaval at the end of the twentieth century.

When looking at how the economy shapes the social landscape, particularly in terms of specific lifeworlds and social identity, Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus is critical here because cultural forms become tied to the social reality created by the economy. Forged in

the shadow of industry, traditional working class life and habitus, the values, habits and dispositions embodied by individuals within a specific social sphere, came to represent or reflect the economic make-up of the community (Hall and Winlow, 2004). Fast-forward to contemporary society and the new economic logic of profit accumulation results in a contemporary habitus reflecting a social reality bound up in active consumerism and consumer signification (Hall et al., 2008; see chapter 8 for a longer discussion of habitus). Changes in the fabric of economic, social and cultural reality have a very real impact on the identity and subjectivity of individuals. Through analysing the economic and social upheavals of the last thirty years, we can begin to gain an understanding of how these changes directly affect the young men and women in marginalised locales who are engaged in new forms of service sector employment.

The following chapter outlines the methodology at the heart of this thesis; which methods were used? What was the rationale behind these particular methods, what are the benefits and deficiencies of those methods? What informs the theoretical framework on which the data rests? Chapter one introduces Middlesbrough by offering an economic and social history from her foundation as an iron and steel town in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the fluctuations in Middlesbrough's fortunes along with the fluctuations in the global economy. The social changes of the late 1970s and 1980s, hinted at earlier, will be discussed in more detail, highlighting how Middlesbrough's relative prosperity was wiped out and, eventually, began to re-emerge as a base for service sector employment. Chapter two will consider the myriad social problems facing Middlesbrough in the wake of deindustrialisation and the rise of call centres and other forms of service work as a substitute for traditional industries. This leads on to a broader discussion of call centres and their development in the wake of deregulation and privatisation.

Chapter three begins the ethnographic description of call centre work. Focusing specifically on the recruitment practices of call centres, including my introduction to call centre work, this chapter will look at how call centres recruit, train and attempt to keep staff turnover levels down in a labour market notorious for high levels of employee withdrawal. Chapter four will look at the management practices in place at Call Direct, how the work process is determined by the marriage of technological innovation and human monitoring. The use of surveillance and monitoring is central to call centre work and plays a big part in this chapter. Chapter five

looks at employee disobedience and resistance at work. Contrasting it with resistance and disobedience in industrial literature, this chapter highlights how call centre workers engage in individualised acts of disobedience and rule breaking rather than collective forms of resistance. Chapters six and seven look closely at the young men and women who worked at Call Direct, firstly identifying their feelings and attitudes towards the job, the company and their future, and then secondly asking whether they ‘live to work’ or ‘work to live’. The role of leisure and consumerism as a counterbalance to work also appears here, as well as the notion of a ‘real career’ versus call centre work. Chapter eight offers a theoretical discussion of identity, subjectivity and habitus; how have the fundamental changes to the social fabric discussed throughout this study affected the identity and habitus of the young men and women of Middlesbrough? A discussion of class and a debate as to whether class analysis is still relevant finishes off the final chapter. The conclusion draws all of these issues together and makes some final points about the future for Middlesbrough and the young people emerging into a recession-hit labour market.

## METHODOLOGY

This chapter will set out the methodology employed in this study, focusing on both the research methods and the theoretical and philosophical structure and assumptions at the heart of this thesis. The first section deals specifically with the choice of research methods, why they were chosen as well as the pros and cons of each method. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical choices made throughout this study, why were certain theories included and others rejected. The chapter will conclude with a few comments regarding empiricism, subjectivity and ideology within sociological research.

### *Methods: Why this Methodology?*

From the very beginning, there was very little doubt that, in my opinion, the best way to research call centre work would be to gain access to the environment first-hand. The workplace has long been a central venue for ethnographic studies, largely due to the centrality of work to our everyday lives (Hodson, 2004). Although the decentralisation of work thesis calls this into question (Beck, 2000; Rifkin, 2004), there is no doubt that, for many people, work still takes up a vast proportion of their waking hours during a week. In this sense, there is a tradition of ethnographic studies of the workplace (including Beynon, 1977; van Maanen and Manning, 1978; Holdaway, 1983; also Winlow, 2001; Fincham, 2004). For me, the best sociology is those rich, descriptive qualitative studies that jump off the page and describe an unfamiliar environment in such a way as to make one feel instantly familiar with it (for example, Duneier, 1992; 2000; Bourgeois, 1995; Anderson, 1999; Liebow, 1967). Understanding the environment goes a long way to understanding the motives, feelings and attitudes of the people engaged in this social milieu (Becker, 1998). Van Maanen (1988) argues that 'ethnographies are portraits of diversity in an increasingly homogenous world'. Whilst not necessarily endorsing the idea of a homogenous world per se, I agree that ethnography offers the opportunity to illuminate diverse forms of social organisation and social life. From this perspective, gaining access to a call centre was critical to the study.

As call centres exemplify the closed institutional setting of the modern office, and particularly as I wanted to uncover the organisational structures and management practices of the call centre, the feeling was that the presence of an 'outsider' would negatively affect the

scene and behaviour of the subjects. For me, the only way to ensure my presence would not affect the natural environment was to engage covertly as a participant observer – I would have to get a job in a call centre. Whilst fully acknowledging the ethical issues regarding covert fieldwork, there really seemed no other way of gaining an accurate reflection of call centre work than actually doing the job itself. The British Sociological Society argue that covert ethnography should only be used when all other methods are deemed unlikely to yield suitable results ([www.britisoc.co.uk](http://www.britisoc.co.uk)), as far as this study is concerned, covert ethnography offered the best opportunity to yield accurate and realistic research findings.

The well-rehearsed limitations to ethnography, mainly the ability to ensure validity and reliability (laCompte and Goetz, 1982), whilst important considerations in the research process, are not strong enough arguments to prevent researchers undertaking ethnographic or participant observation research when it is the best method for the study in question. Validity, ensuring the findings represents an empirical reality and is scientifically accurate, is of great concern to social scientists (ibid). However, questions of validity hang over every tool available to the social researcher meaning discounting ethnography on the validity debate alone is not a strong enough reason not to utilise ethnographic methods. Secondly, ethnography is criticised on the grounds of reliability, or the belief that ethnography precludes other researchers from recreating the setting and getting the same results (ibid). Positivists argue that replication should be the aim of any research model in order to prove or disprove the findings of a particular study. Becker (1998) argues that no two studies can be alike, no matter the lengths one goes to in order to make it so, largely because the setting changes over time, people change, attitudes, beliefs and values also change making it impossible to replicate any previous study. Becker uses this argument to justify the legitimacy of any study, whilst laCompte and Goetz (1982) argue replicating any study exactly is impossible, thus negating the reliability argument. Whilst acknowledging the criticisms levelled at ethnography, I felt, and still do feel, that the ethnographic method was the ‘best fit’ for the study.

My ethnography was only ‘covert’ in as much as my role as an ethnographer was not immediately disclosed to my employer, primarily as this would have precluded any job offer thus making any possible research at Call Direct impossible. Although I withheld some information, namely my research agenda, at no point did I lie to anyone at Call Direct. They

were provided with my full name, accurate national insurance details, and full curriculum vitae with my academic qualifications. As I made no attempt to lie my way into their organisation, as far as they were concerned this was a routine hiring of a young local student looking to earn some extra money. In terms of my relationship with fellow co-workers, again, at no point did I lie to them. As far as they were concerned, I was at university but nobody asked me what I was doing at university therefore I did not mislead anyone. After I had made the decision to leave Call Direct, I revealed my role as a researcher to a few key individuals and nobody had any complaints. I had worked alongside these people for six months, doing the same job as them, taking the same calls, dealing with the same problems, and I was treated the same by the management and granted no special privileges.

The other main research method involved semi-structured interviews with co-workers at Call Direct. Having established relationships with many of my co-workers during my period of employment with the company, the process of asking for interviews was considerably easier. In this sense, the covert ethnography greatly facilitated the interview process because, rather than being asked to talk about their job with a stranger, a researcher with no knowledge of them as individuals, or about the job they do, most people I approached saw it as having a chat with someone they know, about a job we have both done and therefore my respondents knew I could relate to what they were saying. Trust is an important part of qualitative research and, because of my employment at Call Direct, working alongside these people day-in, day-out, they were much more receptive to my requests to talk at length about their experiences working in a call centre. In terms of numbers, I worked with and discussed call centre life with over 70 CSRs and team leaders. Of this group, I engaged in longer, informal conversations at break times, during downtime on the phones, and in the pub after work with around 30 co-workers. These conversations were written up afterwards, some verbatim and some paraphrased when necessary. Out of this group, 15 longer, recorded semi-structured interviews took place, the majority lasting over an hour. The turnover of staff at Call Direct made it difficult to stay in touch with some respondents whilst some who had been central to my time at Call Direct either declined to be interviewed or became incredibly hard to pin down for an interview. Fortunately, having worked with some of these people for six months beforehand and having recorded their opinions, views and feelings on many occasions previously, not getting them to talk on tape was, for me, not as damaging to my research as it may have been otherwise. Obviously, getting a recorded interview would have been

beneficial but the ethnography and data generated through that part of the research was very rewarding and offered a broad picture, which was augmented by the formal interview data I was able to collect.

I would argue that the methodology employed for this study was valid, reliable and robust enough to generate a significant amount of analysable data. The social world cannot always be reduced to statistics and empirical data and six months worth of data collected through participant observation at Call Direct represented a rich, detailed and thorough account of life in a modern workplace. Similarly, the information generated through interviews and discussions with co-workers was strong enough to allow for further analysis of themes and issues raised throughout the participant observation. Coding the interview data was straightforward in the sense that the same themes arose throughout the interviews and discussions – co-workers had similar opinions on many of the issues that came to light throughout the research; the organisation of the call centre floor; the attitude of the company toward the employee; the attitude of the employee toward co-workers and customers; the outlook on the world of the young men and women in this study. Whilst some would argue that a lack of quantifiable empirical data harms the overall conclusions and analysis, I firmly believe that the methodology used for this study was not only robust enough to deliver good quality data, it was the only methodology suitable to such a study. An alternative methodology could not have generated the rich, detailed account of everyday life engaged in a new form of service sector work I am able to provide here.

The methods involved were entirely suitable given that my exposure to the workings of call centre life allowed me an understanding of the processes and structures in place within the company whilst my active involvement as an agent allowed me to personally experience the ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 1983) required to do the job and also to understand the feelings and thoughts of the people who submitted for interviews. The covert nature of my employment meant that everyone around me acted in as natural a way as possible, not adjusting their actions and behaviours in the presence of an outsider. Their familiarity with me also facilitated the interview process as many felt comfortable talking to someone they trusted.

Covert ethnography afforded the opportunity to witness and be a part of things that no other method could. Actually experiencing the boredom of waiting for calls whilst paradoxically not wanting the call to actually come, the pressure of dealing with irate customers whilst a team leader listens in and monitors the call, the anger and frustration felt at having days off rescheduled at short notice or holidays rejected and ultimately lost, were great advantages to the project. By experiencing these issues myself rather than simply reacting to anecdotes offered by respondents I was able to build a fuller picture of how call centre work affects those engaging in it on a daily basis. By being subject to and involved in the same problems as my co-workers I was able to understand the importance, in their mind, of what would appear a triviality to someone on the outside and thus being able to report it accurately. Having to ask to go to the toilet only to be denied because there are too many calls in the queue is something that needs to be experienced to fully understand how degrading it can feel. One downside to covert ethnography was the inability to chronicle events or conversations at the time. Being plugged into the 'electronic panopticon' (Taylor and Bain, 1999) of the call centre prevented me from running off to the toilet to hastily write up any notes I had, leading me to finish a seven and a half hour shift and then go home to write up as much as I could remember from the day's events.

Whilst no doubt some will criticise sections of this study as being a further example of 'autoethnography' (Holt, 2003), without immersing myself in this work-culture and being subjected to the same pressures, problems and issues as every other call centre agent in the company, my understanding of this milieu would be drastically limited. The debate surrounding subjectivity and objectivity within research is as old as the discipline itself. Rather than limiting oneself within the strict confines of academic decency and ironclad laws of research, producing good research, using any method, should be the aim of every social scientist. Any method which furthers our understanding of enclosed cultures, environments and new workplace settings should be viable providing no damage or negative effects befall those taking part. Finally, the charge that those indulging in autoethnography do so out of self-indulgent or narcissistic reasons (Coffey, 1999) is an easy one to counter. Without wishing this to become 'all about me' or a self-indulgent study, my biography offered a unique opportunity to study call centres from the view of an employee. I live and grew up in Middlesbrough, had gone to school with some of the people at Call Direct, had worked with other co-workers in different occupations, and knew some of my co-workers and other

respondents socially. My biography mirrors the biography of many of the people engaged in call centre work on Teesside, indeed, if I hadn't received ESRC funding for this study, I would have been employed in service sector work out of necessity to help fund my continued stay in higher education. As such, I acknowledge that it was impossible for me to maintain a measure of distance from my research environment, given my proximity to the people I worked with. Whilst some may suggest this as a failing in my research design, I think it is worked as an advantage as I had the benefit of not being an 'outsider', my presence there was totally realistic and therefore never questioned. My feelings towards the job, the management and the customers reflect that of my co-workers in the sense that our shared background and experiences generate a certain habitus or worldview that an outsider could not replicate. Also, there is absolutely nothing self-indulgent or narcissistic about taking a job paying £5.13 an hour (at the time slightly over the minimum wage) and exposing oneself to the rigours and stresses of the modern call centre, no matter what any university professor or peer reviewer may think.

*Theory: Why this methodology?*

Whilst wanting to illustrate the everyday experiences of the young men and women in my hometown, engaged in low paid service sector work, I did not want to simply produce another small scale ethnographic study that looked at interaction and had nothing to say about macro-level social processes. Taking into account the notion of the universal and the particular, I believe that there is a tight relationship between the particularities that I observed on the call centre floor and in the lives of my respondents and the universal, major issues of our time, for instance, the world of global capitalism. In order to make this connection, abstract theory is essential and as such, for me, the likes of Zizek and Badiou can tell us more about the way the world works and the way we experience that world than a hundred empirical studies. As I have suggested already, the interaction between macro-level processes and micro-level practices, the universal and the particular, need to be discussed and contemplated. Zizek (1992; 2000; 2002; 2008a; 2009) and Badiou (2000; 2007; 2008) have continuously highlighted the nature of global capitalism in the postmodern world as well as the nature of subjectivity and identity, what it means to be alive in today's world, how we see the world and how we are influenced by things such as ideology. Their interpretation of the world not only offers a better understanding of the attitudes and behaviours of the people involved in this study, it also contributes to our understanding of how the world works.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1977; 1984) concept of habitus is central to this thesis insofar as it straddles critical debates surrounding structure versus agency in a highly creative and nuanced manner. Habitus, as a concept, attempts to place individual choices and decision making within a wider social structure, arguing that rather than consciously learned beliefs and dispositions, our physical and psychical characteristics are learned through the thoughtlessness of habit and habituation, grounded in the various fields we occupy. The individual is capable of acting in an autonomous way whilst simultaneously being influenced by wider societal structure. As this thesis attempts to link wider structural processes with individual choices, attitudes and behaviours within a specific locality, Bourdieu and habitus offer a significant explanation for much of the data I generated.

Finally, the work of Steve Hall and Simon Winlow (Winlow, 2001; Hall and Winlow, 2004; 2006; Hall et al, 2008) informs my own critical thinking to the extent that their research is grounded in specific localities very familiar to me and similar to the locality at the heart of my thesis. Their work also centres on the North East of England and concerns young men and women trying to make sense of their place in the world whilst rooted in post-industrial towns and cities with very little to offer. Whereas their work focuses specifically on criminal enterprises and identities, I felt my thesis offered the chance to explore some of their ideas in a setting they only touch on briefly, the modern workplace.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Clearly I believe that my theoretical approach is the 'best fit' for the data I gathered. I accept that my theorisation is ambitious yet I also believe that we need ambitious theorisation if we are to gain an understanding of the big issues that shape our times. Matthews (2009) addresses the rise of 'so what?' research within criminology; small scale empirical studies that ultimately say nothing about the world and fail to further our understanding of the conditions of our existence. This thesis can be criticised on the grounds of making bold statements about the world based on a small sample of young men and women in a call centre in Middlesbrough. Fine. However, my theoretical approach is the result of spending so much time in these places and with these people. Of all the theory I have come across during my exposure to sociology, the theory I apply here is the most appropriate given the data I collected. Undoubtedly, someone else doing this study may have reached different

conclusions but their account would be just as much framed by ideology as mine. Obviously, with this in mind, I believe that my choice of methodology is the 'right' choice and is clearly robust enough in terms of validity and reliability to justify my findings. Chapter One begins the analysis with a look at Middlesbrough and her history, as well as how social changes have shaped her destiny over the last century.

## CHAPTER ONE

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‘This remarkable place, the youngest child in England’s enterprise, is an infant, but if an infant, an infant Hercules’

- William Gladstone on Middlesbrough, 1862

The introduction served to offer some thoughts on the changing social landscape over recent decades. Broadly speaking, these issues serve as a backdrop for the many aims of the thesis. After outlining how macro-level global changes have affected the specific locale of Middlesbrough, principally in terms of overhauling the local labour market in favour of service work over manufacturing and heavy industry, we take the role of the call centre as a representative of low-paid, insecure service sector employment. This thesis also intends to investigate the journey an average call centre employee takes, from their initial foray into applying for a job, through the interview process, training and indoctrination into the company, daily life on the call centre floor, the management practices and company attitude towards employees and customers, the attitude of co-workers to the range of issues, stresses and strains that daily confront call centre operatives, to, eventually, the decision to leave the company, prompted either by the employee or employer. This study will also attempt to draw wider conclusions about the changing nature of labour markets within the national and global context of individualisation and the primacy of market capitalism, the consequences for localities such as Middlesbrough, the implications for traditional notions of solidarity and mutuality and, ultimately, the nature of class relations and subjectivity in a social world increasingly cut loose from its moorings and floating on a wave of liquid modernity and consumer capitalism.

The aim of this chapter is to introduce a specific locality, Middlesbrough, and offer a brief overview of the economic, social and cultural history of the town, after which it will be possible to see how some of the issues raised in the introduction come to have a significant impact on the lifeworld of the local population. Essentially, this chapter will demonstrate how Middlesbrough’s economic and cultural history has been shaped by the needs of capital, first in terms of the rapid rise and expansion of Middlesbrough, and then in terms of an equally jarring decline and fall from prosperity.

### *The Industrial Revolution and the 'Infant Hercules'*

As we discussed in the introduction, Marx's (1999) analysis of the economy shaping social and cultural trends and norms is useful in understanding how a society is organised. Consider the restructuring of society during the Industrial Revolution. As technological innovation created the conditions for rapid economic expansion through mechanisation, factories and mass production, this economic shift required society to change in order to sustain this growth (Hobsbawm, 1999). Mass urbanisation took place as millions flocked to the rapidly expanding towns and cities thus reshaping the geo-demographic make-up of Britain (ibid). In order to regulate the new workforce parliament passed a raft of legislation, including the creation of a professional police force in 1829 (Reiner, 2000) and the Great Reform Act of 1832 designed to offer a limited extension of the franchise in order to stave off possible revolt by the newly massed working classes (Cannadine, 1998). The labour market changed dramatically; mass production succeeded small family-based enterprises (Arrighi, 2010) whilst what we would describe as the traditional working class developed through a massed industrial workforce (Thompson, 1980).

Geographically, Middlesbrough lies on the south bank of the River Tees (Simpson, 2006). Situated 3 miles west of the North Sea coast, Middlesbrough was a true product of the Industrial Revolution. In 1801, the population stood at just 25, situated across four farmhouses; by 1851, the population had reached nearly 7,500, largely due to the exportation of coal and the discovery of ironstone in the nearby Eston Hills in 1850 (Lillie, 1968). Improvements to the dock area, including reclaiming large portions of land from the sea, combined with the extension of the prestigious Stockton and Darlington Railway stimulated the economy further leading to another population boom (Beynon et al, 1994). The creation of an iron foundry and rolling mill by Henry Bolckow and John Vaughan saw pig iron production rise tenfold between 1851 and 1856; as a result the population had reached 40,000 by 1871 (Lillie, 1968). By 1874, Middlesbrough had become the number one iron ore town in England, leading many to refer to the town as the 'Ironopolis'. One third of all national iron ore output originated in Middlesbrough and was transported around the world. By 1881, the population of Middlesbrough had reached 56,000 and by the end of the century the population was nearly 90,000, making Middlesbrough the fastest growing town in England during the nineteenth century (Bell, 1969). Middlesbrough's place as an emerging

powerhouse in industrial Britain led Prime Minister William Gladstone, visiting the town in the 1860s, to comment, ‘this remarkable place, the youngest child of England’s enterprise, is an infant, but, if an infant, an infant Hercules’.

Middlesbrough owed its existence entirely to the emergence and consolidation of capitalist relations of production (Beynon et al, 1994). In fact, Middlesbrough is a unique case study of the relationship between capital, labour, the global market and the state, primarily because Middlesbrough grew due to relations between capital, labour and the production process (ibid). Meanwhile, the role of the global market has, on several occasions, directly impacted on the industries central to building and expanding Middlesbrough. The depression of the 1920s and 30s saw high unemployment and plant closures in the area (Hornby, 2004; also see Wilkinson (1939) for an account of the depression and unemployment leading to the famous Jarrow March in 1936 [Jarrow is a former mining village 35 miles north of Middlesbrough]), whilst the emerging global economy of the 1970s and 80s, built on free trade and free movement of capital, caused, as we shall see, considerable damage to the local economy, irreparably crippling the industrial heart of the town (Beynon et al, 1994).

Rapid growth during industrialisation gave Middlesbrough the feel of a ‘frontier town’, dramatically expanding around the natural resources and consequent industries created in the area (Taylor, 2002). This frontier feel was epitomised during the early rush to mine ironstone from the Eston Hills, indeed, one of the many hastily erected settlements east of Middlesbrough for the incoming mine workers was named California, after the 1849 Gold Rush (Hornby, 2004). Subsequently, Middlesbrough was unable to shake off its ‘rough and ready’ image of a hard working, hard drinking, hard fighting locale, in fact some would argue that the image still lingers at the dawn of a new century. Hard work, alcohol and violence characterised the robust working class identity of the town, particularly given the spectacular growth meant so many people were living on top of one another in slum housing (Taylor, 2002). The social development of Middlesbrough could never match the industrial growth (Bell, 1969). There was a ‘chaotic rush of inferior house-building, complete streets of mean, badly built terraces [being] sandwiched between the back gardens of the original houses’ (ibid). The ever-increasing labour force, almost exclusively male, would spend long hours at work and many found relief from the stresses and strains of heavy industry in local drinking places. There was a direct correlation between the increase in house building that took place

in the nineteenth century and the number of new licences granted by the Brewster sessions of the magistrates' court for the sale of spirits (Woodhouse, 1990). As a result, dozens of public houses sprang up in the downtown area.

Steel production began at Port Clarence, across the river from Middlesbrough, in 1889 and an amalgamation with Dorman Long soon followed. Dorman Long famously designed and built the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932, as well as designing and building bridges in China, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Thailand and the Sudan (Simpson, 2006). Steel and iron production in Middlesbrough reached such levels that for many years during the nineteenth century Teesside set the world price for iron and steel (Frey, 1929). Consequently, Middlesbrough's production of iron and steel contributed greatly to Britain's prosperity throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By 1919, Middlesbrough was producing one third of the nation's steel (Appleton, 1929). From a national output of 10 million tons, Middlesbrough's nine steel plants produced 3.35 million tons whilst, by 1913, Middlesbrough produced nearly 40% of the national output in pig iron (Gleave, 1938). The First World War highlighted Britain's need to produce its own chemicals, therefore Middlesbrough again became the site of industrial growth. The emergence of Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) in 1929 saw Middlesbrough lead the way in chemical production whilst the chemical factories began producing plastics as early as 1934. Middlesbrough's importance as a site of industrial strength resulted in the town being among the first to be bombed by the Luftwaffe in World War 2. The development of chemical industries led to another population boom as, by the 1960s, the population had reached 160,000. In the early 1960s the steam naphtha process utilised crude oil rather than coal in the production of ammonia, leading to four giant oil refineries being built on the Tees. Petrochemicals had replaced iron and steel as the engine of the local economy.

The materiality of industrial labour became the foundation around which Middlesbrough grew (Beynon et al, 1994). Transported around the world, the products developed on Teesside created prosperity arising from the tangible physical objects created by the hands, sweat and craft of the industrial workforce. Given that the town emerged solely as a result of the physical environment and natural resources that made industrial production a viable proposition, a link undoubtedly materialised between the town, the industry, and the people (Bell, 1969), typified by the fact that the Sydney Harbour Bridge houses a beam that has the

phrase 'Made in Middlesbrough' carved on it. The working people lived in closely packed terraced housing that appeared to cultivate the community spirit often regarded as typical of working class culture during this period (Thompson, 1980; Dennis et al, 1969; Bourke, 1994).

The development of an industrial workforce created a surplus labour supply crucial to the understanding of industrial capitalism and capital accumulation. The mechanisation of certain industries released masses of labour for exploitation in other, generally less mechanised areas of capital accumulation (Braverman, 1998). More people became incorporated into the working population, either through employment or as part of the reserve army of labour through a simplification of the work process, which included mechanised operations and a spread of jobs, in both number and variety, which reduced essential qualifications to the bare minimums of simple labour (ibid). Marx (1999) argued that the same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, also develop the labour power at its disposal, therefore, as capital moves into new fields in search of profit, the laws of capital accumulation in older fields operate to create the labour force required 'by capital in its new incarnations' (Braverman, 1998). Essentially, capital and labour intertwine, the needs of capital affect the fundamental shape of labour, and during the Industrial Revolution this involved the creation of a surplus supply of labour, as well as the migration of people to centres of industry. Alienation becomes a by-product of the move to a massed industrial workforce, man becomes divorced from the product of his labour through a production process organised around principles of productivity and efficiency (Marx, 1999).

The onset of industrial modernity promoted the notion of work and a 'work-ethic' as the labour of the masses powered the new industrial economy (Bauman, 2005b; Weber, 1958). The 'protestant ethic', as described by Weber, serves as another example of how the logic of capital structures the social. The 'protestant ethic', in the Calvinist theological tradition, believed that religious calling is not an innate trait but something pursued through strenuous and exacting enterprise and religious responsibility (Weber, 1958). The early exponents of capitalism saw business and labour as a spiritual end as well as an economic one; diligence, thrift, sobriety and prudence were all common characteristics between Calvinism and capitalism and therefore both forces began to affect the social structure and economic organisation during the Industrial Revolution (ibid). The early capitalists, by aligning their

economic interests with religious characteristics began to gain ground on the ruling bourgeoisie and gradually began altering social and economic structures along the logic of capital.

For Weber, rational thinking, science, technology and bureaucracy were the main features of an emerging society; in the case of capitalism, or modern society as Weber preferred, the rationalisation of social and economic life according to principles of efficiency and on the basis of technical knowledge began to shape the social world (Weber, 1992). Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) analysis of capitalist development indicates that rationalisation has allowed capitalism to reinvent itself several times over in the face of criticism or challenges to its authority. In their study, Boltanski and Chiapello identify three successive 'spirits of capitalism'; the nineteenth century was typified by the 'protestant ethic', the captain of industry or entrepreneur who combined risk, speculation and innovation with the Calvinist propensity for saving, personal parsimony and an austere attachment to family; the interwar period saw the rise of the organisation man, the heroic director of the large, centralised bureaucratic corporation dedicated to long-term planning and rationalisation; and finally the post 1968, decentralised, autonomous, meritocratic co-ordinators or leaders who, by the 1990s had rejected all hierarchy or top-down control in favour of international competition. This form of capitalism, having less and less bearing on reality, is labelled as 'connexionist' or 'network' capitalism, echoing Sennett's (1999) observation that modern firms reject hierarchy in favour of networking and flexibility. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue that capitalism reinvents itself through responding to the critiques of opponents in order to neutralise that opposition, displaying what Arrighi (2010) calls an 'unlimited flexibility' within capitalism which makes it capable of adapting to new conditions.

For individuals, families and communities, their social action is coloured by an instrumental rationality, effectively restructuring their social life around the new needs of the economy, forming what Durkheim (1984) called an 'organic society' functioning around a complex division of labour. Class-consciousness and the notion of a working class habitus emerged in the aftermath of the jarring upheaval the social world underwent (Hall and Winlow, 2004). Particularly among the working class, men and women would develop a sense of identity borne out of their particular economic function (Bourdieu, 1992), be it as a coal miner, ship builder, or homemaker. Daily life and routine centred on the needs of the economy, an 'iron

‘cage’ of bureaucracy (Weber, 1958) ensured that everyone played their part and knew their role, being all the while subject to regulation (Sennett, 1999). This glance at the importance of economic change to social life during Industrial Modernity highlights how, as Marx (1999) argued, the needs of the economy determine the social world. Fast-forward to contemporary society and it is again apparent that radical changes in the economic make-up of the social world have had a profound influence on society-at-large, and Middlesbrough in particular.

Given the shifting demands of industrial capitalism, cycles of ‘boom and bust’ were regular occurrences in Middlesbrough and the inter-war depression hit Middlesbrough as hard as anywhere else in the country (Beynon et al, 1994; see also Hopkins, 1991; Cronin, 1984 and Whiteside, 1991 for a national perspective). Hornby’s (2004) excellent film, *A Century in Stone: The Eston and California Story*, tells the tale of the ironstone miners in Eston, an outlying suburb of East Middlesbrough situated close to the river. Interview testimony from elderly Eston residents forcibly hits home exactly how hard life was in a formerly prosperous working class area:

“The gentleman from the parish came up, it was in Eston High Street I think, and he had to look all through my house to see if I had a piece of bread or anything. He left me ten shilling, no rent, I couldn’t afford to pay the rent, but there was ten shilling to get two weeks groceries.”

“They’d say, ‘here’s the means test man coming’ and say...my sister’s husband would run out into the back way and go into somebody else’s house. They’d come into anybody’s house and say, ‘you can sell that’, or ‘you can sell that’. Anything you had in the house that was sellable, you had to sell it, *to live on*. It was really very, very...that’s why people today don’t even know they’re born.”

Means testing split up local families as fathers and sons could not live in the same house and claim assistance from the government (Bourke, 1994; Hoggart, 1957; also Kynaston, 2007). In some cases men even resorted to camping on the Eston Hills they mined the ironstone from in order to claim benefit (Hornby, 2004). For many people interviewed in the film, local community spirit and solidarity seemed to be crucial to getting through hard times as fond recollections of a previous era permeate the film. Although Pearson (1983) would

describe this as a nostalgic look back at a mythical ‘golden age’, it seems from the testimony provided in *A Century in Stone* that a strong working class community was forged through hard manual labour and close-knit ties to a neighbourhood whose internal logic was inextricably intertwined with the heavy industry around which the town grew up. Earlier in the century, the poor relief afforded to the unemployed was administered in such a way as to actually disqualify around 10% of all claims in 1926 whilst those who did receive it found it to be ‘plainly inadequate without other sources of income’ (Turner, 1982). Throughout Middlesbrough’s history, there are many examples of desperate poverty, inadequate government aid and chronic unemployment. It was not uncommon to find families pawning their valuables in order to keep their heads above water as many spent their lives hovering around the poverty line, desperately hoping to avoid slipping into deeper trouble (Bell, 1969: 84). Meanwhile, pride precluded many from relying on benefits and avoiding the stigma attached to using the Poor Law for assistance (Bourke, 1994: 6). The ‘us and them’ attitude of the working class fostered a distrust for government officials ‘looking down their noses’ at those in dire financial straits and thus encouraged a collective working class reliance on each other rather than turning to the state for support (Hoggart, 1957).

However, despite the conditions, a strong sense of local pride and working class culture emerged in Middlesbrough (Chapman, 1946). The Ministry of Town and Country Planning conducted a social survey after World War 2 in order to gauge public opinion about Middlesbrough and the results indicated that, despite the image of poverty and desperation, many felt a strong sense of attachment to the place (ibid). 75% of all housewives and 73% of men revealed they would prefer to stay in Middlesbrough after the war rather than moving elsewhere with many in the lowest income group admitting they wanted to stay because ‘they were born there’, ‘they are used to it’ and ‘because they like it’ (ibid). This makes sense as, according to Hoggart (1957: 33), ‘the more we look at working-class life, the more we try to reach the core of working-class attitudes, the more surely does it appear that the core is a sense of the personal, the concrete, the local: it is embodied in the idea of, first, the family and, second, the neighbourhood. This remains, though much works against it, and partly because so much works against it.’ According to some local people, talk of a singular working class community is a little simplistic. An online local history blog argues that ‘the area housed thousands of people. It would be more accurate to describe a series of close communities’ ([www.communigate.co.uk](http://www.communigate.co.uk)). The sense of solidarity is apparent from the fact

that many chose to live among people of the same class rather than choosing any other demographic, such as religion or race (Chapman, 1946). After a while, this became intergenerational:

“The employers, the professional men, the tradesmen, are handing on their work to sons who come after them. In many cases the sons of the workmen are going on to work for the same employers as their fathers did before them. All this is gradually creating a precedent, a tradition, a spirit of cohesion and solidarity. Many of the inhabitants today have been born in the town or the district, and to a large proportion of them the associations of home and childhood, of leisure and enjoyment, as well as of work, are already centred in a place which to the first restless generation of newcomers who started it was nothing but the centre of industrial activity.” (Bell, 1969: 7-8).

Whilst economic problems have often occurred in Middlesbrough, political decisions have also had a huge impact on Middlesbrough. In the immediate post-war period, the prevailing ideological belief in central planning, full employment and Keynesian economics saw relatively few instances of recession (Harvey, 2010). When recession did occur it was usually brief and shallow. The first full-scale global crisis of capitalism since the end of the Second World War occurred in 1973, beginning the erosion of the post-war consensus. During the 1960s and 1970s, the government began a modernisation campaign designed to kick-start a lagging economy by targeting specific areas for investment with Middlesbrough being one of them (Beynon et al, 1994). Whilst the investment managed to sustain the local economy by shielding it from the dominant trends of the global economy, the sense of continued prosperity felt by the people on Teesside was artificial and, once investment was withdrawn, disappeared almost overnight. By charting the fluctuations of capital across the twentieth century (Arrighi, 2010; Harvey, 2010) it becomes clear that once the post-war consensus began to erode and then was finally jettisoned in favour of neoliberalism, there have been hundreds of financial crises around the world, often long-lasting and causing considerable damage to both the economy as a whole and to localities such as Middlesbrough. The next section demonstrates how the growing importance of global economic and social changes altered the social, industrial, economic and political landscape in Britain and thus signalled the end of the era of relative prosperity on Teesside.

*Neoliberalism, social change, and 'from boom to bust'*

Whilst the infant Hercules grew up forging a strong working class identity and reputation in the Promethean heat of the iron and steel industry, the town, over the last three decades, has suffered a decline and fall from prosperity worthy of Prometheus himself. Where the fires of industry once created a Hades-like dystopian skyline, the warning at the gates of hell in Dante's *Inferno*, 'abandon all hope, ye who enter here', seems apt for a town ravaged like Prometheus' liver. As recently as the 1960s, there was virtually full employment in the Teesside area and this economic success underpinned social cohesion and stability. In fact, by 1977 Cleveland had the fourth highest county GDP in the country and the government saw Teesside as central to its modernisation plans designed to boost the economy after several slumps in the 1960s and 1970s (Beynon et al, 1994). However, since then, global economic competition and privatisation forced companies to streamline and increase productivity with smaller, more flexible workforces (Sennett, 1999). This change ushered in large scale redundancies and a restructuring that led to persistent, long-term unemployment (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Across Europe, half of the 800,000 steelworkers lost their jobs in a single decade as 'places which had been built up for more than a century around one industry saw their *raison d'être* wiped out almost overnight' (Beynon et al, 1994: 75). Between the mid-1970s and 1980s, one quarter of *all* jobs in Cleveland was lost through the dramatic restructuring of the steel, chemical and heavy manufacturing industries. At times, unemployment exceeded 20% (Beynon et al, 1994), reaching 21% in 1987 compared to only 2% in 1965 (Shildrick et al, 2010). Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), from employing around 20,000 people on Teesside in the 1960s, radically scaled back their North East operations in favour of more practical and profitable conditions abroad. By 1999, the same factory only employed around 400 people (The Northern Echo, 2003). This long-term unemployment is still felt today on Teesside. The Teesside Studies project undertaken by researchers at the University of Teesside and elsewhere, including Robert MacDonald, Jane Marsh, Tracy Shildrick and Colin Webster, involves a long term ongoing study of youth transitions in the context of severe socio-economic deprivation in some of Teesside's most deprived areas. Conducting biographical interviews with 186 respondents born between 1974 and 1983, their body of work highlights the severity of the social problems caused by a severe lack of 'good jobs'. Economic marginality (MacDonald, 2008), disjointed transitions between youth and adulthood (Webster et al, 2004), inadequate job prospects (Shildrick and

MacDonald, 2007; Shildrick et al, 2010), low educational achievement (MacDonald and Marsh, 2004; 2005), and criminality (Webster, MacDonald and Simpson, 2006) are all linked to the decline of the local labour market in the wake of deindustrialisation in the 1970s and early 1980s.

What we have witnessed since the late 1970s is the gradual shift in the nature of capital accumulation (Angell, 2000). As Barber (2007: 9) notes, ‘once upon a time, in capitalism’s more creative and successful period, a *productivist* capitalism prospered by meeting the real needs of real people’. Traditionally, during industrial capitalism, production was the central premise or characteristic of the economy (Hobsbawm, 1999; also, Marx, 1999). Trade is central to any economy and at this stage of the capitalist project, trade involved the movement of ‘real’ goods therefore productivity was essential. Contemporary capitalism, in its need for economic expansion has shifted from catering to our needs towards manufacturing our desires by applying desirous characteristics to products that now offer ‘real’ happiness through the consumer experience (Hall et al, 2008). Of course, the very nature of desire prevents this from ever happening; desire endlessly reconfigures itself in order to remain unfulfilled, thus prompting us to move on to the next ‘must have’ consumer experience. Manufacturing desires provides a continuous repetition of consumption essential to continuing economic prosperity. Traditional manufacturing capitalism addressed needs and therefore as consumers in the 1950s and 1960s began purchasing household ‘essentials’ such as washing machines and kettles, capitalism expanded. By the end of the 1960s, the essential needs of the majority were met, however in order to survive, capitalism must grow therefore it pushed into new markets, began targeting desires rather than needs (Barber, 2007; also Cross, 2002), and increased, on a global scale, the reserve army of labour (necessary to keep wages low) by mobilising women into the labour force (Harvey, 2010). In capitalism’s consumer phase, sign value transcended use value (Baudrillard, 1981). Expansion was central to the rapid advancement of globalisation over the last thirty years as markets built upon expansionary logic marched determinedly toward maximum capital accumulation. One of the key developments in market expansion is the targeting of young people by marketing and advertising experts (Barber, 2007; Frank, 1997) in order to continue expanding markets rather than suffering stagnation and crisis. However, as the global recession has shown, markets cannot expand indefinitely, they inevitably reach a saturation point and the bubble bursts, as it did in the housing and mortgage market in 2007-2008 (Stiglitz, 2010). Despite

the proselytizing of free marketers, economists and politicians during the 1990s and early 2000s that we had ended the ‘boom and bust’ cycle of economics (Mason, 2009), in reality, the bubble burst, as it did with the dot.com bubble at the turn of the century, and the recession started. The modern compunction towards positive thinking (Ehrenreich, 2009) left many in positions of responsibility either unable or unwilling to contemplate potential financial disaster, resulting in a general unpreparedness for the recession when it hit.

With accumulation of capital possible without producing actual products, productivity is no longer important to the national economy (Gray, 1998); growth is vital but the means of achieving it are unimportant (Jackson, 2009). Arrighi (2010) notes how this has been a regular feature of capitalism since its early development in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy. Each systemic cycle of accumulation, starting with the city states of Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, moving onto the Dutch traders, then the British Empire and finally the United States, begins with a period of material expansion. Once material expansion hits saturation point, a period of financial expansion and accumulation would take place until a new power would rise to take capitalism to the next level. For Arrighi, the current era of financial expansion is the latter stages of US capitalist hegemony. The question is, given the global expansion and pushing boundaries of capital accumulation to their limits during the current phase of capitalism, is there a next level in which capitalism can grow? Jackson (2009) argues that continued growth is ecologically unsustainable, whilst Harvey (2010) contends that primitive accumulation is an indicator that capitalism has very few legitimate avenues left to plunder. While these issues raise interesting questions for the future, it is sufficient to say, at this stage, that capitalism has reached a phase beyond material productivity, at least in Western society.

Whilst it is undoubtedly true that nations can survive without traditional industrial or manufacturing output, at a local level, regions of the UK previously dependent upon industry or manufacturing jobs either re-emerge from deindustrialisation through investment in new forms of employment, or they are left to stagnate and fall behind (Richardson and Belt, 2001). Traditionally, capital served social ends; within a democratic system, capital provided a broader social function, however, rather than embedding capital and the economy within society and harnessing it to serve social ends, the new neo-capitalist economy becomes the master of society and all within it (Harvey, 2005; Chomsky, 1999). The growth of new technology is in part responsible for this. ‘Growth is no longer dependent on physical and

capital labour' writes Angell (2000: 78), 'the principle source of future wealth is the quality of technology available in a society'. When capital accumulation is no longer dependent upon massed labour and full employment there are, inevitably, consequences for the social world, as well as local labour markets such as Middlesbrough. The 'haves' in contemporary British society have no reason to close the ever-widening gap with the 'have not's' given that they no longer require their labour in the pursuit of capital accumulation (Bennett, 2001: 160; also Rothkopf, 2008). Instead, they are dependent upon the 'have not's' from other parts of the globe, those who make the parts that go into electrical products, stitch their designer clothes, and mine the diamonds and other precious metals that go into making their jewellery. Marx (1999) suggests that all profit is based on labour, capital withers without investment opportunities and labour, however, profit and capital accumulation is possible without remaining dependent on UK labour.

Companies are run strictly for profit; their ability to accumulate capital without consideration for labour has jettisoned any responsibility they have to treat their employees fairly (Sennett, 1999; Stiglitz, 2003; Bakan, 2005). With employees expected to change jobs up to ten times over their career (Fenton and Dermott, 2006), businesses accept turnover as part of their business plan and do not expect employees to stay for life, as was once expected. An extreme example of this new ethos of capitalist enterprise no longer attached to the physical environment is evident in Iraq. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the imposition of a free market by the conquering Western 'liberators', many US-based companies have exploited these free market conditions and accumulated a fortune in Iraq, however, once they have made their money they withdraw it from the country and send it overseas (Klein, 2007). By withdrawing vast sums of money from a country without reinvesting any of it in the local economy, they reinforce the grim social position many face in Iraq. The local labour markets are an irrelevance to companies exploiting the situation in the Middle East, they do not need them to make their fortunes therefore they are not beholden to them and as such can leave without any regard for the situation they leave behind (ibid). Although this is an extreme example, the principle remains the same. In many parts of the world, for example Russian 'gangster capitalism' after the fall of the Soviet Union (Holstrom and Smith, 2000), and increasingly in first world countries such as the US and UK, these practices are ongoing and stand as a testament to the new nature of global business and primitive capital accumulation.

On Teesside, the effects of these practices are still causing huge upheavals in the local labour market. In early 2010, over 150 years of steel production on Teesside came to an end with the mothballing of the Corus steelworks, the last in the area. Formerly British Steel, the company was privatised under the Conservative government in the 1980s and the Corus plant was finally purchased by Tata Steel of India. The decision to close the Teesside steelworks caused large protests from the workers and residents of the area, petitions to local MPs and the Prime Minister and threats of strike action. However despite the pressure, Corus closed the plant and focused their steel production elsewhere. Whilst Corus survived the pressure and publicity, the casualties were local Labour MP for Redcar and East Cleveland Vera Baird who was defeated at the 2010 General Election over her inability to help the Corus workers, the two thousand workers who lost their jobs, and the area as a whole which lost its final link to her rich industrial heritage. For a region still struggling to recover from processes of deindustrialisation dating back to the late 1970s, this latest blow highlights how insignificant Middlesbrough and Teesside are in relation to global economic shifts and multinational companies. It also served to demonstrate how ineffective the government was in retaining industry and jobs in a global market.

Government ineffectiveness in the face of multinational companies has been obvious over recent decades (Hutton, 2003). The ability to pack up and move to another country is one of the consequences of free trade, free markets and greater technological advancement therefore many companies exploit this development when faced with unfavourable regulation or taxation (Stiglitz, 2002). Until the financial crisis and recession of 2007-08, the prevailing belief was that governments no longer had the power to stand up to rich multinationals and this has a disproportionate effect on the poor who end up footing the bill (Angell, 2000). Seymour (2010: 72) regards this as ideological blackmail in the language of globalisation. The threat of capital flight has been effective in disciplining labour markets and electorates who are forced to accept the 'reality' that we cannot make waves and buck the market. The recent financial crisis and bank bailouts provided evidence that capital is still hugely reliant on the state. As Harvey (2010: 218) indicates:

“The actual practices of neoliberalism (as opposed to its utopian theory) always entailed blatant support for finance capital and capitalist elites (usually on the

grounds that financial institutions must be protected at all costs and that it is the duty of state power to create a good business climate for solid profiteering).”

Rather than abdicating their power to the marketplace, the state chose to facilitate market freedom for capitalists and multinationals, preferring to sit back and give capital a free reign, partly because of a continued ideological belief that regulation prevents growth and partly out of fear that companies will move abroad. When the rich use loopholes to evade taxation or move their company abroad, the government has to make that money up somehow and inevitably it comes from those who can least afford to hand over more money to the Treasury or accept spending cuts in essential services and benefits, as the emergency budget thrust upon the nation in June 2010 by the new Conservative - Liberal Democrat coalition government in order to tackle the mounting national debt proved. As Angell (2000: 4) explains, ‘politicians may promise and posture, but now the global markets decide’. The 2010 general election proved the power of the market over domestic political arrangements. In the wake of a hung parliament, the markets reacted favourably to the notion of a Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition, yet responded badly to news of a possible Labour – Liberal Democrat coalition. Ultimately, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats formed a coalition government and the market responded positively.

It also offers a clear indication of the relationship between an abstract ideological perspective and social relations in the real world, the ‘human identity’ beneath the ideological label (Zizek, 2009). Most market decisions rest on little more than speculation, guesswork, and the gut feelings of a few men and women in a room trying to answer the question, ‘how will the market react to this news?’ When the market and financial interests hold such sway in decisions regarding the make-up of government, it takes little imagination to understand their influence over government policy. Surrendering power to the market has resulted in the government having to subsidise multinational companies through favourable rates and tax cuts in order to boost the national economy (see Richardson and Belt, 2001).

In this scenario, the rich continue to prosper whilst the poor continue to live in uncertainty and instability, what Wacquant (2008: 8) terms the ‘liberal – paternalist’ state; liberal at the top in terms of giving the rich a free hand, yet paternalist and authoritarian at the bottom, using the penal arm of the state to tackle problems traditionally deemed to be the purview of

departments dealing with welfare. The inevitable outcome is an increasing economic and social polarization that brings with it a wide range of potential problems (Bauman, 2005a; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Young, 1999). The idea of a meritocracy, adopted by all political parties in Britain, underpins the belief that society will always be unequal and that inequality is perfectly acceptable, as long as we pay lip service to the notion of social mobility as a way for individuals to improve their lot (Seymour, 2010; Cannadine, 1998). When the prevailing ideology reflects a belief in hierarchy or inequality, it is little surprise to hear that the gap in inequalities of health, in terms of premature mortality, has widened in the last decade, reflecting the widening inequality in wealth and income (Dorling et al, 2010). In fact, Dorling et al's (2010) observational study found that health inequalities were worse now than during the depression of the 1920s and 30s and were likely to get worse before they got better. Meanwhile, there are more poor children in the UK than any other EU country (Judt, 2010: 14).

We have seen the development of what some critics have labelled a 'casino economy' or, 'casino capitalism' (Strange, 1993; Stiglitz, 2010). Today, investors are unable to find high rates of return in the real economy and therefore have turned financial markets into speculative casinos where there are few rules to restrain them (Cavanagh and Collins, 2008; Mason, 2009). The global financial crisis and recession of 2008 proves how much of a gamble investors have taken, particularly in the housing market and mortgage lending, in search of favourable returns of capital (Stiglitz, 2010). The recession also indicated how 'light touch' regulation exacerbates the problem, allowing the market to dictate trends causes instability and uncertainty in many areas, including labour markets. The orthodoxy of economic liberalism established since the late 1970s looks incredibly suspect today. Addressing the question of whether economic liberalism has become a 'god that failed', *The Washington Post* argued:

“The fall of the financial system has been so fast and far reaching that there's been no time to fully consider its implications for the reigning economic theology of the past thirty years. But with the most right-wing administration in modern American history scurrying to nationalize the banks, the question cannot be elided indefinitely.” (Meyerson, 15/10/2008).

It is ironic that the preachers of minimum government intervention have resorted to the biggest injection of government support in history in order to steady markets destabilised by rampant speculation and hyper real capitalism, manifested perfectly by futures trading where brokers speculate on the uncertainties of the market. However, almost immediately, neoliberal proponents of unfettered markets began calling for government to get out of the way again and let them return to business as normal, literally saying, ‘thanks for your help but the storm has passed, let us get back to business as usual’. The chairman of the US Chamber of Commerce, less than 6 months after the government bailout, allied with business lobbies in attacking government intervention and praised the unfettered market, arguing, ‘enough is enough. If we don’t stop the rapidly growing influence of government over private-sector activity, we will squander America’s unmatched capacity to innovate and create a standard of living and free society that are the envy of the world’ (Dionne Jr., 15/06/2009). Demonstrating the power of market-capitalist, neoliberal ideology, after the world entered the worst recession since the 1930s, caused by unrestrained primitive accumulation in financial markets under the complicit eye of regulators induced to back off and let the market ‘do its thing’, the immediate response from the financial community was to argue that the recession was a blip and the best medicine would be to let the market continue unrestrained (Stiglitz, 2010). This represents a crisis of capitalism; capitalism is by nature expansionary therefore it must search for new opportunities to grow. On the one hand, innovation takes place, for example creating new financial markets such as derivatives, futures and hedge funds, but, on the other hand, it sees the return of primitive accumulation, or ‘accumulation by dispossession’ characterised by predatory practices such as subprime mortgages, the power of eminent domain to seize assets, privatisation, and fraud and theft in pension funds and Ponzi schemes (Harvey, 2010: 47-49). Unrestrained market forces are essential to capital accumulation, providing opportunities and clearing restrictions on investment, therefore it comes as no surprise to hear capitalists demanding the state to step back again.

The fact that unrestrained market forces for localities like Middlesbrough, lead to unstable labour markets, lack of inward investment, and now, in the wake of recession, a large increase in unemployment, hardly figure in the thinking of free market proponents. Zizek (2009) argues that, despite pro-market observers insisting the bailouts constitute a move towards socialism, the opposite is true:

“Is the bail-out plan really a ‘socialist’ measure then, the birth of state socialism in the US? If it is, it is a very peculiar form: a ‘socialist’ measure whose primary aim is not to help the poor, but the rich, not those who borrow, but those who lend. In a supreme irony, ‘socialising’ the banking system is acceptable when it serves to save capitalism. Socialism is bad – except when it serves to stabilise capitalism” (Zizek, 2009: 13).

Again, it is the taxpayer who foots the bill. Those in the financial sector, the cause of the crisis, do not pay and the government steps in with taxpayer money to bail out the financial industry. In the UK, the Labour government nationalised Northern Rock, bailing out a failing financial institution with taxpayer money. In the economic world of Hayek and Friedman, when a company fails, the market takes care of it through what Schumpeter (2010) refers to as ‘creative destruction’. Ironically, the true-believers of free market philosophy were not prepared to let the market deal with the failing companies, they ran to the government for help, at our expense, indicating that Keynesianism was not dead, just lurking in the background waiting to rescue the economy in the wake of market excesses. Once state spending had steadied the ship, the market demanded the government back off and let them return to free enterprise. This is indicative of what Dean (2009: 56) regards as the ‘fantasy of free trade’, which serves to mask the fact that neoliberal doctrine predominates, yet in reality, free trade does not exist:

“In neoliberal ideology, the fantasy of free trade covers over persistent market failure, structural inequalities, the prominence of monopolies, the privilege of no-bid contracts, the violence of privatisation, and the redistribution of wealth to the ‘have mores’. Free trade thus sustains at the level of fantasy what it seeks to avoid at the level of reality – namely, actually free trade among equal players, that is, equal participants with equal opportunities to establish the rules of the game, access information, distribution, and financial networks, and so forth.”

Interestingly, while the banks were ‘too big to fail’ and the financial industry required unprecedented government intervention to survive, the steel industry on Teesside collapsed while the government stood by and watched. Despite assertions that the government was

doing all it could to save the Corus steelworks, market forces overpowered local protestation and government intervention and Corus mothballed its plant on Teesside. Meanwhile, call centre operations which were heralded as the bright new future of a service economy, fell afoul of the global recession as well. CJ Garlands, the largest call centre employer in the North East, with over 1,100 employees, went into administration in 2010 under the strain of a constricting global economy and further outsourcing to cheaper locations in Asia and Africa (bbc.co.uk, 18/05/2010). When the market is in jeopardy, when national crisis looms, the government is expected to act in favour of the financial markets; when a local economy is in jeopardy, the state remains subordinate to the market.

Today's issues surrounding casino capitalism have their roots in the 1970s. In the early 1970s, the United States abandoned the principle of the Bretton Woods agreements made by the Allies in the 1940s which tagged the value of the dollar to the value of gold in order to stimulate recovery in Europe and Japan (Strange, 1993). European post-war economic revival, declining US gold reserves, and speculative runs on the dollar, kept artificially high to ensure European growth, all served to leave the US facing recession (Morris, 1984). In order to stimulate the US economy, the Nixon administration revoked the Bretton Woods agreement and, by tagging the price of the dollar to the market, the US essentially gave birth to a financial market which would become dependent on the mood swings of the market rather than the balance of trade in the real economy. This shift engendered conditions which fostered the development of widespread speculation on the vicissitudes of the market (Strange, 1993).

With capital no longer rooted to actual physical levels of gold it became free to move across national boundaries with relative simplicity (Gorz, 1999). When financial transactions began to transcend national boundaries on an unprecedented level, multinational companies developed in order to capitalise on the potential to accumulate capital across the globe (Bauman, 2007a). With the growing power of trans-national companies engaging in speculative market transactions, the power of the nation-state began to diminish as truly global companies were able to dictate terms to national government, knowing they held all the cards given their ability to relocate their vast reserves of capital overseas with little disruption to their business (Stiglitz, 2002). Beck (2000: 2) describes how the global economy has become a power game carried out between 'territorially fixed political players',

such as governments, and ‘non-territorially fixed economic players’ such as capital, finance and multinational companies. It is readily apparent who is winning this contest, as nation-states have no room to manoeuvre. Returning to the two local examples on Teesside, the government failed to prevent the closure of the Corus steelworks at the cost of 1,600 jobs, whilst the multinational broadband companies such as Orange and Vodafone pulled their contracts from the outsource call centre operator Garlands, at the cost of 1,100 jobs on Teesside and Tyneside. Places like Middlesbrough, ruined by the removal of the industry upon which the town’s economic and social fabric relied so heavily, do not have the infrastructure in place to be competitive in a global market and therefore the investment upon which regeneration rests is not forthcoming. Parallels and comparisons have been made between the period before the recession of 2008 and the ‘roaring twenties’, between the ‘Gilded Age’ and the ‘new Gilded Age’, as the spectacular accumulation of wealth through financial services such as private-equity firms and hedge-fund magnates earn billions whilst the majority struggle to get by on minimum wage salaries (Henwood, 2008). As in the 1920s, the market bubble which provided the rapid accumulation of capital inevitably burst leading to the worst recession since the Great Depression.

Financial brokers and companies are wagering on the mood of the market, playing with billions of dollars that can make or break a nation-state and their economy (Strange, 1993). The financial industry traditionally argued that their industry was essentially well-run with the occasional rogue trader, however, since the onset of the credit crunch and the recession, it became obvious that there were fundamental flaws in the system that allowed and encouraged excessively risky speculation (Stiglitz, 2010; Mason, 2009). The growth of speculation on market forces led to uncertainties, in turn breeding hedging devices like futures and options, thus logically creating more speculation on the market (Strange, 1993) as well as further complicating a system already devoid of meaningful regulation (Stiglitz, 2010). In 1971, 90% of international financial transactions related to the real economy, through things like trade and long-term investment, only 10% was speculative. By 1990, these figures had reversed (Chomsky, 1999). By 1998, approximately 95% of all financial transactions taking place on a daily basis were speculative in nature (Gray, 1998). Again, locales such as Middlesbrough, built on physical manufactures and manual labour, contrast sharply with the symbolic and free-moving hyper reality of speculative financial capitalism.

A corollary of the increase in speculation and hedging within financial institutions, exacerbated by the recession, is the growing crisis over pensions and savings. Many companies hedged capital earmarked for pension funds in order to potentially maximise their profit, however problems arise when their speculative wager fails to pay off (Stiglitz, 2010). Pension funds and building societies were caught out in the credit crunch for having invested their capital in bundled up sub-prime mortgages, a risky venture that backfired badly when homeowners who should never have been given mortgages in the first place, began defaulting on their loans (Mason, 2009). A question arises – who fills up the pot again when pension funds have been gambled away? Given the limitation and cut backs on state involvement in many areas of social life, the obvious conclusion is that nobody fills the pot up again, except the taxpayer who faces an incredibly bleak and uncertain future. On top of this, Stiglitz (2003: 11) explains how changes to the US tax system, a practice somewhat replicated in the UK during the boom years of the 1990s, led to rewards for the very people who gambled, and often lost, with working people's money:

“Those who earned their money by speculating and winning on the stock market were the heroes of the day, and were to be taxed more lightly than those who earned their money by the sweat of their brow.”

Never mind that those earning money through speculation were earning so much money that the income disparity between the rich and the poor skyrocketed (Rothkopf, 2008), they were also the beneficiaries of generous, although altogether economically dangerous tax breaks, whilst those who comprised the stagnant middle class and the impoverished working class were expected to bear the brunt of the tax burden (Stiglitz, 2003). Since the 1980s, economic policies in both Britain and the USA have been tinged with an unmistakable feeling of economic Darwinism, survival of the fittest with no regard or compassion for those unable to pull themselves up. This legitimisation of social hierarchy and inequality is exemplified in the political language of meritocracy, providing opportunity to advance up the social ladder is deemed more acceptable than tackling inequality (Seymour, 2010; Cannadine, 1998). Rather than promoting egalitarianism, neoliberal politicians endorse this idea of economic Darwinism, albeit couched in the softer language of meritocracy. Many who speak of ‘trickle-down economics’ as practised by the neo-capitalist heterodoxy use the analogy of ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’, however, whilst the sentiment is touching, in the lifeworlds of those

living in deindustrialised places such as Middlesbrough, many cannot afford a boat in the first place. Harvey (2010) notes that 'trickle down economics' is a fallacy primarily because those in what Harvey terms the 'capitalist class' who amass their fortunes through the beneficial conditions provided by neoliberal governance never reinvest their capital in areas of the economy that are likely to reach those at the bottom. Stemming from the monetarist tradition of the Chicago School of the 1950s and 60s, this represents nothing more than the ideological conviction that government should refrain from regulating business in order to boost growth.

The relevancy of these issues stems from the growth and development of new and innovative forms of information technology (Castells, 2000). The rapid expansion of information technology is one of the driving forces behind the shift in capital accumulation (ibid). Castells (2000:13) goes as far as saying that, 'the information technology revolution was instrumental in allowing the implementation of a fundamental process of restructuring of the capitalist system from the 1980s onwards'. Given that the daily transactions in foreign exchange markets has reached over \$1.2 trillion, vast, unimaginable sums of money move around the globe at the click of a button (Gray, 1998). Although the impact of new technology on the production process is nothing new (Edgell, 2006; Braverman, 1998), the growth of telecommunications technology has created a situation where traditional labour is almost obsolete, companies are capable of generating huge profits without the need for a massed workforce (Angell, 2000). Importantly, there is no linear progression here. A non-linear progression involving globalisation, an IT revolution, and the explosion of capital accumulation free from national constraints created the conditions conducive to the centralisation of the market in everyday life (Gorz, 1999; Harvey, 2005). As Gorz (1999: 14) highlights, 'capital needed a technical revolution to overcome the crisis of Fordism, free itself from the constraints of the social state, reduce labour unit costs and speed up productivity growth. But that technical revolution could only be set in train if the relation of social forces and the relation of forces between capital and the state were at the same time, and irresistibly, modified in favour of capital'. In this sense, as the political, economic and social crises of the 1970s came to a head the ground had become fertile enough to be conducive to the kinds of change necessary for rapid technical expansion, freedom of capital accumulation, and the development of a competitive market economy (Harvey, 2005). For some, this opportunity offered the chance to vastly improve their economic position whilst for local labour markets

like Middlesbrough it signalled the onset of serious economic and social hardship. The likes of Reagan and Thatcher took advantage of this and used the opportunity to apply a pragmatic, conservative, neoliberal approach to governance, irrevocably changing the social landscape in Britain and the US (Harvey, 2005). Indeed, at the start of the twenty-first century, ‘there is simply no other legitimating set of ideas besides liberal democracy that is broadly accepted in the world today’ (Fukuyama, 2006). Even a deep global recession has failed to throw up any alternative vision of governance in the Western world. It is reasonable to suggest that there is no other legitimate set of ideas besides capitalist economics and its politico-ideological guard dog, neoliberalism.

The development of neoliberal and market capitalist policies in both Britain and the United States during the Reagan and Thatcher era heavily influenced the preoccupation with developing new technologies (Harvey, 2005). As conservatives and pragmatists, Reagan and Thatcher capitalised on the discontent that accompanied a stagnating economy in order to lay out an agenda designed to promote unrestrained market freedom, entrepreneurial enterprise and innovation, de-regulation and privatisation (Chomsky, 1999). One of the central tenets of Thatcherite policy was the research and development of new technology to inspire business innovation, create jobs and generate capital (Hutton, 2003). In both the UK and the US, the promotion of technological development would create new markets whilst revitalising and streamlining old exhausted industries and markets, although the long term affect would be to develop technology so advanced as to change the nature of business and capital accumulation by gradually phasing out the need for a centralised workforce (Castells, 2000). Throughout the 1980s, technological investment in the communications and information infrastructure made it possible for both de-regulation of certain markets and the globalisation of capital (ibid). The symbiosis of technological development, globalisation, market de-regulation and the freedom of capital from the constraints of labour all served to shift the foundations of sociality and dramatically alter the labour market. In 1987, Margaret Thatcher famously took her ‘walk in the wilderness’ across the barren post-industrial Teesside landscape decimated by her policies and, when criticised about the 21% unemployment rate at the time, remarked that former miners, steelworkers, shipbuilders and factory workers would have to retrain because times had changed (Hewison, 2007). The labour market on Teesside was irreversibly altered by the confluence of market de-regulation, globalisation and technological advancement.

During the modern era, technology actively sought to improve people's lives, now technology is increasingly concerned with sign value as opposed to use value (Baudrillard, 1981). The constant refinement of taste has become crucial in terms of developing new technologies, in line with the demands of the market and the ever-growing totalising nature of the culture industry (Debord, 1998; Bauman, 2007b; Adorno, 2001). Technology has been harnessed by the market in several ways, firstly to keep consumers spending their hard-earned money on a continuously developing range of 'must-have' commodities (Barber, 2007), whilst also directly influencing managerial and operational practices in many companies, thus redefining the labour process and ultimately the labour market (Edgell, 2006; Beck, 2000). This has led to what many writers have dubbed the move from an industrial to a post-industrial economy (Edgell, 2006). As the economy has moved away from its reliance on a strong, massed workforce, industrial production, more often than not, has relocated to third world countries where tariffs, taxes and wages are much lower (Taylor and Bain, 2005); the main result being an evisceration of the industrial and manufacturing economies in the UK. Throughout the 1980s, as the Conservative government continued to privatise and deregulate large numbers of public services, a process of deindustrialisation began to take place (Winlow, 2001). It must be stressed that global forces were at play here, not just Tory policy, rather, the 'manufacturing industry declined in most of the prosperous Western countries during the 1980s and 1990s. Britain had particular long-term problems of low investment, poor industrial relations and weak technical training that would have meant that industry performed badly even in the best of circumstances. The most brutally simple verdict on the Thatcher government's relations with industry in the early 1980s was that it merely turned off the life-support system for a patient that was already dead' (Vinen, 2009: 286). The opening up of global markets to competition and the development of greater and more efficient technology signalled a decline in fortune for heavy industry and traditional manufacturing in Britain; unfortunately, the Conservative government withdrew support for, privatised and closed large swathes of vital sectors of employment in the North East.

Petrochemicals had emerged on Teesside as a growth industry since the First World War, coming to dominate both the skyline and the labour market (Williamson, 2008). As noted earlier, the expansion of petrochemicals on Teesside led to not only a population boom but also government investment in the local industry. Ironically, the very technological

innovation in petrochemicals, particularly the steam naphtha process, which had brought jobs and investment to the area, actually sowed the seeds of Middlesbrough's decline (Beynon et al, 1994). The new process required far less labour and manpower and although technological advancements and government investment had allowed Teesside to remain competitive in the global petrochemical industry, it also signalled the beginning of the end for the local labour force as multinational companies based on Teesside found it more beneficial to move their operations elsewhere (ibid). At the same time, global competition had led to an efficiency drive within local industries and the revelation that American companies were producing as much, if not more, with a vastly smaller workforce than ICI had at Billingham, led to a restructuring effort and a rethink as to the cost-effectiveness of the huge workforce on Teesside (Williamson, 2008). It was especially hard on Middlesbrough given that iron, steel and chemical industries had built the town by providing the infrastructure and jobs that triggered much of the migration to the area; when the jobs went, there was little on which people could fall back.

Hobsbawm's analysis of the twentieth century supports the facts behind Teesside's decline. Hobsbawm (1994) argues that Britain utilised her empire to sustain her economic position in a global world, however, the dual impact of World War Two and the breakdown of the British Empire undermined Britain's economic position. Despite these blows to British industry, the dramatic shift of industrial production away from the West did not occur until the 1970s as former colonies such as India and recovering nations, namely Japan and Germany, began to recover their former strength and industrialise on a scale large enough to sustain their own growth rather than rely on Western imports (ibid). Once the 'built-in tendency to reinforce the industrial monopoly of the old core countries' (Hobsbawm, 1994: 206) was weakened, British industrial strength declined in such a way as to make propping up traditional industries financially unsustainable for the government and so they were sold off or closed down, thus resigning places like Middlesbrough to the hardships that followed. The economic liberal orthodoxy of the 1980s and 1990s believed that private businesses are more efficient at running companies and public services because they run them for profit (Harvey, 2005), therefore many public services were privatised whilst those industries no longer financially viable, such as coal mining, suffered widespread closures. Of course, not all public services were privatised, the public veneration of the NHS prevented Thatcher from privatisation, indeed, despite 30 years of privatisation in Britain, the NHS has remained a

public service (Harvey, 2010). Once in the hands of private owners, many industries were completely gutted in the name of efficiency and cost-effectiveness (Sennett, 1999). In many cases, it meant the closure of large numbers of coal mines and shipyards that had employed thousands of people across the North East and fostered a genuine sense of community and working class identity (Dennis et al, 1969; Winlow, 2001). The reckless dash towards a new world of global capitalism destroyed these valuable and important aspects of social life; the proud heritage and tradition of working class communities, as well as the mutuality, collective identity and experiences, grounded in locales such as Middlesbrough, were discarded in favour of capital.

The relationship between labour and capital had shifted by this point; the newly unemployed were surplus to requirements rather than being central to the economic development of the country (Bauman, 2005b). Keynesian economics, the post-war model for both Britain and the United States, emphasised full employment, or as close to full employment as a country could realistically achieve, as being central to a healthy economy (Dean, 2009). The ascendancy of neoliberal, free market capitalism to political and economic orthodoxy saw a swing away from ensuring full employment, claiming that the country could prosper despite higher than average levels of unemployment (Hayek, 1960; Vinen, 2009). Keeping a reserve army of labour allowed downward pressure on wages which also helped increase profits (Harvey, 2010). Unshackling capital from labour was no more greatly demonstrated than by Thatcher's successful battle with the trade unions in the mid 1980s (Beckett and Hencke, 2009; Campbell, 2009). The 1970s highlighted the power held by labour, particularly the three-day week and the collapse of the Heath government, as well as the 'winter of discontent' that helped propel Thatcher to power in 1979 (Beckett, 2009; Wheen, 2009). The economy had always been attuned to the demands of labour, given that strike action could bring the country to its knees, however, Thatcher's victory over the unions further released capital from the bonds of labour and ensured that trade unions would no longer be able to hold the government hostage with the threat of strike action. Business was now free to accumulate capital without the threat of significant industrial unrest (Vinen, 2009; Campbell, 2009). With the decline of trade union power in Britain, the market became free to generate capital without the need for labour (Bauman, 2007b). The end of trade union power is probably the most visible sign that competition and market pressures are all-powerful in contemporary society, particularly in terms of eroding what Bauman (2007a) calls the

‘solidarities of the weak’. Those who still had jobs became expendable commodities, capable of being discarded on a whim by companies seeking to ensure cost-effectiveness and efficiency by relocating to countries more conducive to maximising their profits (Stiglitz, 2000; Friedman, 2000; also Poster, 2007). Not only did this result in labour becoming a disposable commodity, in many parts of the country, including Middlesbrough, a surplus pool of labour developed thus allowing companies the opportunity to pick and choose who they employed whilst keeping wages low, given that the demand for jobs far exceeds the supply (Bishop, 2003). Such was the scale of the economic decline in the area during the 1980s, the town’s local football team, Middlesbrough FC, forced into liquidation in 1986, actually padlocked the gates to their Ayresome Park ground. Only a last minute intervention by local businessman Steve Gibson saved the club from extinction. Unfortunately, it was a different story for many other businesses in the area at that time. By the late 1980s, the economy on Teesside was characterised by recession, job losses and unemployment. Decline was the key word to describe the town and surrounding area by the end of the 1980s (Beynon et al, 1994). The following chapter will lay out the myriad of social problems that emerged in Middlesbrough following deindustrialisation, the stagnation of the local labour market and the ‘regeneration’ of the late 1990s, spearheaded by the rise of service industries and call centres.

## CHAPTER TWO

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‘Now Main Street’s whitewashed windows and vacant stores,  
Seems like there ain’t nobody wants to come down here no more.’

- Bruce Springsteen, *My Hometown*

So far we have chronicled the rise and fall of Middlesbrough in relation to the political, social and economic developments in both Britain and the global economy. The superiority of neoliberal market capitalism served to dismantle the traditional industrial economy on Teesside and consign thousands of local workers to the unemployment lines. Sociology and criminology have ably demonstrated over the years how rapid deindustrialisation brings with it multiple social problems that exacerbate local malaise (Charlesworth, 2000; Winlow, 2001; MacDonald and Marsh, 2004; Shildrick et al, 2010). This chapter will highlight the social problems accompanying deindustrialisation, the attempts to regenerate the local economy, and the role call centres play in this process.

### *Unemployment, Labour Markets, Social Disintegration and ‘Regeneration’*

Once unemployment and underemployment began to spread across the town and the region as a whole, further social problems began to develop as a result. Chronic unemployment naturally results in growing poverty, particularly when one considers the large number of people who became unemployed throughout the late 1970s and 1980s (MacDonald and Marsh, 2004). A shortage of available jobs creates a shortage of available capital. Inevitably forced to rely on government handouts, working class families fell into cycles of welfare dependency. As of 2009, 22% of people in Middlesbrough of working age claim out-of-work benefits (Tees Valley Unlimited, 2010). Despite well-recited underclass arguments by the likes of Murray (1990), it is crucial to point out the terrific strain placed on a working class community, built on traditional notions of a strong work ethic, to have to rely on welfare to survive (MacDonald et al, 2005; also see Bourke, 1994). Since the late 1980s, the Grangetown area of Middlesbrough frequently appears in the national media as an example of an inner city ghetto fractured by chronic unemployment, high crime rates and a rising urban underclass (Murray, 1990). After a *Newsnight* special report in 2004 highlighted the problems facing Grangetown due to the collapse of the industries around which Grangetown was built, tired clichés about ‘industrial wastelands of the North’ were trotted out by

journalists, commentators and those who entered online forums to discuss the programme (Easton, 2004). However, what was evident was that, typical stereotypes aside, there are real problems in parts of Middlesbrough, many of which relate directly to the loss of industry and a traditional manufacturing base. If Thoreau was right in saying that ‘the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation’, then the media coverage of Middlesbrough and Grangetown clearly shows a ‘quiet desperation’ in a community who, for all their hard work and community spirit, have gradually become resigned to the reality that rather than seeing improvements to their town, time and again they face worsening conditions leading many to simply give up.

MacDonald and Marsh (2004) describe the attitudes of young men and women in East Middlesbrough towards education as being almost fatalistic at times. When those regarded as academic achievers at school find work only in the local bakery, it proves to the other young men and women that qualifications and endeavour at school ultimately count for nothing. With almost double the national average for unemployment (Tees Valley Unlimited, 2010) and educational achievement at schools in some areas reduced to only 14% of students gaining five GCSE’s at grades A-C (bbc.co.uk), it becomes clear that the twin problems of educational underachievement and lack of employment opportunities are manifested in the fatalism of many young men and women.

The official unemployment statistics for Middlesbrough do not make healthy reading. As of April 2010, Middlesbrough had an unemployment rate of 7.7%, compared with a national rate of 4.1%, 11.2% of men are unemployed compared to 3.8% of women (Tees Valley Unlimited, 2010). More worryingly, of those currently unemployed, nearly one quarter (23.2%) have been unemployed for more than 12 months, up from the national average of 16.6%, whilst almost 10% (9.8) of the unemployed in Middlesbrough are under 20 years of age. Since the Labour government came to power in 1997, it made repeated claims about successful efforts to tackle long-term and youth unemployment, although the figures in Middlesbrough seem to tell a different story. Recent large-scale redundancies at both Corus and CJ Garlands at the end of Labour’s run in office and the start of the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition serve as proof that political promises become increasingly hollow in face of global economic processes, leaving localities like Middlesbrough struggling to survive.

Whilst the Labour government was quick to pat itself on the back for the low rates of unemployment in the years leading up to the recession, it increasingly overlooked the growing number of people working in low-paid, highly stressful forms of service work and ‘emotional labour’ (Bunting, 2004; Hochschild, 2003). A local example from Teesside would be the fact that ‘casual work at ‘the turkey factory’ replaced skilled employment at ICI’ (MacDonald, 2008: 246). As Judt (2010: 14) notes, ‘most of the new jobs created in Britain in the years 1977-2007 were either at the very high or the very low end of the pay scale’. As Middlesbrough does not have the infrastructure to secure high paying jobs, inevitably the new jobs created on Teesside are at the lowest end of the pay scale. The urban poor, or ‘economically marginalised’, found routes to ‘real jobs’ blocked and tended to drift between periods of unemployment and various forms of ‘poor work’, those insecure, low-paid jobs found in abundance at the bottom of the local labour market (Webster et al, 2004). Precisely how low paid many of these jobs are is evident in the statistics offered in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Weekly earnings comparison across UK

	National Statistics April 2009	Tees Valley Unlimited Sept 2009
Median weekly pay in UK (£)	489	491.0
Median weekly pay in North East (£)	436	438.8
Median Weekly Pay in Middlesbrough (£)	-	409.8
Median Weekly Pay in Service Sector (£)	424	-

These national and regional statistics highlight the disparity in pay for full time employees across the country. The median weekly pay in Middlesbrough is significantly less than the median weekly pay across the UK. Indeed, service sector workers are paid comparatively less than the national average at only £424 per week. Interestingly, when I began working for Call Direct (in 2006), my hourly salary was £5.13, slightly above the minimum wage. Over 37.5 hours a week, my gross pay was only £192.38, much lower than the average wage for Middlesbrough. By early 2010, the minimum wage was due to rise to £5.93 an hour for those

over 21, therefore had I still been at Call Direct, my gross pay would have been £222.37, still significantly lower than the median weekly pay in Middlesbrough. When the call centre literature states that the work is low paid, these figures prove exactly how low paid many outsourced call centre employees are. These figures also show how stagnant wages have become at the bottom end of the labour market (Shildrick et al, 2010), particularly in relation to the fact that my pay would have risen by approximately £30 a week over four years.

To understand how dependent Middlesbrough has become on service industries, the Tees Valley Statistics (2008) reveal the true picture. Whilst the term 'service industries' is frustratingly ambiguous and covers a wide range of occupations, of the 63,700 people in Middlesbrough who were in employment during 2008, 88.7% were employed in service industries. According to Nomis' official labour market statistics, between January and December 2007, 19.3% of Middlesbrough's working population worked in 'personal service occupations' or 'sales and customer services occupations' ([www.nomis.co.uk](http://www.nomis.co.uk)). These figures are likely to include call centre employees. In these categories, Middlesbrough employs more people than the North East in general (17.1%) and Great Britain as a whole (15.6%). Middlesbrough's reliance on service industries is a clear parallel to her earlier dependence upon iron and steel and chemical industries. Indeed, Shildrick et al (2010: 8) note that following the loss of 100,000 manufacturing jobs between 1971 and 2008, they 'were gradually replaced by 92,000 jobs in the service sector (particularly in call centres, leisure services and the public sector)'.

The changes that have taken place since the late 1970s have left the labour market increasingly unstable, leaving many workers facing uncertain futures due to the insecurity they encounter in the workplace (Fenton and Dermott, 2006). The centrality of the market in all spheres of social life has replaced discourses of collective responsibility and mutuality with a focus upon the individual, flexibility and social mobility (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Bauman, 2005a). The institutionalisation of individualisation has reshaped the focus and direction of social institutions to provide the support for individual achievement and mobility rather than ensuring the needs of the community or collective groups are met (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The result of this process is an increase in responsibility falling on the individual, often without any social safety net to catch them if they fail (Young, 1999; Bauman, 2005b). My respondents all demonstrated an inherent individualism which

superseded notions of community or class however familial closeness remained intact, often as young men and women had to extend their stay in the family home as they could not afford to move out, or through relying on financial support from family as the monthly wage often ran out long before pay day. While the data agrees with Bauman and Beck in terms of a shift in focus away from collective responsibility towards a reflexive individuality, traditional familial relations survived.

By shifting attention toward individual responsibility, the changes that have resulted in an unstable labour market have largely gone unchecked, despite being detrimental to the average worker, who is increasingly expected to develop the necessary flexibility to survive (Sennett, 1999). As Bauman (2007a: 10) suggests, ‘the ground on which our life prospects are presumed to rest is admittedly shaky – as are our jobs and the companies that offer them, our partners and networks of friends, the standing we enjoy in wider society and the self-esteem and self-confidence that come with it’. The changes documented so far have affected not only our working lives, but our social lives as well – the move toward an individualised, consumer-capitalist, neoliberal social world leaves everything on uncertain ground. Although we believe ourselves to be free from the rigid norms of a Keynesian, Fordist past, the ‘fluidity and adaptability of imaginary identities are incapable of establishing a firm place to stand’ (Dean, 2009: 67) and therefore social life becomes increasingly anxiety-ridden and soluble. The more we retreat into our own, individualised existence the more likely it becomes that we perceive of social activities as risky ventures, particularly given the removal of social safety nets and the emphasis on individual responsibility (Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2007a).

We have seen the devaluation of labour from an essential right to an unstable commodity (Sennett, 1999). Employment in the industrial age was regarded as an inalienable right, people identified themselves according to the job they did as work became important to people in terms of moral and social worth, not just economic worth (Edgell, 2006: 106). The corrosion of Keynesian guarantees of full employment gives rise to the instability in the current labour market, the end of the belief in a ‘job for life’, and the desire for a flexible, malleable workforce capable of, and expected to, change jobs and careers over the course of a working life (Fenton and Dermott, 2006). Of course, the end of the political will to sustain full employment serves the needs of capital; the unemployed constitute a reserve army of labour which forces downward pressure on wages and pushes profitability up (Harvey, 2010).

It becomes apparent that, for many people engaged in the labour market today, work becomes little more than a means to an end. Traditionally, work was the cornerstone of life for working class people and many truly identified with their occupation, seeing it as more meaningful than the purely economic transaction of labour for capital (Zweig, 1952; Kynaston, 2007; see also Williamson, 2008). Given the unstable nature of the labour market and the economy, many people today, increasingly, engage in insecure, low-paid service work under the threat of job losses (Rifkin, 2004; Toynbee, 2003; Bunting, 2003), a throwback to an early imitation of industrial capitalism before gains made by trade unions and reforms offered by social-democratic governments offered a measure of stability (Kynaston, 2007). For many, losing jobs and moving on to other forms of employment is ‘taken for granted’, regardless of the circumstances (MacDonald, 2008: 242).

Call centres emerge as the classic example of a low-paid, insecure, highly stressful and pressurised form of service sector employment (Taylor and Bain, 1999). A truly ‘postmodern’ occupation, call centres provide a disembodied service for consumers, meeting customer needs from a distance via the telecommunications technologies developed in recent decades (see, for example, Miozzo and Ramirez, 2003). Call centres fit into the category described by Margaret Thatcher as ‘tomorrow’s jobs’, the service sector employment that would replace the unproductive and costly manufacturing work in the early 1980s. One of the primary functions of the modern call centre has been to sweep up the surplus labour in towns and cities decimated by the decline of traditional industrial and manufacturing jobs (Belt and Richardson, 2001). As the above figures show, Middlesbrough fits firmly into this category. According to the Call Centre Agency, as of early 2010, over 950,000 people, or 3% of the UK’s working population now work in ‘contact centres’, with the industry having grown over 250% between 1995 and 2004 whilst still adding tens of thousands of jobs each year. This is a huge section of the workforce and therefore, unsurprisingly, call centres have become incredibly popular in academic and journalistic circles (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Deery et al, 2002; Ellis and Taylor, 2006; Winiecki, 2004; Mulholland, 2004; Wegge et al, 2006; Kinnie et al, 2008). The government and service industry rhetoric on call centres leaves one with the assumption that the jobs created in this new sector of the economy are vibrant, fun and cutting edge, particularly given their reliance on new technology (van den Broek, 2004). For those people located in depressed areas, safe in the knowledge that traditional jobs that once gave their locale its sense of identity are not coming back, engaging

in this new blossoming sector of the labour market will provide the opportunity to escape the economic shackles of unemployment and deprivation. Beckett (2009) illustrates this by commenting on the transformation of Scottish dock workers into call centre operatives following the influx of service sector jobs to Scotland in the wake of the collapse of traditional industry. One of the central aims of this study is to determine whether this positive rhetoric reflects a lived reality on the call centre floor or whether journalistic and academic accounts of harsh, exploitative, demanding emotional labour is a truer reflection of call centre life (Houilhan, 2002). Many writers view call centres as the embodiment of a mass production approach to customer service (Houilhan, 2002), with workers experiencing degradation, increased machine pacing of the labour process, routinisation of the work process, boredom, and increased levels of stress (Batt and Moynihan, 2002). High staff turnover implies workers feel little reward in the work they do and little loyalty or affinity to the company (Fenton and Dermott, 2006; Cross et al, 2008). One of the many goals of this study, as laid out in Chapter One, is to determine the causes behind such high levels of attrition in the call centre industry.

The call centre is an illustrative example of the marriage of new information technology and company policies concerning efficiency and cost-effectiveness (Deery and Kinney, 2002). The call centre would not have been possible 30 years ago. In Britain, the de-regulation of the telecommunications industry in the 1980s sowed the seeds of the call centre (Ellis and Taylor, 2006). Once British Telecom's monopoly on the telecommunications industry was broken, it created conditions conducive to the development of a competitive market where rival companies would compete for customers, contracts and revenues (ibid). In order to be competitive, companies would have to increase efficiency and cost-effectiveness. By harnessing the latest innovations in telecommunications and information technology, companies found that, by creating a centralised system of dealing with a large number of customer enquiries by telephone, they could reduce costs and increase productivity (Taylor and Bain, 1999). This served as the birth of the contemporary call centre. In the North East of England, call centres emerged in the late 1990s as a potential lifeline for towns and cities struggling to overcome deindustrialisation. The industrial decline since the late 1970s created chronic unemployment (MacDonald and Marsh, 2004; Shildrick et al, 2010) resulting in official studies and surveys ranking the region as amongst the weakest in England on most indicators of economic competitiveness (Richardson and Belt, 2001). Consequently, parts of

the region are regularly cited as the worst places in Britain for issues such as poverty, unemployment, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, school truancy and many more social problems (MacDonald et al, 2005; Webster, MacDonald and Simpson, 2006). This was epitomised in 2007 when a Channel 4 programme, *Location, Location, Location*, labelled Middlesbrough as the worst place to live in the UK.

Several factors played a significant role in the relocation of many call centre operations to the North East. Richardson and Belt (2001) argue that a good telecommunications infrastructure in the region, a large pool of available, low cost labour, and subsidies from local redevelopment agencies made the North East a suitable home for call centres (see also Richardson, Belt and Marshall, 2000). Indeed, in terms of labour costs, call centres in the North East pay the lowest, or among the lowest, wages in Britain (Richardson, Belt and Marshall, 2000). However, the regeneration of the region through call centres is built on shaky ground. The inward investment by companies outside the region had undoubtedly been beneficial, although there are many examples where the cost of running call centres in the UK, although relatively low in the North East, are even lower overseas (Taylor and Bain, 2005). The ability to outsource call centre operations to places such as India, Ireland and the Philippines, has made local and national labour markets highly unstable. The collapse of Middlesbrough's largest call centre operation, CJ Garlands, was partly the result of recession-struck telecommunications contracts concentrating on lower labour costs abroad in order to recover from the recession. However, Taylor and Bain (2005) point out that there are nearly one million call centre workers in the UK, yet only around 60,000 call centre jobs in India actually dealing with UK consumers. Still, the fact that companies can move abroad freely still causes instability in local labour markets. In order to survive, call centre management must ensure that their labour force reaches levels of efficiency and cost-effectiveness that become difficult to attain without a rigid, scientific management approach that has been found to leave employees feeling overworked, burnt out and disillusioned (Deery et al, 2002; Kinnie et al, 2008). When this occurs, employers demand reflexive, flexible engagement from their staff whilst resorting to highly micro-managed strategies to achieve their targets (Taylor and Bain, 1999).

Whilst the service sector has taken on a significant role in regenerating the faltering economy in Middlesbrough and the Tees Valley, call centre jobs cannot solve the myriad problems

facing the region (MacDonald et al, 2005; MacDonald, 2008). We have already seen how the labour market and local economy suffered from slumps and problems long before deindustrialisation destroyed the traditional industrial base. Middlesbrough has a long history of social problems, many of which were exacerbated by the collapse of local economy and labour market in the 1970s (Beynon et al, 1994). In much the same way as Charlesworth (2000) describes his native Rotherham as a 'stagnant pool' in the wake of industrial decline, Middlesbrough has to contend with above average crime rates, drug dependency, teenage pregnancy and poor educational achievement. Although Middlesbrough was never a good example of public health during the industrial era of full employment (Taylor, 2002), it is worth noting that a 2007 study revealed the Middlehaven area of Middlesbrough to have the lowest life expectancy in the country at only 54.8 years (BBC, 2007). Middlehaven is located on the south bank of the river, the site of the early settlements and ironworks, and after falling into disrepair recently became subject to an £800 million investment scheme designed to regenerate the area. Middlesbrough also made the top ten of a 2004 list of the 'fattest towns in Britain', based on obesity and lifestyle measurements (bbc.co.uk, 2004)

Crime has been a feature of Middlesbrough since the rapid expansion witnessed during the Victorian era (Taylor, 2002). Today, although crime rates have, according to recent statistics, declined considerably, the local crime rate still remains well above the national average. Cleveland Police force serves a wide area, over 230 square miles; however Middlesbrough is the largest town under Cleveland Police's jurisdiction, accounting for around 30% of the population covered by the force (cleveland.police.uk). According to Cleveland Police, the first 3 months of 2010 saw a 20% reduction in reported crime against the same 3 months in 2009 (ibid); however in a national comparison, Cleveland has the seventh highest crime rate in the country (Walker et al, 2009). The national average for offences per 1000 population is 86, whilst Cleveland has 98 offences per 1000 (ibid). According to the most recent British Crime Survey, 36% of people in the Cleveland area saw drug use and dealing as a 'very/fairly big problem' (ibid). This was the highest percentage in England and Wales, only matched by Merseyside and South Wales, indicating that, although the statistics match the official line from the local government regarding cleaning up the streets and reducing crime (Fenwick, Grieves and McMillan, 2004), the locals are still concerned about the level of crime in Middlesbrough. Whilst the figures seem to bear out the rhetoric of crime reduction, there are well-documented problems with crime figures and the dark figure of crime may be

significantly different to the official statistics (Maguire, 1997) or Middlesbrough may have an alternative problem in terms of reducing the fear of crime as well as actual crime (Lee, 2001).

Traditionally, Middlesbrough has had higher than average levels of both drug addiction (MacDonald and Marsh, 2001) and prostitution (Foster, 2002). Whilst criminological theory has, for many decades, attempted to offer relevant or insightful theories into the causes of crime, there is not the space in this study to offer a detailed account of prostitution and drug dependency in Middlesbrough. However, when Middlesbrough is responsible for one quarter of *all* kerb-crawling convictions in the country (Weaver, 2006), heroin prices can be found as low as £5 for 0.2g (We are Teesside, 2006) and ecstasy tablets are available for only £1 in certain places ‘over the border’ (the site of the original settlements, south of the river but north of the railway lines), it is clear that certain crimes predominate the Middlesbrough landscape (see also Webster, MacDonald and Simpson, 2006). As Sarah Foster from *The Northern Echo* (Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2002) indicated, after a study of Britain’s wealth by postcode named Newport Road in Middlesbrough as the poorest street in Britain (combined annual household income of £11,600 per year), it is hardly surprising to hear that the Cannon Park industrial estate at the west end of Newport Road is part of the notorious red-light district of Middlesbrough.

From her earliest days, Middlesbrough was an overwhelmingly male-dominated locale (Taylor, 2006). Men outnumbered women significantly and the presence of large numbers of young working class men with few, if any, local roots combined with the perceived total absence of women on the streets, created conditions in which by the 1850s, regular town meetings focused upon, among other things, the problem of prostitution (ibid). Whilst Middlesbrough’s historical significance as a major port undoubtedly played some part in the abundance of sex workers in the town, more recently the social effects of mass deindustrialisation and the subsequent impoverishment of large sections of the local population clearly involve some turning to drugs and often prostitution (MacDonald and Marsh, 2001). Following the massive disintegration of heavy industry on Teesside in the 1980s, Middlesbrough saw an influx of very cheap heroin in the 1990s (ibid). In a Durkheimian sense, the overpowering anomic conditions in certain parts of Middlesbrough correlate directly with a rise in drug addiction, petty crime and prostitution (Durkheim, 1984).

Ethnic diversity is another area in which Middlesbrough differs somewhat from her North East neighbours. Traditionally built on the labour of 'outsiders', English workers from places as near as Durham and as far away as Cornwall migrated to Middlesbrough looking for work (Simpson, 2006). Also, a large section of the expanding population in the town's early days were Irish immigrants (Taylor, 2002). From her earliest days then, the influx of immigration has shaped Middlesbrough and her history. The first mayor of Middlesbrough, Henry Bolckow, was born in Germany whilst the 1851 census revealed that local residents included people from as far away as Germany and Jamaica ([bbc.co.uk/legacies](http://bbc.co.uk/legacies)). By the end of the century, the rapid rise of the town and its reputation as an international powerhouse of the industrial age had begun to attract unskilled labourers from Poland and the Baltic States, the East Indies and the United States (*ibid*). Ironically, a century later, Polish workers would again flood into the British labour market in search of work. In fact, the BBC legacies article goes on to postulate that the rapid immigration into Middlesbrough was partly to blame for the many social problems that arose, such as poor housing, inadequate health provision, poor education, and crime (*ibid*).

Middlesbrough's status as a port town also played a part in the continuing ethnic diversity of the town. The steady stream of merchant navy ships that navigated the waters of the Tees brought people from all over the country to Middlesbrough, whilst trading vessels from abroad also brought people to the town. Obviously not all of them stayed, although with census records indicating a rich diversity of people constantly settling down in the town, the port no doubt figured heavily in this. In particular, after World War 2, many displaced servicemen from various parts of the world descended on Middlesbrough in order to join the merchant navy as a way of making their way home. However, not everyone who came to Middlesbrough to join the merchant navy after the war actually left, some stayed and settled down in the area.

Today, Middlesbrough is still overwhelmingly white, however somewhere in the region of 9% of the population are considered to be non-white, with 5% of the overall town population described as Pakistani in the 2001 census (ONS, 2001). Although not as ethnically diverse as some areas of the country, in regional terms Middlesbrough has a much wider range of ethnicity than Sunderland and Durham whilst relative to their size (Newcastle has twice the

population of Middlesbrough), Middlesbrough is more ethnically diverse than Newcastle (ibid). One would also expect to see the figure for non-British residents to have increased at the next census given what many locals have perceived to be an influx of Asian and Eastern Europeans to the town. The influx of immigrant workers into Middlesbrough has begun to show a worrying trend toward ethnic insularity and resentment, typified by the gains made by the British National Party in local by-elections in March 2008. Despite having never previously fielded candidates in the Marton West and Gresham wards, the BNP gained over 11% of the vote in both elections, clearly indicating that their nationalist agenda had growing resonance in a town apparently awash with unskilled immigrant labour gaining jobs, houses and benefits ahead of local people (The Northern Echo 15/03/08). However, at the General Election in May 2010, the BNP failed to capitalise on a growing resentment towards mainstream politics in general and performed poorly at the ballot box. Immigration and ethnically-based tension is not a new phenomenon for Middlesbrough given that the 1961 Cannon Street Riots started when an Arab migrant stabbed to death a local white youth during an altercation (Renton, 2006), leading the local communities to protest and riot over the influx of foreigners apparently taking over traditionally 'white' areas. After 4 days of violence towards police and immigrant shops and businesses, over 30 arrests were made and the incident was significant enough to garner the attention of *The New York Times* (Panayi, 1991).

### *The Research Location*

The decline and end of traditional industries left a gaping hole in the town that has been slow and painful to fill. The last remnants of Middlesbrough's industrial heritage are still there to see. Whilst the town centre is undergoing an image change, a short train journey indicates from exactly what the town is attempting to recover. When the railway extended to Middlesbrough in the 1830s, the original settlements emerged to the north of the station, hemmed in between the railway line and the river. As expansion began south beyond the railway line, the station became a symbolic line of demarcation between the town centre to the south whilst 'over the border', as the locals know it, lies the old town. Jump on any train heading east to Redcar or Saltburn and Middlesbrough's industrial heritage lies before your eyes. The 3 miles of disused steel mills, ironworks, blast furnaces, railway lines, and foundries offer a sad reminder of the recent past. The Dorman Long silo stands in disrepair, a

far cry from the company's heyday, designing and providing the steel for the Sydney Harbour Bridge almost eighty years ago.

The Middlesbrough I grew up in seemed old and tired, remarkable considering it was still regarded as a 'new' town. I was raised in Acklam, a former farming village incorporated into Middlesbrough as the town expanded south. Acklam is a relatively quieter area of Middlesbrough, situated around 3 miles from the central business district. Putting my postcode into the ACORN demographic database reveals that the area is 'comfortably off', populated by 'working families with mortgages'. Most of the residents are either professional or clerical workers who moved out of the town when they could afford to, or people who moved into the area for work. ACORN bears this out, categorising the occupations of residents as mainly 'intermediate and supervisory occupations' and 'routine occupations'. Predominantly middle-aged, white, full-time homeowners with dependent children and two cars or more, living in detached or semi-detached houses, ACORN's description of Acklam is accurate. Interestingly, annual income between £20,000 and £50,000 is above the national average whilst there are more people with incomes above £50,000 than below £10,000. As house prices in Acklam range from £150,000 to £300,000, an area made up predominantly of homeowners and families with mortgages is beyond the reach of someone earning less than £10,000. Whilst ACORN acknowledges a large number of full time students living in the area, educational achievement only reaches above the national average for GCSEs, with A Levels falling below the national average and degree attainment slipping further behind. In terms of lifestyle interests, Acklam is characterised as a cinema going, eating out, home computer owning, foreign travelling, magazine subscribing area, whose residents' interests meet the national average for football, reading, fishing, DIY, cooking, fashion and clothes, gardening, easy listening, eighties and rock and roll music, horseracing and theatre.

Life outside the town centre was qualitatively different from life in the town centre, therefore trips into town, particularly when I was younger, left a feeling that something was not right, as though the people were slowly resigning themselves to the fact that Middlesbrough had seen better days and did not have a great deal to offer anymore. Of course, my first recollections of Middlesbrough coincided with the decline of the traditional industrial base in the 1980s, therefore the town and its inhabitants were still reeling from the wave of closures

and unemployment at a time when the future was far from bright. Made aware of the need for educational achievement from a young age, largely because the desperate state of the local labour market meant that any chance of making something with our lives would require academic qualifications. Ironically, the glaring lack of a graduate labour market in Middlesbrough resulted in a form of 'brain drain' as young people with qualifications move away in order to seek employment whilst studies repeatedly prove that educational achievement is not generally the instant access pass to the world of high paid employment that we were led to believe (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). By 2010, it was reported that only one third of all students graduating that summer would expect to find graduate jobs (Williams, 2010 in *The Guardian*). During my time working at Call Direct, it became clear that I was not the only person working there who held a degree.

Regeneration began in the late 1990s. One of the key themes in controversial Mayor Ray Mallon's manifesto is regeneration, particularly in terms of making Middlesbrough more appealing to business investment (Fenwick, Grieves and McMillan, 2004). Many of the schemes and partnerships entrusted with the regeneration of Middlesbrough are public/private enterprises oozing neoliberal catchphrases such as 'making Middlesbrough up-to-date and competitive', 'ready for the twenty-first century', 'providing skills for global labour markets' and 'increasing speed and efficiency' ([www.middlesbroughcouncil.org](http://www.middlesbroughcouncil.org)). The Middlesbrough Partnership is an excellent example. A Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) combining public, private, voluntary and community organisations entrusted with over £27.5 million between 2001 and 2006 to 'promote the interests of Middlesbrough' and ensure 'services can work better and more efficiently', the partnership is essentially made up of local councillors, the private sector and NGOs who decide the best way to spend public money ([www.middlesbroughpartnership.org](http://www.middlesbroughpartnership.org)). Interestingly, whilst the public have access to the meetings, they have no input unless invited by the chair, instead entrusting their views to local organisations and NGOs. As Monbiot (2000) indicates, public/private partnerships seem like a good idea, yet in practice, they serve to bolster private business with public money, largely ignore the opinions of local people and increase the influence private enterprise holds over democratically elected local officials. Whilst 'regeneration' is spun in the media as a means of improving the everyday lives of local people, it is an inescapably neoliberal form of capital accumulation as private enterprise gains a stronger foothold in democratic decision making whilst local officials, motivated by their desire to stay in office,

pander to their most influential constituents, those with the power to get them re-elected. Walking around today, there is overwhelming evidence of the millions of pounds worth of improvements made to make the town more aesthetically appealing, whilst a degree of inward business investment attempted to stimulate the economy, only to be knocked back down again with the onset of recession.

One of the central pillars of regeneration in Middlesbrough and the historically inaccurately-named 'Tees Valley' has been the rapid assemblage of new housing. Prime sites formerly home to local landmarks such as Ayresome Park (home of Middlesbrough FC) and Middlesbrough General Hospital, sold off to private property developers, are now awash with new houses and 'luxury' apartments. More tellingly, the vast outlying farmland to the west of Middlesbrough, located between Stockton and Yarm, has been developed into Ingleby Barwick, the largest housing estate in Europe. Thousands of houses make up the biggest dormitory for the post-industrial service class Western Europe has ever seen. Essentially a commuter town, Ingleby Barwick provides homes for workers in the main centres of the North East and despite the specific designs aimed at fostering a sense of community belonging, a cold hard look at Ingleby Barwick reveals a vacuous place, an endless maze of cul-de-sacs populated by huge swathes of identikit houses. It appears to typify the social isolation suggested by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) as well as many others. As the majority of people work outside of Ingleby Barwick, their homes become somewhere for them to sleep, shower and change before heading off to work again, their neighbours appear as strangers who happen to live next door. Mutuality, shared belonging and understanding have no place in most people's instrumental existence consequently talk of fostering close relationships with neighbours is a frightening prospect for people who have come to lead extremely individualised lives (Bauman, 2006). In this sense, the working class attitude and philosophy highlighted in the previous chapter by the men and women of Eston now face serious competition from hard-edged instrumentalism and individualisation.

At the heart of the town centre lies a shopping centre now called The Mall Middlesbrough, rebranded in 2005 in order to fit in with the new image of an area on the comeback. Traditionally known as, and often still referred to as, The Cleveland Centre, built in 1972, The Mall occupies a 400,000 square foot plot between the main thoroughfares of Linthorpe Road, Corporation Road, Grange Road and Albert Road. The shops were a combination of

national chains such as WH Smith, Boots, British Home Stores and HMV and local enterprises such as tobacconists, watch repairers, pubs and fruit and vegetable shops. By the 1990s, the Cleveland Centre was showing signs of fatigue, like the rest of Middlesbrough. In 2005, The Mall Corporation paid almost £200 million for the centre and immediately refurbished it with the emphasis firmly on creating a centre conducive to consumer spending. Rather than having open areas and communal spaces, as there were in the past, the new design featured three straight arcades, providing a more fluid flow of human traffic with nowhere to stop other than inside the shops. The extra space this created was filled by more big retail outlets such as *H&M*, *George*, *New Look* and *Topshop*. Incidentally, once The Mall Corporation took over, rents went up in the Cleveland Centre, forcing out many of the traditional local retailers in favour of the larger chains. The Mall is undoubtedly the central shopping attraction in the town, although it is not the only shopping centre.

Representing the bland homogenisation of space (Klein, 2000), The Mall today feels more like an American shopping mall designed to induce individuals into spending. The Cleveland Centre seemed to offer more than simply consumption; you would often see people sitting on benches underneath the model of Captain Cook's ship, *The Endeavour*, resting, chatting, or waiting for relatives upstairs at the doctor's surgery. Ultimately, The Cleveland Centre had a local feel and character about it. Now people hurriedly move through the arcade, rarely stopping for anything other than window-shopping whilst cautious security guards eagerly watch groups of teenagers loitering outside *HMV*, office workers on lunch breaks fill up on pasties and sandwiches from *Greggs* and parents with children in pushchairs make their way swiftly towards the lifts leading up to the surgery. All the while, bright fluorescent lights shine down oppressively, illuminating everything like sleep deprivation chambers, non-stop music is pumped through the speakers, punctuated only by the obligatory announcements reminding shoppers to not smoke inside. Once inside The Mall, you could be in any shopping centre in the country, it is effectively what Auge (2009) refers to as a 'non-place'. These spaces are divorced from locality and history, the building no longer has any local character. It is a bland, generic space in which the shopping experience becomes standardised and homogenised for a consumer culture driven by forcing, demanding, and needing consumers to spend (Barber, 2007).

The consumer economy convinces shoppers they can carve out an individual identity by buying off the peg items in *H&M* and *Topshop* that sell by the millions and are mass produced thousands of miles away by the dispossessed of developing countries (Hall et al, 2008). The Mall represents the front line of consumer capitalism at its best (or worst?), identikit shop vistas enticing insecure consumers into ill-fated attempts to satiate their passion for abstract desires generated by a celebrity-driven consumer culture utterly dependent on our inability to satisfy our desires and our constant need to 'stand out' (Rojek, 2001). The explosion of media, consumerism and celebrity transformed traditional notions of 'keeping up with the Jones'' into a quest to emulate millionaire television stars or celebrities, be it David Beckham, Cheryl Cole or whoever the latest flavour of the month is. The desperate state of towns like Middlesbrough becomes all too apparent when a bland, lifeless mausoleum such as The Mall represents the vibrant centre of town. The consumer dreams and desires instilled in consumers by the culture industry find their disappointing outlet in shopping centres devoid of a soul; they become hallucinations of conspicuous consumption and individuality in a homogenised indoor world.

The surrounding streets show clear signs of regeneration, from new pavements with fancy spotlights, stylishly revamped public spaces complete with water features and sculptures, to the attempts at improving the aesthetic features of the local houses by updating and replacing the facades with new, clean brickwork designed to match the spate of new houses springing up around town. Whilst some of the older buildings, thanks to renovation and repackaging, now house shops, bars and businesses, many others suffered demolition and entirely new modern structures stand in their place. All of this gives Middlesbrough a mixed identity, architecturally speaking. The original red brick Victorian buildings are still in evidence in the town centre and beyond, some with modern facades, and some without, whilst there are thoroughly modern buildings, mainly in the university area, 5 minutes' walk from The Mall. The university has been the focal point around much of the rebranding, indeed, as a relatively new university (1992), Middlesbrough is attempting to capitalise on the University of Teesside's growth by transforming large parts into a university town. As a result, seemingly every new business that opens its doors is a pub, bar or restaurant, attempting to cater for the growing number of students living in the town. By the end of 2005, over 20,000 students enrolled on courses at the university, a remarkable achievement given the size of the town itself (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2007). Making Middlesbrough appealing to

students has been a central feature of the Tees Valley regeneration project, and the investment in the university has resulted in a huge regeneration of the area surrounding Southfield Road, Woodlands Road, Borough Road and Linthorpe Road. The spate of new buildings and expanded facilities helped earn the university the 2009 Times Higher Education University of the Year award. Having spent four years at the University of Teesside, I felt that, despite the vast outlay of capital designed to help the university compete with the best and the brightest, that studying here felt like a continuation of school or college, not the introduction to the hallowed halls of intellectual achievement the university is advertised as being.

However, whilst there are clear improvements in some places, it is obvious that there is much still in decline. Moving away from the main roads and the centre itself, into the side streets and the housing estates bordering the town centre and there are clear signs that the regeneration has only gone so far. Middlesbrough has some of the most deprived estates and neighbourhoods in the country (MacDonald and Marsh, 2004; MacDonald et al, 2005). Some roads greet you with an overwhelming number of green metal shutters on the doors and windows signifying the derelict, abandoned state of some of these places, hardly the 'interesting streets' Jacobs (1993) sees as essential to creating an interesting city. Speak to some of the residents and they feel that the abandoned houses are symbolic of abandoned estates, ignored by the local authorities who are concerned with making the central business district attractive to business investors and tourists. Derelict houses not yet boarded up have had the windows smashed, almost par for the course in some areas. While plans are constantly unveiled for regenerating abandoned industrial wasteland, some of the abandoned housing estates are left untouched. The English Indices of Deprivation for 2007 ranked Middlesbrough as one of the most multiply deprived areas in the country. Six areas of Middlesbrough made the top 200 most deprived parts of England whilst the final report found that, 'areas such as Easington, Middlesbrough and Hartlepool in the North East Region have very high levels of multiple deprivation' (Noble et al, 2008: 42). The North East in general has the greatest concentration of deprivation in the country (ibid). Unfortunately, for the town planners, this Middlesbrough gets the publicity. Whilst the image is being polished and upgraded for the twenty-first century, beneath the surface, many of the old problems persist; however, in a world dominated by image, spectacle and appearance (Adorno, 2001; Debord, 1998), it is hardly surprising.

This is the town I live in, the town I grew up in, and crucially, the town in which I based this research project. Over recent years, the local press had regularly published stories about call centre jobs coming to the region, whilst adverts began appearing everywhere for call centres looking to attract young men and women to their companies. In fact, it has become typical for everyone in the local area to know somebody who works in a call centre. Whether this is apocryphal or not is hard to establish, however, before undertaking this research, I knew people in several call centres in Middlesbrough and I came across very few people who did not know anyone who either worked or had previously worked in a call centre. This made the potential study of call centres intriguing to me, given that so many people seemed to be engaged in this new form of service work. Especially given that many of the people I talked to did not have a very high opinion of the job itself. Having introduced the research location, the next chapters will begin the focus on call centres. In particular, chapter three concentrates on the process of getting a job in a call centre and what that process entails.

## CHAPTER THREE

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“Without a compelling cause, our employees are just putting in time. Their minds might be engaged, but their hearts are not.”

- Lee J. Colan, *7 Moments that Define Excellent Leaders*

This chapter will begin our focus on call centres, particularly the call centre at the heart of this research project. Call Direct is an outsource call centre operation in Middlesbrough, although the company also has sites in other locations across the South West of England and Scotland. Having been in existence as an outsource call centre since the 1990s, Call Direct has gradually built up a glowing reputation within the service industry whilst simultaneously garnering an unflattering reputation as an employer among many people in the local area. As an outsource call centre, Call Direct provides the facilities, equipment and staff for larger companies who contract out their call centre operations to private companies (Kinnie et al, 2008). This is supposed to provide the most cost-effective and efficient way for companies to maximise profits (Sennett, 1999). Rather than offering new skills or expertise, or even an innovative new approach or product, outsourced call centres' contribution to the market involves promoting their 'talent' for providing adequate numbers of workers who are capable of fulfilling the demands of the contract at very low costs (Taylor and Bain, 2005). Given the competitive nature of the market, outsourced call centres have to offer efficiency and cost-effectiveness if they are to be rewarded with the lucrative contracts available in the market place (Kinnie et al, 2008). Under this sort of pressure, outsourced call centres such as Call Direct have to meet many demands from the contract and therefore this pressure reflects in the recruitment of, and attitude toward, new employees. The following discussion will concentrate on the process of getting a job in a call centre and the training process that new recruits are subjected to in order to prepare them for life 'on the floor'.

Call Direct has been operating as a call centre in the Teesside area since the late 1990's and by 2008 the company operated across several sites in the North East as well as sites in Scotland and the South West of England, although their operation had been scaled back as a result of the recession. I first became aware of the company around 2002 primarily through their recruitment strategy of blanketing the local media with adverts, posters and billboards

offering employment opportunities and a friendly, dynamic working environment. As one of the UK's largest customer contact outsourcer in terms of staff numbers, the recruitment drive appears to have worked. What this chapter intends to demonstrate is that whilst the company is more than adept at recruiting staff, retaining staff is a much harder task.

Turnover of staff is one of the biggest problems facing many call centres in the UK and elsewhere (Deery et al, 2002; Robinson and Morley, 2006). Call Direct had a notorious reputation on Teesside for turnover and the time spent on this research project only reinforced this. Amongst the mass of documentation handed out to new recruits on their first day, one document stated that one of the key aims for Call Direct was to reduce staff turnover (or attrition, as they labelled it) by 22% and reduce absence by 6% over the year. To counter labour market pressure and high rates of attrition, call centres such as Call Direct are forced continually into developing innovative recruitment strategies or simply employing an unusually high percentage of those who apply for jobs (Taylor and Bain, 1999: 111; also Robinson and Morley, 2006; Townsend, 2007). This is essential for the company to survive.

Given the industry-wide problem with staff turnover, ensuring their ability to deal with such high turnover and continue to handle client demands, the company has to put considerable effort into recruitment. High turnover is an unavoidable factor in service sector work in general and outsourced call centres in particular given their basic function is to shoulder an enormous workload for minimum costs: employees are expected to work incredibly hard for little wages or reward (Taylor and Bain, 2005; see also Toynbee, 2003). Many call centres adopt a 'sacrificial' policy whereby they accept high levels of turnover given the high-pressure environment they operate in (Wallace et al, 2000). As long as there is a surplus supply of labour, as there is in Middlesbrough, employee withdrawal is less of a problem for companies who are therefore under little or no obligation to curb the level of work intensification or adopt employee-friendly management strategies (Deery et al, 2002). As Braverman (1998: 264) noted, 'the mechanisation of industry produces a relative surplus of population available for employment at the lower pay rates that characterise these new mass occupations'. Call centres undeniably rely on this surplus labour given that some call centres experience turnover rates as high as 30% annually (Taylor and Bain, 1999). We will return to turnover rates later in the chapter.

As the previous chapters have highlighted, Middlesbrough and the North East in general has undergone rapid social and economic upheaval resulting in low local investment, low employment levels, and few opportunities for young people. The availability of labour on a large scale has made the North East a prime location for huge investment by the service sector, taking advantage of financial incentives and an abundant labour supply (Richardson and Belt, 2001; Richardson, Belt and Marshall, 2000).

My introduction to the world of call centre work was quick, easy and painless; the passage between walking through the door for the first time to receiving a job offer took no more than 45 minutes. The Call Direct offices are located outside the centre of Middlesbrough, within walking distance of the town centre, in the heart of the regeneration effort taking place along the riverside. From the outside, the building is one of a number of identical office buildings, all self enclosed by their own car parks, with enough distance between buildings to ensure workers from different buildings never have to meet, bordered by the only road in and out thus causing traffic problems on mornings and evenings. Inside, the reception area is large, maybe 30 feet across and at least 60 feet from the front door to the lifts on the far side, with the security desk to the right of the turnstiles and several large black leather settees around a coffee table in front of the security desk. The walls are decorated in black and white faux-marble, while giant green plants attempt to make the reception area appear more colourful, although instead it seems dark, dingy, and somewhat unwelcoming.

The first person I encountered on my initial visit to Call Direct was a security guard, sitting behind the desk engrossed in his copy of *The Sun*. Around 40 years old, slightly built and of average height, the guard seemed very bored and barely paid any attention to me as I approached and explained why I was there. Having seemingly suffered through this same conversation a thousand times, the guard unenthusiastically explained recruitment was on the fourth floor and pointed to the lifts. The recruitment offices on the fourth floor were accessed through a bland corridor illuminated by the artificial neon lights emanating from the strip-lights on the ceiling. To the left and right were security doors; the door to the right had the Call Direct sign above it so I headed to that door. When I arrived at this door, the young man who opened it looked no older than me, early 20s, dressed casually in a t-shirt and jeans. I told him I had an appointment and, with a smile, he invited me into the room.

The main area of the recruitment office was a large, open plan room that was very light and cool courtesy of the air conditioning, although thankfully it was not as cold as it was outside. To the left were a dozen really bright and comfortable looking chairs and settees, made even more colourful when offset against the dull, mundane whiteness of the walls and ceiling. The room looked like any standard office anywhere in the country, totally unremarkable and devoid of character. In the middle of the room, directly in front of the door sat a long desk used by the recruitment team, whilst to the right was a large oval shaped table divided into 12 individual workstations. Further right from that table was a glass partition and door that concealed what appeared to be more anaemic-looking corridors and offices. The windows on the floor were full length, floor to ceiling, and despite the blinds, offered an elevated view of Middlesbrough's post-industrial cityscape.

As I walked towards the desk in the middle of the room, there were three men working, all early to mid 20s, dressed casually in jeans and t-shirts and only identifiable from the security passes hanging from their belts. One of them sat at the desk very bored looking, whilst one kept wandering back and forth, in and out of the offices on the far side. There were two young women sitting around the oval table, both dressed casually, filling out application forms. Neither of them appeared to be more than 20 years old.

I was given an application form and asked to sit at the large table and fill it out which did not take long. The forms were all standard material, personal information, education and employment history. As I sat there, three more people came in and joined me around the table. The two Asian men who sat on my left both seemed to be in their early 20s while the young woman who sat to my right looked like she had just left school. The partitions on the desk were shoulder-high, so while I was sitting down, I could not really make out much more than that, in fact only their head and shoulders were visible over the partition.

When I finished the form, the eldest of the three recruitment workers (none of them wore name badges or introduced themselves to me so I was left calling them 'mate' all the time, and although my name was written across the top of the form in his hand, he kept calling me 'mate' as well) asked me if I had time to sit an assessment which, having overheard a conversation which he had with one of the women sitting around the table, I knew would take no more than half an hour. He gave me the test and a calculator, told me there was no time

limit and left me to it. When he left me, I overheard him tell one of the women she had not passed the assessment but, from what I could gather, he was giving her a second chance.

The first page of the assessment consisted of 10 mathematical questions, relatively basic things involving adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing, all along the theme of working out how much a customer would have to pay or how much they would save. The second page involved a spelling test, 3 spellings of words like 'successful' and 'necessary' with the aim being to choose the correct spelling. The final page contained a paragraph with 20 grammatical and punctuation errors, again the task being to locate the mistakes. Overall, the 3 pages took no more than 15 minutes to complete. The final page asked 8 questions, including things like, 'what is a modem?' 'what is broadband?' and 'what does www stand for?' All through the assessment the internal radio station piped music into the room. It seemed like the music and soft furnishings were part of a deliberate plan to soften the sharp edges to their approach to labour relations. However, Madness, Simon and Garfunkel, Girls Aloud and Whitney Houston all failed to enliven the morgue-like atmosphere in the office.

Having completed the assessment, I handed it back to the man who gave it to me, from the way the other two talked to him, I assumed that he was in charge, and he took it away to mark it. He came back over a couple of minutes later and informed me, much to my relief, that I had passed and just required an interview. Given the turnover rates that the company reportedly have, the test seemed a waste of time because, as in the case of the young woman who sat her test before me, she failed but she was shown where she went wrong on her test and then given another chance. It seemed that they were more interested in making sure she passed the test than ensuring they hired someone capable of doing the job. This was the first glimpse afforded to me of the bureaucratic machinery in place at Call Direct; rather than weeding out those without the skills or ability to do the job, the recruitment team made sure everyone sat the test, then ensured everyone passed it simply so they could say that the new recruits had completed the test before being interviewed.

Directed to the comfortable looking settees on the left hand side of the room, I sat and waited. All of the walls were decorated with slogans and phrases such as 'passion for service', which turned out to be the brand values of the company. Perhaps by painting them on the walls, they hoped that the staff would see them every day and eventually learn and embrace them.

There was a group sitting in the far corner of the room who I had not noticed before, all drinking coffee and making notes. I assumed they all worked there and were in a meeting, but I was too far away to hear what they were discussing so I took advantage of the view from the window again and looked out at the town for five minutes. While I waited Robbie Williams, Shakira and Westlife punctuated the boredom and the silence in the room.

The young man I met when I came in walked over and took me through the security doors to the left into what looked like a large office full of tables and computers although there appeared hardly anyone working. He then directed me into a small side office with a table and 4 comfortable chairs. The office was like the main room, light and plain, white walls, blue carpet and the ubiquitous strip lights on the ceiling, as per any standard office. His name was Joe and he was 23 years old. He had previously worked on the call centre floor as an agent but transferred to the recruitment team a few months previously. He was quiet, but he did not strike me as shy, instead he seemed used to the routine of his everyday task and got on with it simply and without making too much fuss. It was his job to interview prospective employees and from his manner and demeanour throughout the interview, it seemed he had done it enough times to be comfortable with the process.

He conducted the interview on his own, asking me basic questions from a prepared sheet. From walking in the front door, the whole experience had seemed relaxed and laid back; it had not felt like I was applying for a job and I had not felt nervous, a response common to many in my sample. The interview was no exception: I think because the questions were basic and Joe seemed friendly and relaxed, I was not at all worried. He did not press me for answers but then the questions were not difficult. He asked me what my interests were, what I thought my strengths and weaknesses were, if I could I think of any stressful experiences in my current job and why I wanted to leave the job I had. It could not have lasted any more than about 5 minutes.

When he finished filling in his form he disappeared for a couple of minutes, returned and asked if I could start a week on Monday. He explained there were two offers, both for Internet Plus broadband: the first was as a customer support agent, starting a week on Monday, or as a technical support agent, starting in 3 weeks. Keen to get my research underway and conscious of my lack of technical knowledge when it comes to computers and

the internet, I chose the customer support job starting a week on Monday. He then told me I would need to come back for a second interview, really only to sort out my shifts and show me around. We arranged that interview for the following week and then he asked if I had any questions. The only one I had was regarding my salary, which I found out was £5.13 an hour. Working 37.5 hours a week would net me just over £10,000 a year. I thanked him and was left to find my own way out of the building. As I hit the biting January air, I thought about just how easy it had been to get through the recruitment stage, less than an hour after coming in off the streets I was on my way to becoming a call centre worker.

Getting through the recruitment stage had been so straightforward I was actually taken by surprise. Through my research, I learned that this was common practice and that I was not the only person surprised by the ease in which they found themselves employed at Call Direct. Fred, 22, worked on the same team as me for a while and turned out to be a useful contact:

‘I literally walked in off the street, filled in an application form for Internet Plus, which, I’ll be honest, I did pretty bad in one section, it was like top marks on them all except for one section so she just pointed out where I could improve. I handed that in, waited like, two minutes, did an interview and had a job! I think it was like, the Thursday when I got the job and Monday I turned up for work and started my training. It literally is just walk in and you’ve got a job! At the same time they hired me, they hired this old bloke with two hearing aids and [he] tried to use a mouse like a remote control, which is fair enough if you’ve never used a computer before, but they tried to train him for tech support! They’re not really picky about who they sign up!’

While it was apparent that many recruits were unable to meet the demands that the company set in terms of possessing the adequate skills to do the job, the pressure over targets and fulfilling their contractual obligations meant that they could not afford to choose only the most suitable candidates. The overall recruitment strategy seemed to revolve around ‘quantity over quality’. Townsend (2007: 478) rightly states that the recruitment team hold a vital position in the call centre operation as they act as gatekeepers. Furthermore, their role appears to be twofold; ‘the gatekeeper must be sure to allow the right people in, but also, to

ensure the wrong people are kept out' (ibid). Whilst Townsend is certainly correct in the importance of the role of gatekeeper, in practice, at least at Call Direct, ensuring sufficient numbers are recruited appears to be most important. All of my respondents admitted that they found the recruitment stage easy and straightforward. Liam was 23 and although he worked on a different contract for Call Direct, he had undergone a similar interview process. He had recently finished university and saw his employment at Call Direct as temporary while he attempted to enter his preferred profession, teaching. Having known him prior to undertaking my research, he was happy to be involved in this project and offered some keen insights:

“I had friends who worked there at the time so I just went in, did a brief assessment which wasn't difficult, they gave you the interview, asked you a few open questions then they gave me a ring. That was the Monday and I started on the Friday... Certainly in terms of job interviews I've done before for more long term jobs, in terms of where they are trying to get you to show how you will fulfil the role and what you can bring to the company, well, its less strenuous.”

Townsend (2007) argues that employees in call centres face intensive recruitment and training in order to deselect those inappropriate for the job and retaining only those who have the skills and values necessary for call centre work. Indeed, across much of the call centre literature which focuses on recruitment, there is a consensus that potential employees undergo a rigorous selection and training process before being let loose on the call centre floor (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Frenkel et al, 1998; Korczynski et al, 2000). However, from my research, it appears as though Call Direct do not conform to this strategy, instead concentrating on ensuring sufficient numbers are recruited, regardless of skills or values and, whilst the training programme will be discussed in detail later in the chapter, it did not match up with the existing descriptions of call centre training and seemed relatively brief in comparison. Interestingly, by late 2008, as the economic downturn had taken affect, I learned that Call Direct had become much more stringent in its recruitment policies, ensuring only quality candidates were hired, then, as the recession bit harder, recruitment stopped altogether. One of my respondents, Zoe, was 28 and had been at Call Direct for 5 years and had recently left when I interviewed her in late 2008. She highlighted the new ethos in recruitment:

A- Well, I have, all my friends work on recruitment and it's changed now. You have to do your normal assessments, you have to do a normal interview, your second interview, then you have a typing test, a listening test, another test, there's loads of extra things you have to do now. It is better cos I know my cousin and her fiancé were down a couple of weeks ago and they had interviews. My cousin passed but her fiancé failed because he was two words short on the typing test. You had to type so many words in a minute and he was two words short. They had two practice goes and he just got through on the practice one but he was two words short on the main one so they failed him. He has to wait six months before he can apply again. So it's changed a lot.

Q – So they're a lot more selective about who they take on now?

A – They are yeah. At the beginning it was just anyone who wanted a job really, it didn't matter whether you passed or failed.

Another of my respondents, Ben, had to go through these new tests in order to get a job with Call Direct and he seemingly contradicted some of Zoe's claims about a new stringency in the recruitment process:

Q – What were the tests like?

A – Pretty easy really. The first one I did was a typing test, obviously you have wrap time after calls don't you, so you've got to get all your notes down in less than two minutes so they time you. You get a percentage for your grammar, which isn't really massively looked at, it's just the speed of your typing. Then you did a phone test to see how you manage all right and how you listen on the phone. Pretty basic tests really.

Although Call Direct implemented new tests in the recruitment process, these trials were not 'harder' than previous methods, instead they were directed more efficiently at the skills required to do the job.

### *Staff Turnover*

As noted earlier, turnover rates are notoriously high within the call centre industry and several studies have attempted to address the question of why so many people leave call centre employment (Deery et al, 2002; Mulholland, 2004; Robinson and Morley, 2006). Firstly, it is widely understood that call centre work can be demanding mentally and emotionally (Witt et al, 2004), leading to high levels of stress and job dissatisfaction (Deery et al, 2002; Rose and Wright, 2005). Under these sorts of conditions employee withdrawal is a regular feature of the call centre environment and one that is factored into the organization and work process of many companies, including Call Direct; they know people are likely to leave and therefore prepare contingencies to deal with it when it occurs. Deery et al (2002) concluded that the speed and pace of work were crucial in understanding levels of emotional burnout and employee withdrawal, meanwhile Mulholland (2004) argued that high levels of stress brought on by work intensification led to resignation. Wegge et al (2006) argue that employee well-being and satisfaction is diminished when they lack control and autonomy in the workplace, causing negative attitudes towards the company to emerge and, as Holman (2003) suggests, low employee well-being is a factor in high rates of turnover.

Call centres generally operate using Taylorist principles of scientific management, which include simplifying the work process into basic tasks, dividing the labour force up to deal with specific functions, and management controlling the pace of work (Braverman, 1998). Even in his own experiments, F.W. Taylor accepted that, despite setting the work pace to a level achievable by certain individuals, not all employees would be capable of maintaining such a level (ibid). In one example, Taylor set the piece rate so high that only one in eight pig iron loaders could meet the demand prompting Taylor to fire those who failed and replace them with far fewer 'first class men' (Morris, 2005: 301). In this sense, the speed of work expected under scientific management schemes is fundamentally flawed when dealing with a large workforce who, in many cases, cannot comfortably keep up with the expected pace. As Deery et al (2002) and Mulholland (2004) identify, many employees suffer exhaustion, burnout, stress and dissatisfaction when their work pace is dictated to them and they have no control of it. The inescapable truth about call centre work is that the job itself is very hard. The workplace environment may be styled as nice and friendly, the furnishings and decoration designed to relax employees, yet it is still a very demanding job and therefore not surprising that some choose to leave rather than stay and face the daily rigours of the job.

The relaxed informality of the call centre floor may seem appealing at first glance, however on closer inspection there is still a rigid structure in place determining the pace of work, controlling the employees' movement, reducing autonomy and increasing levels of stress and burnout. In this sense, we can postulate that high turnover rates resulting from burnout and stress are a built in feature of contemporary scientific management strategies.

During the 6 months I spent working at Call Direct, many people came and went. It appeared as though the workforce separated into two groups, those who saw a long-term investment in their job and had been there for more than 12 months and those who saw it as a temporary measure and were actively looking for a way out. Many did leave during my employment with the company. Leaving Call Direct never occurred in a uniform fashion as people left in a variety of ways for many different reasons although most of those who left, or were fired, ultimately admitted that they were sick of their job and were looking for a way out. Ollie, who started on the same day as me, was 19 at the time and was openly hostile to the management and team leaders and had lost all interest in doing his job properly by the time he was 'released from his probation' (company-speak for being fired) after several disciplinary problems. Just after he left, I wrote in my field notes:

'In all honesty, it hasn't come as any great surprise. His attitude, regardless of whether it is flawed or wrong, quite simply didn't fit into the structure of the company and it was a marriage destined to fail. I've lost count of the times he has sat next to me and said, 'No, I aint doin' that fuckin' shit', or 'nah, they can't make us do that, I don't fuckin' care what they say'. None of us appear to like the job we do, however, the majority of people tend to keep their heads down and get on with it. Most people have the attitude that the job is only there for the purpose of earning money so there is no point in getting worked up over anything (not that it stops anyone; ask many of the staff what they think of the place and the answer will usually start with 'it's fucking shit'). However, Ollie can't keep his mouth shut and it has gotten him in trouble right from the start, and ultimately cost him his job.'

Ollie was an interesting case and raised important theoretical issues concerning individual attitudes and fitting into the corporate structure. However, his attitude and behaviour by the

end of his employment was indicative of a wider culture whereby agents who were generally apathetic to begin with, seemingly pass through a barrier towards a fatalism which results in them essentially giving up any remaining loyalty or dedication to their work and slowly, or in some cases very quickly, find themselves on a path out the door, either by choice or by management design. Chapter 4 will discuss the management practices at Call Direct and consider whether the management strategy affects the individual agents attitudes although it is important to note that when an agent ‘gives up’, the management seem to have little interest or resource to turn them around. As Sally, a 21 year old former team member of mine, explained:

‘They’ve got such a high turnover of staff, they know that if one leaves they’ll get someone in. You only need a basic level of knowledge of computers. If they had a higher level of staff, if they chose the right people in the first place, who they know’ll be committed, then it would be different, they could pay higher, there’d be less people pulling sickies all the time and then the staff would get more respect. This place is just like a school though.’

Sally felt that the impersonal management style affected not only turnover rates but employee morale as well. All the staff, according to Sally, were well aware that they were expendable, that the managers would not fight to save them, and that someone else could replace them almost immediately. Given that the job itself created high demands and levels of stress, this combined with the management attitude led many CSRs (Customer Service Representatives) to walk away from the company.

There appears to be a debate as to whether high turnover rates are an unavoidable product of the intense, stress-laden work faced by CSRs (Taylor and Bain, 1999) or whether high turnover rates are actively incorporated into the work strategy in a ‘sacrificial’ manner (Wallace et al, 2000). Whilst most call centre studies have shown management to be aware of and concerned over high turnover rates (see Houlihan, 2002), Wallace et al (2000: 179) reported that high turnover was built into the HR strategy, arguing, ‘there was a clear understanding of the savings that could be gained by turning over burnt-out staff than investing in programmes targeting moral, commitment and enthusiasm’. Just as insightful, they go on to argue that ‘by accepting burnout and high turnover, there is a reduced need for

the organisation to manage the emotional labour'. In effect, the management strategy implied by Wallace et al removes the burden of responsibility for stress and emotional labour from the management and lets it rest solely with the CSRs. It became cost effective and less time consuming for the management as they have no incentive to encourage agents or help them develop, they are expected to leave relatively quickly and are replaced very easily therefore management is not required to invest too much in its new employees.

Tuten and Neidermeyer (2004) suggest that positive job satisfaction decreases one's intent to turnover, therefore stress directly relates to job satisfaction and turnover. If we are to believe Wallace et al, then call centre management have no concern for job satisfaction and strictly focus upon efficiency and competitiveness in the market place. By acknowledging that stress and burnout brought upon by intense, harsh work regimes leads to dissatisfaction and turnover, call centre management have two choices; invest in programmes to help CSRs and relieve their stress and emotional burdens, or accept high turnover as a side-effect of the job and be prepared to lose a significant proportion of staff. Given Richardson, Belt and Marshall's (2000) argument that call centres are deliberately located in areas with a large surplus supply of cheap, available labour, then it would appear as though many call centres accept high turnover as a fact of life and actively plan and prepare a management strategy that allows for higher than average rates of turnover. Houlihan (2002: 68) agrees, believing that 'rather than compromising between efficiency and service, they relied on the goodwill and enthusiasm of employees and the reality that stress and burnout could be absorbed by a ready labour market and 'turnover proof' job design'. Effectively, call centre managers expect employees to sacrifice their enthusiasm and passion for service in an oppressive working environment, safe in the knowledge that they can replace burnt out CSRs easily. This is particularly true in times of economic downturn as employees are more likely to put up with the negative aspects of a job rather than facing unemployment. In Middlesbrough, the availability of jobs plummeted in the wake of the recession leaving many to accept their lot and continue in their current occupation. This corresponds with what Cross et al (2008) term the 'transactional contract' where the employee's role is not essential to the organization. When employers know their employees are expendable, they offer little commitment to them, resulting in little commitment in return from employees. As the psychological contract between employer and employee rests on very low levels of

commitment, employee well-being and satisfaction is likely to be low and therefore conducive to higher levels of turnover.

Call Direct appear to subscribe to this philosophy. Middlesbrough provided a large supply of available labour ready and waiting to step in regardless of the negative image Call Direct had, therefore the company felt no compulsion toward actively encouraging CSRs to stay. Liam, who we met earlier, offered an insightful opinion as to why Call Direct had such high turnover rates:

‘I think it’s just the level of the work you are doing. As you’ve said it is quite monotonous, repetitive, its tedious, it doesn’t give you a great deal of flexibility in what you actually want to do and the time, and I think, generally with the people that are doing it, the people they target to come and work there don’t have a great deal of commitment or attitude towards doing the job so it is a combination of the job itself and the people they do attract. It does lead to the high turnover. People like you and me who have stayed there for a few months doing the job, even though we’ve hated every other minute of it, we do think that I have made a commitment to this company and they are paying me so I’ll just get on and do it whereas some people say after a fortnight or whatever, ‘I can’t be bothered with this, I’m going.’ I think as well, the lack of general organisation and level of care that they show to the employees has got to have something to do with the high turnover rates as you wouldn’t necessarily leave a job on the spot where you feel valued.’

Liam rightly pointed out several reasons for the high turnover rates but did not lapse into the usual response of blaming the company as being entirely responsible, he argued that the employees were at times to blame for their behaviour. As Houlihan (2000: 238) indicated, CSRs are engaged in very specific and restrictive routines and tasks, which Liam felt were part of the problem. Interestingly, his comments regarding the type of people employed by the company raises issues regarding the recruitment strategy we discussed earlier. His opinions seemed to back up my findings that, rather than acting as a gatekeeper who should be spotting the potential talent and discarding the unsuitable recruits, the recruitment team at Call Direct concentrated more on bringing in sufficient numbers to cover their requirements

that led to problems further down the line. Finally, Liam touched on the point made by Wallace et al (2000) when he argued that the level of care by the management towards employees is so low that staff do not feel valued and have no interest in staying. When the work process leaves many stressed and feeling no satisfaction from their work (Holdsworth and Cartwright, 2003) and the management staff make little or no effort to care for their employees and make them feel valued (Wallace et al, 2000), then high turnover is inevitable. When this is the case, it becomes good business sense to factor high turnover into the organisation and management strategy.

Where traditionally responsibility for employees' well-being fell on the employer, neoliberal market logic has reversed this and placed all responsibility on the employee (Wallace et al, 2000). One of the central pillars of neoliberalism, individual responsibility has clearly seeped into the workplace, agents are deliberately provided with little or no support and expected to either offset the stress and emotional burnout with their 'passion for service' (ibid), or walk away from the company. When the labour market becomes structured to favour short-term, flexible working patterns over long term career narratives (Sennett, 1999: 122), companies seeking to get ahead of the curve and compete in an incredibly unstable market place clearly see an advantage in high turnover rates, whether it be directly promoted and built into their organisation strategy or simply through their indifference toward any effort at retaining staff. Call Direct grudgingly accepted their inability to retain staff and built it into their business plan, however it was seen as an individual failing on the part of the employee rather than a fault of managerial tactics or the parameters of the service sector overall.

What this clearly shows is a management strategy and attitude infused with hard-edged market-based neoliberal principles of cost-effectiveness, efficiency and competition (Harvey, 2005). As a system, capitalism sees people as resources and works to its own advantage, blindly following its own self interest. With capital no longer needing to rely on labour in order to accumulate, employers and employees alike become dehumanised through capitalism's incessant need to accumulate and grow. Employers incorporate high turnover into their business plan because scientific management and inflexible assembly line-style work processes lead to higher levels of productivity, and therefore higher accumulation of capital, than more flexible, employee-friendly practices that reduce stress and burnout. When the system is specifically designed to promote the accumulation of capital ahead of looking

after its subjects it highlights the exploitative nature of liberal capitalism meekly accepted by everyone because it happens to be ‘less worse’ than other systems of governance. According to Žižek (2000; 2002) and Badiou (2000), regarding liberal democracy as ‘the least worst’ system of governance available, it indicates an inherently evil nature of contemporary liberal democracy. For all the talk of freedom and flexibility, liberal democracy subordinates the welfare of its subjects to the demands of capital, thus creating the conditions such as those on display in modern call centres. Despite the relaxed informality of the call centre floor, the soft furnishings and the casual clothing on ‘dress down’ days as opposed to formal office attire, the underlying structure of the call centre is geared solely towards efficiency, targets and productivity; the work process disregards employee well-being, the pursuit of profit takes priority over everything. The raw brutality of capital and oppressive management practices produce an alienated workforce on par with any workplace analysed during industrial modernity. Whilst many may argue that working in a call centre is not as bad as some forms of employment during industrial modernity, the alienation, anxiety, stress and insecurity generated by the naked and relentless pursuit of capital indicates that things are just as bad in the new economy. Also, during industrial modernity, exploitation of this kind was generally countered or tempered by a grounded sense of place, community or togetherness. These things are missing in contemporary society thus making exploitation in the workplace much more sharply felt.

### *Training*

In this section, the focus is upon the training programme employed by Call Direct. In Townsend’s study of recruitment and training (2007: 477), he describes the most common methods of training used in call centres as including ‘basic contextual knowledge of company products, computer systems and company policies. In addition, there is often an initial process of ‘buddying’ where an experienced employee is placed with an inexperienced staff member’. The research conducted in this study broadly agrees with this assessment of call centre training. The training programme at Call Direct lasted 5 weeks and was broken down into two sections, firstly 3 weeks of training aimed at inculcating company values, improving product knowledge and computer systems training, and learning the call structure. The final 2 weeks were spent in an ‘academy’ where new recruits were allowed to take calls but have the safety net of ‘floor walkers’, two or three experienced agents who could advise the new CSRs and even take over the call if necessary. After this 2 week placement in the ‘academy’,

agents were placed in the available positions in existing teams and went 'live' on the call centre floor, essentially left to their own devices without the safety net of the 'academy'. After 5 weeks training, agents were ready to 'go live' or felt to be unsuitable for call centre work and released from their probationary period.

Of the 18 new recruits in my training group, 2 left before the 2 weeks of 'academy' training whilst 4 more people left within 2 days of starting on the academy. It became apparent very quickly after starting on the academy that the 3 weeks training we had undertaken did little to prepare us for life on the call centre floor. Having spent only one brief period buddying with an experienced agent, being turned loose on the 'phones, even with the assistance of floor walkers, was a nerve-racking experience for everyone, leading some to decide very quickly that they were not cut out for dealing with customers in a call centre environment and walking away from the company. After an inadequate training period, those of us who went 'live' were truly in a position of sink or swim; get used to the demands of the job as soon as possible or look for another line of work.

During the training process, there were several exercises that required us to adopt the role of the customer and, as Korczynski et al (2000: 676) explain, generate suggestions that provide an understanding of the attributes we should show in our work on the 'phones. These exercises included recalling situations when we needed to contact a call centre and either received bad service or received a good service. As a group, we would discuss why the service was good or bad and what the agent could have done to improve the customer experience for us. We also listened to tape recordings of calls from Call Direct agents and had to fill in the same call monitoring sheets (see Appendix 1) that, later on in our employment, became very familiar as our team leaders graded our own calls. By analysing calls and determining what the agent did right or wrong from the customers' point of view, we began to learn good and bad behaviours for when we went 'live'. We also underwent assessments and marked exercises, usually at the end of the week or the start of a new week, in the form of role-plays or written tests in order to see how much we had learned and to make sure we were ready for the next step in the training programme.

The first day of the last week of training was assessment day. At least that was how it felt. We were to have a 45 minute written assessment and another role-play. Looking around at

my new co-workers, I could see that many of them could not be bothered today. Personally, my throat was sore, I felt like I was coming down with a cold. The last thing anyone wanted to be doing was tests and role-plays. Last week had proven how easy the role-plays were, I got 100% for mine and even Peter got 100% after he had sworn in the middle of his role-play. Only a couple of the group failed to reach the 80% pass mark and they had all done a successful re-sit on Friday night after the rest of us had finished and gone to the pub.

There was a quick revision session on the morning, John shouting out random questions to people about what we had covered in the last few days. “What do you do if someone hasn’t got all the equipment in their starter pack?”; “What does a filter do?”; “What is a modem?” Annoyingly, John called on me to do a role-play in front of the whole group. I started with, “Welcome to Internet Plus customer support, how can I help?” We ran through the various ways you can register with Internet Plus – online, over the phone and with a registration CD. I used the standard ‘close’ and received a round of applause by the rest of the group.

After the revision session, we moved around so we had a computer each, rather than sharing. John handed out the 3 page assessment with instruction to use any of the computer systems we had learned in the last few weeks and answer all of the questions in 45 minutes. The first page was not difficult; I worked through the questions in no time at all. The second and third page was a bit trickier, requiring me to look around the systems to find some information. I had difficulty with some of them, time was starting to run out and I had to use all the systems knowledge I had acquired in order to find an answer for some of them.

When we finished we went for a 15 minute break and it was interesting to hear everyone else worry about how badly they had done. “I didn’t answer all the questions” was one of the comments I heard during our break. It sounded like we were back at school, panicking about our examinations, worrying about the answers we had given or whether we got enough right answers to reach the 80% pass mark. By the time we reached the afternoon, it was time for the second round of role-plays. Having already performed one, there should not have been any nerves, however, the fact that this role play was problem solving rather than the registration role-plays from last week, many of the people in the group were feeling anxious about how this would go.

While we waited for our turn, Jack, Wayne, Peter and I practised role-plays in our little group although this did not last too long. After a little while, we were bored of practising as we all agreed we knew enough to get through it. Instead of revising, we sat around and talked instead. It was interesting because I got an insight into their thinking about getting started on the `phones. Because we were planning to do these role-plays, finding information on all of the different systems we have to use, and dealing with calls and the unexpected and unprepared nature of dealing with customer problems, the people around me were very nervous about getting started on the `phones. Peter was 19 years old, short and slim with fairly long blond hair spiked up at the front. He had just finished college and was hoping to make it in music although his band had recently split up and he was struggling to get going again. Our little group had formed early on in training; sitting near each other for the last 2 weeks had meant we were all reasonably friendly with each other. Peter captured the mood in a nutshell. Everyone agreed with him when he said, "I was thinking last night about this job and I can't believe we're doing a job where we are actually scared of the job itself. Getting on them `phones is a terrifying idea, I don't think I can manage it all day every day." As everyone agreed with him, I had no doubt that for this group of young men, fresh out of college or lacking the further education to move up the job ladder, this job was nothing more than a way of making money. This was not a calling or a career option, nor did the job have any particular meaning in terms of helping build an individual's identity.

By the time it was my turn, I was quietly confident that I knew my stuff. Sticking to the preferred call structure was the first thing on my mind, I thought this was the best thing to remember as I would pick up most of the marks on the assessment for the call structure – fitting the role play into the structure was what I would have to do when I got on the `phones. The role-play I was given involved me dealing with an inquiry about ordering extra filters for a customer's broadband package. I started the call correctly, following the structure as I had planned, asking questions to find out how many filters the customer needed, and ordering the product before closing the call correctly. It went fine, although John needed to ask me how much the extra filter would cost – I had forgotten to tell him how much the filter cost. After it was over, John said it went well although I told him I knew where I had gone wrong. He said I was probably right but it was still good nonetheless. When everyone had finished, we were finished for the day and John told us we would get our results tomorrow.

This excerpt captures the main method used at Call Direct; bombard the new CSRs with information for several days and then test them. Given that the generally accepted skill sets needed for call centre work are computer-related skills, social interaction, and product or service knowledge (Batt et al, 2003: 16), the training at Call Direct attempted to cover these requirements. However, as the training period only lasted 3 weeks it was difficult to devote any meaningful time to key areas of training, resulting in us often skipping over things or rushing through without proper time for information to sink in. The end result, unsurprisingly, was that CSRs panicked about the assessments during training, as Peter's comments above show, and when it came time to 'go live' on the `phones, many felt ill-equipped to cope and left. Only one week after Peter commented about 'being scared of doing the job', he left Call Direct, having spent a single day taking calls in the academy.

Miozzo and Ramirez (2003) discuss how call centre operations divide into low and high skill requirements. Low skill requirements can be taught quickly whereas product innovation and technological change requires more multi-skilling therefore encouraging management to invest time and effort in training is vital for these CSRs. The CSRs at Call Direct must fall into the high skill category given the need to keep up to date with technological change and product innovation within broadband, internet, and computer industries. Whilst many might argue that 'only' dealing with registration or billing queries is not high skill, the training necessary to understand the relevant computer systems, products, and contractual terms and conditions ensures that CSRs must be 'multi-skilled' as Miozzo and Ramirez suggest. Lloyd and Payne (2009) suggest that the form of work undertaken in call centres fails to fit into the current definition of 'skilled work' because the call centre workers in their study focused more on common sense and repetition as being crucial to their job. A high level of systems training, product knowledge, and communication skills are necessary, as well as the employment of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003), therefore whilst some call centre workers might not think themselves skilled, inadequate training would quickly render a new CSR out of his or her depth on the call centre floor. However, Call Direct did not allow the time for sufficient training to ensure each CSR was equipped with the necessary skills to do the job adequately. The high turnover mentioned earlier is one big reason why Call Direct cannot afford lengthy training programmes; CSRs are needed answering `phones as quickly as possible.

Many call centre researchers have discussed the use of on-screen prompts that inform CSRs of the procedures they need to use for particular issues and the deals and offers they can promote to customers, thus making the work process easier as CSRs are essentially reduced to reading off a screen (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Taylor et al, 2002). At Call Direct, this was not the case. Agents were not met with onscreen prompts, rather they had to use their own knowledge to solve the issue or alternatively consult a system known as ‘Knowledge Base’ for answers. The ‘Knowledge Base’ was essentially a database of articles that CSRs could read through to learn procedures, find out about new deals, and find technical information. From the first day of training, our trainer advised us to read the ‘Knowledge Base’ everyday to learn the relevant information, as we would not be aided by pop-ups or on-screen prompts. Houlihan (2000) describes learning for agents as being constructed at the level of routine, ‘learning new routines, scripts, system changes, unlearning the old, and becoming accomplished in meeting the changing numerical and behavioural targets’. As systems and products change regularly, call centre agents are always training, even long after they have begun on the call centre floor. I would argue that this insistence on CSRs expanding their own knowledge and resorting to on-the-spot problem solving and research techniques, qualitatively increased the skill level required to work for Internet Plus, however, the training programme in place was insufficient in preparing agents to go onto the call centre floor. In my interview with Zoe, she revealed how extra training would be available for an agent, only as long as they asked for it and their team leader was prepared to allow it:

Q– Do you think they’d provide extra training for you if you need...

A – They will if you ask. They’ll let you buddy more and...not actual training where you’re in one-to-one, you can buddy with a few people, stuff like that. I don’t know what else they do but they used...if you asked you’d be able to get more.

Q – Would your team leader recommend it or would it have to come off you...

A – It depends on your team leader. It wasn’t a company thing, it would depend on your team leader. Some team leaders are better than others, some of them would say ‘I think you’ll benefit from this’. I had a really good team leader at one point and he was absolutely brilliant. He got us Mac training and all sorts and we ended up being the Mac team in the end [the Mac team were the only team who dealt with broadband issues for Mac computers]. It does purely depend

on the team leader, its not like where the company would say, would encourage the team leader to do things like that. Or at least team leaders wouldn't follow up on it mainly, it's the same as everywhere, you get the good ones and the bad ones. Generally if you asked...if you had a bad team leader you'd need to go to your manager or something like that. Generally if you asked, you'd get it.

Q – Fair enough...

A – The training might not be very good but you'd get it!

An agent's knowledge about products and systems, once outside of the initial training period, comes from their own initiative, therefore the onus is on the agent to take responsibility and learn things for themselves. Additional training is arbitrary and dependent upon the attitude of the team leader, rather than a company-directed mandate to continually improve their agents' skills. This highlights the way neoliberal logic has infiltrated the workplace, rather than the company taking responsibility for improving employees' skill sets, they teach the basics before leaving the individual to take responsibility for their own development.

One of the most persistent issues in call centre literature is the use of scripting and the restriction of CSRs freedom in dealing with the customer (Taylor et al, 2002; Taylor and Bain, 1999; Glucksmann, 2004). Taylor et al (2002) differentiated between quantity driven call centres that place strong emphasis on tightly controlled scripts and quality driven call centres more concerned with agents having freedom to provide a service. Call Direct fall into the quantity driven category, although the standard practice was to utilise a 'call structure' rather than a tightly controlled script. CSRs had a certain freedom in what they could say to customers, however it had to fall within the call structure which had a scripted opening and close, as well as several other essential questions which must be asked during the call (for a detailed account of the use of the call structure and points scoring in call monitoring, see chapter 4). The key point for this chapter is how rigorously the Call Direct trainers push the call structure. Before we did any systems training, we learned the call structure and had to be able to follow it perfectly. The standard open and close to calls became so familiar that after a while on the `phones, it became an unconscious reaction to the whisper in my headset informing me of a call coming through. Psychologically, the call structure was so ingrained into our minds that when Internet Plus rebranded itself as Media UK, it took many CSRs, myself included, several days to get out of the habit of opening calls with, 'welcome to the

Internet Plus moving house team, how can I help?’ After 3 weeks of training, we might not have been comfortable with all the products and the systems, but we all knew the call structure.

As well as the call structure, Call Direct trained agents to understand and perfect the ‘conversation cycle’: inform → invite → listen → acknowledge → inform. By following the call structure and conversation cycle, as well as utilising ‘active listening’ and ‘positive language’, whilst knowing the difference between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ questions, new CSRs were taught the skills necessary to develop the right ‘call behaviour’. Much of the call handling training, whilst wrapped up in the institutional terminology of the call centre, was aimed at providing CSRs with the necessary tools to ‘take ownership of a call’ and problem solve. As we have already noted however, solving problems requires a level of product knowledge the CSRs have to find, largely, by them using the ‘Knowledge Base’.

#### *Company Values: A Contradiction in Terms?*

Management studies have, for many years, looked at the efforts made by companies to inculcate new employees with the brand values and identify with the company ethos (see Henkel et al, 2007, for an overview of some of the relevant literature). A large part of the training schemes in call centres also involves attempts by the company to get new recruits to identify with the brand values of the company (van den Broek, 2004). Subtle attempts to influence commitment and motivation are necessary in jobs where autonomy is restricted, conditions are often hostile and oppressive, and morale is low (Beirne, Riach and Wilson, 2004). Strong emphasis is placed on engaging the ‘hearts and minds’ of employees and fostering strong ties to the company (van den Broek, 2004). Inculcating management ethics and brand values onto new recruits becomes one the key tasks for the training team because, should it succeed, it is widely acknowledged that turnover rates will be positively affected if new recruits identify with the company and develop a sense of loyalty rather than simply walking away (Tuten and Neidermeyer, 2004).

Call Direct placed brand values so highly on the training agenda that, at least when this research was undertaken, the entire first day of training was devoted to introducing the company and outlining the company ethos and philosophy for the new CSRs. My first day of training with the company involved John, our trainer for the first three weeks, telling us the

history and narrative of the company before giving us any product or systems training. John was an affable, 30 year old guy from Wales whose energy and enthusiasm was in contrast to his small, slight frame. His sense of humour kept us entertained during the long, boring sessions and although he had clearly swallowed the company manual and wholeheartedly identified with the company and its values, he was a good guy who regularly checked in with us long after we went live on the floor and seemed to care about our progress.

At one point John was extolling the virtues of the company to us with the enthusiasm you would expect when he asked us why Call Direct was situated in this region. I had my opinions but wondered if anyone else had the same thoughts. Eddie, a big mountain of a man in his late 30s and former 'white van man' was on my wavelength. "Cheap labour" was his answer, to which John reluctantly agreed. At £5.13 an hour we were clearly cheap labour. Then Eddie shouted out in his deep, booming voice "there's high unemployment in this region so there's plenty of us to choose from." John agreed again but he had an opinion of his own. "The company is run by local people and they want to give something back to the local region rather than moving elsewhere for more profit." Looking around the room, it was clear I was not the only one failed to be convinced. Eddie had been spot on, there was plenty of cheap labour in this region and this was, in my mind, the reason behind the company remaining here. Particularly on the back of the presentation we had received earlier when John had stated that the company objectives were to cut down on operational costs whilst increasing profits by over 10%.

At this stage of the day, having been 'talked at' for over 6 hours, everyone appeared restless and bored so that could have accounted for some of the cynicism. However, I found it hard to believe I had been given a job working for the last of the great industrial philanthropists. John had told us over and over that the staff was the most important thing to the company and they would bend over backwards for us. However, he had also said they were a business, first and foremost a profit making company which left me struggling to reconcile the two. All of us in the room, John included, were expendable and we knew it. The whole conversation about caring about us, putting our needs first, and being an employee friendly company left me intrigued as to how they planned to demonstrate this.

Research has shown how contracting and outsourcing may generate problems and tensions as employees effectively become agents for the client rather than the employer (Rubery et al, 2004; Kinnie et al, 2008). Darren was a 31 year old team leader at Call Direct and he highlighted the tension of working for both the company and the client:

‘It’s still like that now. I mean, you fight against two walls. You’ve got what Call Direct expects of you and what the client demands. They both need something from you but only one can have it so you’ve got to weigh up who gets it. Either the client gets it, who in effect pay us, or do Call Direct get it, who in effect employ us? It’s like you’re working for two people at the same time. It’s confusing for agents coz agents are made aware of client obligations and they should never be, no disrespect to them but they should come to work and the only concentration they need is to take the call and leave the flack to call centre managers, senior managers. That’s how it should work.’

When CSRs spend their working day dealing with issues for Internet Plus, the client clearly wants employees to buy into the company ethos, however, Call Direct also places demands on the CSR to invest themselves into its identity and attitude. Kinnie et al (2008) argue that employees’ experience of working in outsource call centres tends to be worse than those working in-house ‘with higher employee turnover, closer monitoring and lower wages’. The normal pressures of call centre life are exacerbated by the additional pressures of working for an external client (Kinnie et al, 2008) and, although Darren asserted that the CSRs should not be subject to the tensions between client and contract, my research corresponds to Kinnie et al in so far as ‘employees find themselves squeezed between the objectives of their business clients, their employing organisation and its owners and the needs of the customers with whom they interact’. In this sense, outsource call centres make more effort to inculcate new recruits with their company ethos given the competing pressure of the client’s demands on the employee. As the evidence above proves, Call Direct spend considerable time introducing new recruits to the company, teaching them the company history, and trying to convince agents to identify with and adopt its brand values. Words such as ‘passion for service’, painted on the walls, act as reminders to CSRs what the company values are and what is expected of them if they are to be a ‘Call Direct person’.

In truth, my research discovered nobody who bought into the company mentality and actively tried to reflect the Call Direct attitude. Tracy was in her early forties at the time of the interview and worked in secondary education but had previously worked as a senior manager at Call Direct. She provided an interesting insight into some of the management practices detailed in chapter 4, however when asked if she identified with any of the brand values at Call Direct, her answer was very short and very telling:

‘No! It makes you want to puke in a bucket!’

When senior management have this kind of regard for the campaign to win the hearts and minds of employees, it begs the question as to how CSRs are ever going to buy into the company ethos. When asked the same question about brand values, Chrissie who was 21 and had been with Call Direct for 3 years replied:

(laughing) ‘Oh yeah, course I do! No, I don’t. If I was honest, I don’t even know what they are.’

Meanwhile, returning to Darren, he did not identify with the brand values either:

‘Oh, not one bit. I’d be surprised if anyone does. Like I said earlier, there’s perceptions and how the company portrays itself to impress the clients, the jobcentres, job fairs, and then there’s us who’ve worked there for a while. Speaking for myself, I don’t know about you, when you join, it’s painted as a really, really good place to work and you get bitten by the bug when you first start and you think it’s not actually a bad place because they try to embellish the fact, they try to make, they are good at taking 10 strangers and forming a team over 2 or 3 weeks of training, but when you hit reality of the floor and you’ve got targets and that, people then go to work to serve themselves and not the company. The brand values go out of the window.’

These answers indicate that for all the effort Call Direct put into inculcating employees with company values, it does not appear to work. If one of the most senior and longest serving agents with Internet Plus does not know either the company values or the brand values of the

contract she works on, or one of its own team leaders believes that ‘the brand values go out of the window’, then there is little doubt that its efforts are in vain. While traditional industrial workplaces utilised the same techniques only to find their values or slogans inverted and become a source of mockery, at Call Direct it seems as if they were ignored completely. If the thought that developing a sense of commitment and loyalty to the company is essential in occupations regarded as harsh, oppressive and stressful (Beirne, Riach and Wilson, 2004), then Call Direct has a long way to go in order to achieve this. The next chapter will lay out many of the management practices and organisational approaches at play within Call Direct and perhaps begin to explain why the company has such a hard time retaining loyalty and commitment among its workforce.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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“The principal object of management should be to secure the maximum prosperity for the employer, coupled with the maximum prosperity for each employee.”

- F.W. Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911)

Whilst much of the call centre literature concentrates on management use of Taylorist principles of scientific management, the above quote highlights how surplus labour and productivity are critical to the pursuit of profit. Modern economic theory has sought to discredit Marxist analysis of productivity and surplus labour, particularly given the collapse of communism signalled the death of Marxism as a political movement (Beck, 2000). However, the notion that profit is generated for employers through the surplus labour of workers required to work longer and harder than is necessary to meet costs, is still particularly resonant within call centres (Beirne, Riach and Wilson, 2004). Beck (2000) has noted that recent changes in labour markets, particularly flexibilization of the labour force, massively increase productivity. Indeed, the principal object of management appears to be concerned with securing the maximum prosperity for the employer, however the maximum prosperity for each employee is far from a critical concern in contemporary call centres (Mulholland, 2004; Deery et al, 2002; Gilmore, 2001).

The changes Beck (2000) highlighted were part of an ongoing process of removing regulations and constraints on capital accumulation (Harvey, 2010). From the late 1970s onwards, capital ‘was re-empowered vis-a-vis labour through the production of unemployment and deindustrialisation, immigration, off-shoring and all manner of technological and organisational changes (e.g. subcontracting)’ (Harvey, 2010: 131). As noted earlier, technological innovation and the movement towards ‘light touch’ regulation opened up opportunities for increased productivity and therefore higher capital accumulation. Reshaping the labour market to fit the new needs and demands of capital became the key issue for management. Creating a pool of surplus labour became critical to capital accumulation (Harvey, 2010).

Surplus labour is crucial for call centre operations for several reasons. Firstly, the lack of union representation within the call centre industry and service sector in general allows employers to demand more from its workers (Fenton and Dermott, 2006). As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 217) note, ‘thanks to a mixture of differential benefits and fear of unemployment, they [employees] were induced to engage freely and fully in the work tasks assigned them’. Surplus labour, in the form of the reserve army of unemployed, serve to encourage those in work to comply with the demands of their employers given the realisation that they can be easily replaced. Knowing the expendability of the workforce, companies gear their entire management structure towards pushing productivity up and costs down, with a large supply of available labour and minimal training requirements, management can push workers as hard as they want, obviously within the boundaries of government legislation. New Labour’s belief in ‘light touch’ regulation as the best way to improve market profitability in the global arena has, however, proven disastrously ineffective and open to exploitation (Bunting, 2003). In terms of the financial services, as seen in chapter 1, ‘light touch’ regulation fostered the institutional ethos that precipitated the credit crunch and subsequent recession (Stiglitz, 2010), whilst ‘light touch’ regulation in employment law ensures that calculated manipulation typifies a large portion of Britain’s service economy.

Over recent years, wages in the lower end of the labour market have risen marginally, deliberately kept low in order to maximise profit (Harvey, 2010). However, management practices allowing productivity to rise sharply increase profits for employers. This huge amount of surplus cash allowed the debt bubble to grow, which, as outlined earlier, expanded during the last two decades and created a culture of recklessness and greed that has undoubtedly contributed to the current crisis in global finance. Short-termism became the back bone of, and paramount to, reckless corporate strategy based on the appearance and importance of short-term profit rather than long-term economic well being. The quest for growth led to the pursuit of faster returns on investment, dimming horizons and valorising short-term profit making rather than responsible business practice (Jackson, 2009). Reckless profit seeking became culturally and institutionally ingrained and in certain cases, for example Enron, led to a deliberate manipulation of raw data in order to push up stock prices.

During the mid-twentieth century, wages rose in line with productivity until the arrival of neoliberalism severed that tie (Harvey, 2010; Judt, 2010). Neoliberal concepts such as

micromanagement, the pursuit of efficiency, and insecurity all help drive up productivity whilst the new realities of a neoliberal economy place a downward pressure on wages (Harvey, 2005). Also, moving away from the Keynesian pursuit of full employment towards a situation where an acceptable level of unemployment exists, serves to create a reserve army of labour which also drives down wages and increases profitability (Harvey, 2010: 60). Resnick and Wolff (2003) argues that by this point, consumerism had begun producing infinite consumer desires (see also Hall et al, 2008; Barber, 2007), yet the decline in wages in real terms prevents most of the workforce from consuming indefinitely. Capitalism's new strategy to combat this was not to increase wages to pay for consumers' dreams, rather to increase lending to ordinary people for their pursuit of desirable consumer goods. This created the bubble mentioned above, continually growing as credit was cheap and economies profitable. In truth, workers were still being paid the bare minimum yet racking up huge debts and when the bubble burst, those at the bottom end of society were the first and worst affected. During this time, management practices based on micromanagement, performance targets, efficiency and insecurity were both profitable for companies and the economy as a whole. The point here is simply that management practices have allowed productivity, especially in call centres, to rise unequally with the wages of its employees thus creating large profits for employers. These management practices are the subject of this chapter.

Once a CSR becomes active on the call centre floor he/she becomes subject to incredibly close scrutiny through surveillance and management strategies unique to call centres and rarely seen elsewhere in contemporary labour markets (Winiiecki, 2007). This chapter will focus specifically upon the use of electronic monitoring, call monitoring and the pursuit of targets and efficiency as central to management practice (Houlihan, 2002; Winiiecki, 2007; Townsend, 2005). Additional discussion will concentrate upon shift patterns, the use of teams and codes of conduct to illustrate the harsh micro-management utilised in contemporary call centres.

The use of electronic monitoring in call centres features heavily in the literature, to the point where many early writers considered call centres to be Foucauldian electronic panopticons (Ferne and Metcalf, 1997). Since Taylor and Bain (1999) criticised this theory for being a crude rendering of Foucault's notion of a 'total institution', most research acknowledges that call centres utilise electronic surveillance to an unprecedented level in the workplace,

however there are spaces for resistance which would be impossible in an electronic panopticon (Mulholland, 2004; Townsend, 2005). Any discussion of electronic surveillance must begin with the interface of communication and information technology, manifested in the ACD (Automatic Call Distributor) and its role in both defining the work process and work speed as well as being capable of monitoring an agent's output (Ellis and Taylor, 2006; Bain et al, 2002). The entire working practices in the call centre are determined by technology as 'technology has encouraged working practices that are defined by division of labour, output targets, repetition and standardisation, and strict quality adherence' (Brown and Maxwell, 2002).

The ACD queues all incoming calls and directs them to the first CSR to become available, or in call centre-speak, 'return to ready'. This non-descript grey box, known at Call Direct as the 'Aspect', is roughly the size of a large telephone and dictates the pace of work in the call centre. During busy periods, the ACD lights up indicating how many calls are waiting; a green light indicates less than five calls waiting, an amber light means between five and ten, whilst the dreaded red light means more than ten calls are waiting, and every agent is under pressure to wrap up each call quickly in order to minimise the queue. During my employment at Call Direct, each of the three team leaders I worked under, when the red light appeared, would concentrate intently on their monitor checking which agents had been on long calls and encouraging them to finish whilst also checking nobody was lingering in 'idle' (logged onto the system but not available for calls) or 'wrap' (the period between a call ending and the CSR returning to ready, usually used to complete notes on a customer's account). When the calls piled up, the team leaders were expected to lean on the agents because it reflected badly on the management if the percentage of customers who hung up before speaking to an agent rose too high. For an outsource call centre such as Call Direct, the statistics were vital because poor call handling figures could potentially result in losing a contract, as companies may lose faith in Call Direct and its ability to handle the calls being streamed through to them (Glucksmann, 2004; Kinnie et al, 2008).

The use of technology in call centres serves a dual process. Firstly, the ACD provides work for the agents, streaming waiting calls to the next available agent and dictating the pace each CSR works at. Secondly, the ACD provides management with a means of surveillance by allowing team leaders to tap into phone calls covertly, produce statistics on each agents

handling times and data regarding productivity (Winiecki, 2007). Winiecki sees the opportunity for resistance as CSRs 'shadowbox' with the data produced by the ACD in order to improve their statistics, aware that the most important image for the call centre manager is the objective image of a CSR through their daily statistics (ibid). Statistics and data generated by the ACD is a crucial part of call centre life. One-to-one meetings with team leaders take place to discuss poor performance and unacceptable statistics, regular warnings are given during shifts to cut down on 'idle' time or improve call-handling times, whilst team leaders own appraisals and monthly reviews centre on the performance of their team, primarily through the data produced by the ACD.

Throughout my research it became apparent that the panoptican dystopia Fernie and Metcalf (1997) described did not appear in reality, at least not at Call Direct. Whilst there was undoubtedly a high level of surveillance, there were also examples of a glaring lack of supervision and monitoring. Although some of my respondents, such as Zoe, who had worked there for 5 years and admitted to having witnessed a lot of changes in all aspects of the company, felt that Call Direct had become more professional and monitored agents behaviour more closely, others felt this had not always been the case. Below, Ian, one of my key respondents suggested that electronic and human surveillance was not as stringent as one might have thought:

A - I dunno, I thought it was quite realistic but the stats didn't get checked. As I've said before I was in 'wrap', or what they call 'wrap up' for an hour and twenty minutes and it didn't even get flagged!

Q - Didn't it?

A - No, I just drove to Thornaby [around five miles from the town centre] and back cos my mate had split his pants! Both sat next to each other so we just left our headsets there and buggered off! Came back an hour and twenty minutes later and no-one said a word.

Q - You were still in wrap?

A- Yeah and no-one said a word

Although Ian worked on a different contract to me, much of my research has found that Call Direct treated each contract and the agents working for them very similar, therefore it

surprised me to hear Ian's story. As much of the call centre literature focuses upon electronic surveillance and monitoring agent's statistics (Winiacki, 2004; Townsend, 2005), it seems amazing that Ian and his friend were able to stay in wrap for an hour and twenty minutes. Going back to Zoe's thoughts on the changes she saw at Call Direct, this sort of incident was possible at one point although as the company had developed and management had fine-tuned its practices, it would be impossible for something like this to occur now. Electronic monitoring and agent's statistics and figures were, by the time I left the company, crucial and a source of pressure and conflict between our new call centre manager, Jimmy, and the team leaders and agents. In Jimmy's mind, any time spent in wrap or idle was time wasted and customers ignored. Widely considered by many to be devoid of any social skills, Jimmy forced the team leaders and agents to account for their statistics and figures to an unprecedented degree, even going as far as reproaching my team leader for allowing us too many 'comfort breaks' (toilet breaks) and finding out how many agents in one poorly performing team were still in their probationary period as he intended to release those agents not performing to his standards. Being logged onto the system meant that we knew toilet breaks would be monitored as we had to go into an 'idle break' designated as a comfort break; we remained logged onto the system but were unable to take calls. Jimmy's reaction to our use of comfort breaks was not only personally humiliating, having someone reprimand us for spending too long in the toilet, but it also revealed his attitude towards his agents; he either valued his statistics higher than the personal comfort of his agents, or he did not trust them, believing they were avoiding calls by either dragging out trips to the toilet or using the pretext of the toilet as an excuse to get off the `phones for a few minutes. When even the most basic of human functions as using the toilet become a contested area, it highlights the level of micromanagement in place and serves as a clear indication of the needs of capital. Capital is a process rather than a 'thing' to be imbued with human temperaments (Harvey, 2010). It is a system that sees people as resources and has no relationship with employers or employees; it can do nothing other than follow its own self interest in the dogged pursuit of more capital (Bakan, 2005). Micromanagement techniques such as timing how long someone takes in the toilet clearly show the effect of capital as a process not made to the measure of humanity.

The repetitive nature of call centre work is central in much of the literature (see Mulholland, 2004; Taylor and Bain, 1999; Batt, Hunter and Wilk, 2003) and throughout the research

period at Call Direct, it became increasingly apparent that repetition was central to the work process in modern call centres. Gilmore (2001) differentiated call centre management strategies into those who employ a 'production-line approach' and those who favour an 'empowerment approach'. The 'production-line approach' utilises a business strategy favouring low costs and high volume, prefers customer relations to be predominantly transactional rather than relationship-based, and calls preferred to be dealt with over a short time frame. Meanwhile, the business environment should be predictable with few surprises whilst the type of people working there should have low growth needs and low social needs (ibid). The work process at Call Direct fits smoothly into the 'production-line' category because emphasis was firmly placed on dealing with calls as quickly as possible before moving onto the next, meanwhile, the division of labour within the call centre ensured that agents would deal with the same type of call repeatedly. This 'production line' approach leads to inevitable tensions over service quality (Taylor and Bain, 1999). As Raz and Blank (2007: 83) point out, 'while espousing the goal of customer satisfaction and service quality, the mass production model used at many call centres leads to an emphasis on operational efficiency'. Certainly at Call Direct, emphasis was placed on call handling times as my team leaders regularly told me that I needed to get my handling times down. Regardless of whether I was providing good service, my statistics did not look great therefore I had to work harder at minimising the call length.

The Internet Plus broadband contract at Call Direct used computer technology and the ACD to divide customer enquiries between several teams, all of whom have a very narrow purview. For example, my first 3 months were spent on Customer Support and it was my responsibility to register new broadband customers and deal with billing queries and equipment orders. Nothing else. Enquiries for technical assistance were directed to technical support, enquiries about cancellation were sent to customer care, enquiries about moving broadband to the customers' new house were directed to the moving house team. As Gilmore (2001: 153) states, 'the advantage of a production-line approach is that the organization controls the system and leaves nothing to the discretion of the employee.' Although Call Direct encouraged agents to help customers with issues at all times, for example a Customer Support agent helping a customer with a technical support query if the agent knew how to solve the problem, the general practice was to pass customers along to other departments if

the query was not relevant to the agents' department or there was a specialised team in place to deal with specific queries (for example, the Moving House Team).

The main problem with this division of labour leads to one of the main complaints against call centres (Beirne, Riach and Wilson, 2004). Customers are regularly passed from department to department as agents feel the query does not fall under their departmental purview and do not want to take responsibility for the call. I personally handled hundreds of calls where, for one reason or another, the customer was speaking to the wrong department and I had to transfer them to the right team, tell them to phone a different number, or simply explain that I could not help them. This often led to customers becoming angry, confrontational or belligerent at my insistence that I could not deal with their enquiry. Over time I developed a sense of apathy towards people screaming at me down the phone, however, some of these calls genuinely bothered me.

Shortly after returning from my dinner one day I immediately logged into the system and quickly heard the whisper in my ear indicating an incoming call. The 'whisper' is a loud beep followed by a recording of someone saying 'Internet Plus customer support'. After that, the customer is connected to the CSR. The daily grind of constantly repetitive calls, pissed off 'clients', fake happiness and false sincerity was something keenly felt by all on our team. Despite being constantly urged to remain upbeat on calls, the reality of the work itself made this very difficult. This call was an elderly lady, very polite and calm but asking if she could close her account as she could not get her broadband working. 'OK, let me take some details so I can find your account and we'll see what we can do for you' I said, trying to sound as pleasant as possible.

After taking her account details and verifying she was the account holder, thus satisfying the Data Protection Act, I immediately realised this call was not going to be very enjoyable. The actual nature of the job occasionally left me feeling uncomfortable about applying Call Direct policy in the rigid manner expected of me as one might be found in the position I was left in on this call. Her account told me that BT activated her phone line for broadband two weeks ago, therefore she was inside her 12 month contract and a cancellation fee was required to close the account. Her fee would be the remainder of her 12 month contract in full. It was around £160 to cancel. She began by telling me that she received the modem and filters, set

them up correctly but could not get broadband to work. In fact, she had not had a single minute of internet access since taking out the contract with Internet Plus.

Reading the notes on the account as she talked, I noticed that she has spoken to someone in technical support who authorised cancellation due to a 'possible fault' on her line. That was good enough for me, panic over. If technical support authorised cancellation during the initial 12 month contract then the cancellation fee was waived. I'd be off the call in no time so I looked around my team to see who was free. Jack was sitting opposite me staring blankly at his screen not talking, obviously not on a call. As soon as I had passed this polite old lady to the Care Team (cancellations department), I would be able to grab a minute or two of bullshitting with Jack, probably the person I'd spent most time with since I arrived at Call Direct. Only a few months older than me, Jack was tall and stocky and told anyone who would listen that he was only there to earn some money while he tried to join the police. He disliked this job with a passion.

Going back to the customer, I assured her that technical support's authorisation was in her notes, allowing me to transfer her to the Care Team and get her account closed. 'Thank you Anthony, you've been very helpful' she said as I put her on hold and punch in the Care Team extension on my Aspect. It all went downhill from there. After getting through to the Care Team and passing on the account details, the agent in cancellations told me he would not take the call because he was not convinced by technical support's authorisation. 'What do you mean? It's in her notes, she can cancel without paying the fee' I said, starting to get annoyed, as I knew where this was going to go. 'They've authorised a cancellation but they haven't done enough to try and get her broadband working. They haven't done full diagnostics, it says in her notes that she's using an extension from the filter to the modem. She needs to plug the modem directly into the filter and socket and see if that works. The problem might be with her extension, not the line. I'm not taking over the call coz I think she can still get her broadband working. Send her back to tech support.' Despite my insistence that she was sick of trying and just wanted to cancel, he would not accept the call. Care team agents work towards incentives offered for the most customers 'saved' in a week or month. It was actually in his interest not to take over calls, particularly when the account holder was upset or angry and was no longer prepared to listen to a sales pitch. I hung up with the Care Team and after cursing the agent for being more concerned with keeping up his statistics for saving

customers, I took a moment and threw myself into what I knew would be an incredibly frustrating call, both for me and the customer.

‘I’ve spoken to the Care Team and they won’t cancel the account’ I said, with genuine sympathy this time rather than the fake empathy I used earlier. My original apathy has gone now as, knowing there was nothing I could do to help her, I genuinely felt sorry for this customer. After going through the reasons why they would not close her account and explaining that she needed to plug her modem directly into her filter to ensure all of Internet Plus’ equipment worked (we only provided the filter, cable and modem, the extension lead was her own), she started screaming at me. She was full of rage, hatred and frustration and I could not blame her. It was not nice being on the receiving end of this torrent of vitriol but I tried not to take it personally and tried to calm her down. It did not work. ‘I’M SEVENTY FIVE YEARS OLD!!! I LIVE ON MY OWN, I DON’T HAVE ANYONE TO HELP ME AND I CAN’T CARRY MY COMPUTER DOWN THE STAIRS!!! I JUST WANT RID OF IT, CANCEL MY ACCOUNT, PLEASE!!!!’ Then she started crying. I mean, really sobbing down the `phone. Her frustration seemed to give way to exhaustion and she just sobbed and sobbed as I assured her that I had done everything I could for her. She needed to talk to technical support again. She could not cancel until she did. I sat there thinking, ‘what am I supposed to do?’ Although I had done everything I could to help her, I had reduced a pensioner to tears over the `phone. At times like that the petty bureaucracy deeply affected me, as it did many of my colleagues. One department authorised cancellation, the cancellation department refused to accept it, and I was stuck in the middle. The combination of rigid company policy, statistics driven Care Team agents, and a system of technologically-based call streaming had left me sitting there listening to an old woman cry her eyes out because, through no fault of her own, her broadband provider would not terminate her contract without charging her for a service she had never received.

In the end, I think she lost the will to continue the call and surrendered. Still crying, she thanked me (I couldn’t believe it), and hung up the `phone. Coming off the call, I realised that I had been oblivious to everything and everyone around me. Concentration is essential on difficult calls and it felt like I had blocked everything else out as I tried to help the customer. I slowly typed up my notes on her account and instead of going straight back into ‘ready’ I waited in ‘wrap’ for my allocated two minutes and then rejoined the call queue. I

felt like shit over that last call. I felt like shit for making an old lady scream and sob down the 'phone at me. I felt like shit because despite everything, I could not help her. The company policy and the department structure were so unreasonable that I knew, when she calmed down, the customer would go back to technical support and explain what had happened and they would say, 'oh, we've already authorised cancellation so you need to speak to Customer Support and they'll put you through to the Care Team'. Calls like that made me want to walk out and never come back. Right then, I hated my job. Before I had chance to calm down and regain my composure, I heard 'Beep. Internet Plus Customer Support' in my headset and I was thrown into another call.

That snapshot encapsulates many of the issues surrounding call centre work. The use of technology to create IVR (Interactive Voice Response) menus for customers to use which recognise voice or keypad choices should be a positive move that enables an efficient and swift service sending customers to the appropriate departments. However, as Beirne, Riach and Wilson (2004: 100) point out, 'callers are more likely to experience anger and frustration as they deal with long and inadequate menu options, delays punctuated with annoying synthetic music, and fragmented human contact, often with numerous operators, all of them asking for basic information to be repeated, frequently with inadequate results'. In this case, the customer had to speak to technical support and customer support (two separate calls because direct transfers between technical support and customer support are prohibited by Internet Plus) before being told that she would have to go back to technical support again. In theory, IVR menus are a good idea, yet in practice, customers often find themselves being passed around between departments.

Caller frustration is something all CSRs have to deal with on a regular basis. The abstract, impersonal nature of the call centre experience, speaking to a disembodied voice at the end of a phone line changes the dynamic of what should be a routine conversation. Without the physical proximity to the CSR, customers lose the requirement to be considerate of their point of view and vent their anger in a way most normal people would be horrified at the thought of doing if the CSR was stood in front of them. The reverse of this dynamic is the CSR who is compelled to act and be treated like a machine, absorbing frustration without reaction. Most of the literature indicates the frustrating nature of dealing with call centres as a customer (Bain et al, 2002; Beirne, Riach and Wilson, 2003; Kinnie et al, 2008), however,

the impersonal nature of the call centre experience changes the nature of interpersonal interaction, allowing, for the customer at least, the chance to drop any pretext of civility. Cross et al (2008) came to the conclusion that CSRs could find satisfaction in dealing with customer enquiries and helping people and some of my respondents noted feeling pleased with themselves if they had a 'good call' after which they felt like they had accomplished something. However, dealing with caller frustration was much more frequent at Call Direct than being able to take satisfaction from a customer interaction.

The work process at Call Direct corresponds with Taylor and Bain's (1999) notion of 'an assembly line in the head'. The volume of calls dictates the speed of the assembly line, however, the agent has no control over the pace they work at. In the case highlighted above, I was not ready to take another call given the stressful and upsetting nature of the previous call, yet I had to go back into the call queue and within two minutes, I was dealing with another customer. As Witt et al (2004: 151) point out, 'when work demands exceed resources (i.e. when emotionally exhausted), highly conscientious individuals are unlikely to be capable of maintaining high levels of performance. Simply put, they may have nothing left to give'. Emotional labour is crucial here because CSR's have to 'induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild, 2003: 7). Stress and cynicism are the inevitable outcomes as CSRs continually generate feelings for public displays such as dealing with customers thus leading to stress and burnout, or CSRs fake feeling and empathy in order to serve customers thus leading to cynicism and apathy towards their work. Witt et al (2004) state that low conscientious workers will not feel emotional exhaustion because they do not care as much and therefore can maintain a standard level of quality across their work; not caring becomes a coping mechanism to avoid the downsides of emotional labour.

### *Call Monitoring*

One of the central pillars of micromanagement in call centres is call monitoring (Ellis and Taylor, 2006). Utilising the technological capability to 'barge' in on a CSR's call (Winiecki, 2007), call monitoring involves team leaders listening to an agent's calls and grading them according to predetermined criteria (Miozzo and Ramirez, 2003). At Call Direct, the call monitoring scoring system worked on an agent following the call structure. Actually resolving the issue was only worth 5 points out of a total of 100. The scoring system was

divided between the task, worth a possible 58 points, and behaviour, worth a total of 42. In reality though, many of the task-based criteria were related to the call structure such as using the standard greeting and completing all actions accurately (see Appendix 1 for the call monitoring standards sheet).

Many of my colleagues felt that the worst part of the job was when the team leader monitored your call and graded your performance. At the time it was quite stressful if you knew you were getting monitored but there was a financial implication as well. After 6 months, we were supposed to get a review that decided whether our performance had been 'good', 'excellent', or 'needs development'. The overall grade indicated which performance bonus we received. If after 6 months, we were deemed as 'excellent', there was a £300 bonus added to our annual salary. If after the next 6 months, we received 'excellent' again, there was another £300 bonus. In 12 months we could boost my salary by £600 – almost an extra months' pay. However, the performance bonus was given based on a number of criteria, including the scores from our monitored calls.

Not every call was monitored, there were some randomly taped by the company as training calls, however, the team leader would usually only monitor us two or three times a week. Officially, monitoring occurred in two ways: remotely (i.e. the CSR was unaware that the call was monitored), and 'side-to-side', where the team leader sat beside us, plugged their headset directly into our Aspect, and graded the call. Some calls were difficult enough as it was without having someone sat next to me marking my performance.

Remote monitoring was done in several ways. During my time at Call Direct, I knew one team leader who would plug a tape recorder into his Aspect, put an agent's extension number in and tape half a dozen of their calls before moving on to the next agent. After he had taped the calls, he would go away and grade them. That way the agent had no idea which calls were monitored and was a true reflection of their performance. My last team leader, Gareth, would sit at another pod around the corner so we did not know who he was monitoring. The other way to remote monitor was for the TL to sit at our pod and listen in to a call. Everyone was alerted to that style of monitoring as the TL was sat in front of us with the headset on, however, we were unaware of who was being monitored. When Bev was my team leader,

there were times I was sat close to her and knew she was monitoring me because her face would give herself away when the customer said something, particularly if they swore at me.

Call monitoring, especially when you were aware of it, could be quite stressful because of the scoring system utilised at Call Direct. The standard requirement was over 70% (70 out of 100 on the scoring system) for every monitored call and when the scoring was broken down it was easy to see what was important to the management and what they wanted to see from us. At the start of the call I was supposed to say, 'Welcome to Internet Plus moving house team, how can I help?' Just saying that was worth 5 points. The close was crucial as well because we would get 3 points for saying, 'Thanks for calling Internet Plus, goodbye'. If you did not say the name of the company then you were deducted 3 points. Although there was no script to follow, there were specific lines we were required to say within a call structure. Sometimes a customer would end the call abruptly and you did not get time to blurt out, 'thanks for calling Internet Plus, goodbye'. I often finished a call by saying, 'Thanks for calling, goodbye'. Sometimes, depending on the customer and how the call had gone, it seemed false to say the scripted line and it did not sound right. I would still be marked down for not saying it though.

One of the first calls I had monitored was not long after coming out of the academy and I was marked down for a stupid rule they insisted on enforcing with the call structure. After we had found out the customers problem and had introduced ourselves, we had to ask if there was anything else we could help with. Often I would hear colleagues say they found it pointless saying this, more so after we moved onto the moving house team because usually if the customer did have something else, it was not something I could deal with. I would find myself directing customers to other departments before I had even dealt with the issue they rang for. We also had to ask it at the end of the call, which was more appropriate because it was just before the customer went and I had actually dealt with the issue they rang for in the first place.

Regardless of our opinion about the call structure and the monitoring process and scoring system, it was in place and we had to stick to it. At least we all knew it beforehand. Across my sample there was general agreement that it was unfair when an agent could have really good figures, a very good customer friendly attitude, and have good reports in all other areas

but could find himself receiving a lower bonus than he deserved because he did not say 'Internet Plus' at the end of the call, or he did not follow the call structure, even if he resolved the issue. Interestingly, call monitoring proved to be one area of potential resistance for team leaders and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

As chapter 3 highlighted, Call Direct did not use a tightly worded script. Instead, a call structure was in place to determine the flow of the call. Throughout my research, many respondents felt that management placed more emphasis on agents following the call structure rather than ensuring customer satisfaction, indeed many agents, myself included, were marked down during monitoring for not following the call structure or for missing out the standard call opening or close. One of my respondents, Sally, was very honest about call monitoring and, although she saw the personal benefits of monitoring, did find the system itself to be flawed:

A - Well, I think it is necessary coz obviously some of the staff were fobbing people off and not speaking properly, the only thing about it was that you always knew when you were getting monitored so we always, all of us, were sort of cheating. It was a good thing to do, it didn't bother me at all, I did like to get it pointed out what I was missing out on each call and it tended to be the same things but I never put it right.

Q – What did you think of the scoring system they have for call monitoring? Did you think it was realistic for the call structure?

A – Not really. There was stuff like losing five points if you didn't ask the customer if they were happy with what you'd done today and just get a couple....it's got to be a certain sentence when the person monitoring you should know how happy the person is and say that was a good call. They shouldn't have to go on the exact wording, they should go on how the customer felt and how you made them feel

Another of my interviewees, Ian, was 23 when I interviewed him and had worked for Call Direct when he was 19. Amongst many negative comments about the company, he felt its attitude towards call monitoring was less than impressive:

‘They told us we were going to get our calls monitored. It’s quite a bad system really cos you just mess about and then they’re like, ‘oh, make this next one a good one’, you know, just to make them look better.’

Ian felt that, in terms of call monitoring, more emphasis was placed on making figures look good and ensuring team leaders had high scores than ensuring customer satisfaction. As long as the team leader could boast about good statistics from her team she wasn’t bothered. Adhering to the call structure and making sure the monitoring scores reflected well on the team leader were common themes throughout my interviews. Call quality, or at least customer satisfaction, were not a priority.

### *Teamwork and Shift Patterns*

Townsend (2005) indicates that the notion of ‘team work’ in call centres is an illusion and unsustainable given the reality of life on the call centre floor. Despite marketing and advertising for call centre jobs focussing on the ‘team’ aspect of working life, as well as the open-plan office design believed to aid teamwork, teams are formed for purely functional reasons and the office design is at odds with the work process (Barnes, 2007: 253). Rather than attempting to foster a close bond between CSRs through teamwork, call centre management implemented the team system in order to ensure that it sufficiently manage the profiles for incoming calls. In an industry where the individualistic work process inhibits any meaningful interaction with co-workers, CSRs recognise this fact and engage with co-workers in little more than a very superficial manner (Townsend, 2005). Short, shallow conversations aimed at passing the time were the best we could manage on some of our shifts. This implicit superficial approach to team bonding and conversation became incredibly apparent on quieter shifts where the opportunity presented itself for longer, more in depth conversations with co-workers. I found that, with the exception of most of the agents on my team who I got to know quite well, quieter shifts were worse because many CSRs, myself included, felt uncomfortable engaging in long conversations with people we knew we would hardly speak to in any other situation. As teams did not always sit together it was not unusual to be sitting next to total strangers. When short, superficial conversations are the norm, due to the work process, longer conversations become harder. The very nature of the job, having to deal with customers without the support of one’s team members, and the ACD dictated work process, made the notion of teamwork something of a joke. We were not

expected to work as a team, simply answer as many calls as each individual could in the shortest time possible.

Additionally, the practice at Call Direct, at least during my employment, was to keep changing teams around in order to find the right balance and ensure that the profile of calls coming into our department was adequately covered. In 6 months, I changed teams three times, thus making it difficult to develop relationships with co-workers. There appeared to be an underlying feeling of not wanting to try too hard with new co-workers because we would likely be moved around again soon and end up on different shifts. Through my interviews I found this was not always the case as CSRs able to stay on the same team for sustained periods did develop friendships with other people on their teams. In the 5 years Zoe had spent at Call Direct, she had significant spells on two teams and engendered strong connections with her co-workers:

‘Like I say, I’ve got friends I’ve had since I started, like Sam and Dan. Sam... she still works for Call Direct on the Admin team, she’s been my team leader as well, and she bought a house in Redcar [small town about ten miles east of Middlesbrough] on my recommendation and she still lives there now. And I’m going to her wedding in June so I’ve made some really, really good friends, Sharon who works on recruitment, she’s one of my best friends, if I ever go out it’s normally with Sharon, were attached at the hip when it comes to going out! I’ve made some really, really, really good friends, friends I’ll have for a long time, if not, like, for the rest of my life, sort of thing, that sort of friendship.’

Over time these sorts of relationships are possible, however they seem to be in spite of the work process rather than because of it. Only having worked there for such a long period was Zoe capable of developing meaningful relationships. As Houlihan (2002: 74) noted, the notion of a ‘team’ is purely a scheduling device designed to ensure a sufficient number of calls are answered.

Shift patterns are organised for the same reasons. Call Direct, as an outsourced call centre, had to cater to Internet Plus’ needs, which meant that it would promise to meet its demands, no matter what. Shifts ranged from morning shifts of 7am to 3.30pm, to the late shifts

working 2.30pm until 11pm. During my time on the Moving House Team, these shifts changed continually as the management attempted to satisfy the call profile from Internet Plus. Some days were spent fending off customers non-stop for the entire shift whilst at other times we could wait 45 minutes for a call. When management realised this, our shifts changed again and any plans we had made for upcoming days off had to be changed. After one unsuccessful shift change, management changed the shift pattern again and actually disbanded the team I was on. Not only were my shifts changing at short notice but I had to go through the process of fitting into a new team and getting to know a new team leader. One of my respondents, Tracy, had worked for Call Direct before I joined the company and it was her job to map shift patterns based on the needs of various clients:

A - They give you a profile of calls that....because it's an outsource, it tends to be a lot of overspill from their main call centre, so they give you an estimate of the calls that are expected and they'll tell you when you're likely to receive them that day. Then you have to try and map that and say how many staff do we need available to do it.

Q - Would you say they were flexible doing that or it was a case of saying we're going to get so many calls, we need that many people in whether they like it or not?

A - We were very much driven by what the client would give you in terms of the calls they would give you, you couldn't say, 'well, I'm sorry, I can't staff at that time of the day', they would say 'that's your problem, that's what you're paid for'. That often meant that we were giving, I'd say probably, sometimes unreasonable shifts to staff, we were asking them to compensate for the poor call flow, but it was expected because it is an outsourced call centre, they would tend to say, 'we'll bend over backward for whatever the client wants'

Changing shifts at short notice led to high levels of discontent on the call centre floor, however no process was in place to challenge the decisions made by management. When we complained about it, we were calmly informed that our contracts stated that shifts could be changed at short notice and, whilst the managers were sympathetic to our situation, there was little they could do to help us. We had to get on with the job with minimal fuss. The problems outsource call centres face appeared to be based on meeting the demands of the

client. In order to win the contract from Internet Plus, Call Direct was seemingly prepared to offer anything. Having won the contract, Call Direct had to deliver and, as Tracy explained, this led to bad management practices and attitudes towards agents as Call Direct cut corners in order to satisfy their clients. When I asked her how management could have improved things at Call Direct, Tracy said:

‘Put some proper processes in place, start to treat the people better, have more thought for the fact people have to plan their lives, and that has to be down to the negotiations with the client, they shouldn’t just bend over, their staff wouldn’t put up with it so why should anybody else? There has to be reasonable discussions upfront, not just saying yes we’ll deliver what you want and trying to work out whether it’s actually possible or not. Do some proper training and coaching, recruit people on their competencies not just coz they’re in the wrong place at the right time, to give them some form of career development but there’s got to be consistency and you’ve got to know that the people leading you are actually worthy of the job themselves... I think they’ve gone through phases where they’ve tried to do things the right way then another contract has come along which has forced them to do things very quickly and they’ve slipped back to their old practices, instead of being consistent saying ‘this is how we want to do things, no matter what’, they just end up cutting corners.’

My respondents felt that Call Direct management was both unprofessional and uninterested in the lives and needs of its employees. Shifts and teams were regularly altered in order to satisfy clients, regardless of the impact upon CSRs lives. The work process and call flow dictate everything in modern call centres, from the pace of the work, down to the hours each CSR works and the shift rotation (see Appendix 2 for an example of my final shift rotation at Call Direct).

### *Discipline*

The ACD also provides a disciplinary function in terms of monitoring CSRs behaviour during their time logged onto the system (Winiecki, 2007). Given the electronic monitoring of all statistics and figures during the working day, team leaders are able to see how long an agent has been logged on, how many calls they have taken, how long they have spent dealing

with customers, how many outbound calls they have made, and how many times they have transferred calls to other departments (ibid). The system also allows team leaders to see how long agents have taken for their break, how long they have spent in 'idle' or 'wrap', how many 'comfort breaks' they have used to visit the toilet, and where each agent is in the call queue (Townsend, 2005). A team leader's ability to monitor agents this closely allows him or her to determine whether a CSR is doing his or her job properly; after only 2 weeks on the phones our team leader Donna electronically monitored Ollie, a member of my team, engaging in 'call avoidance' and brought disciplinary proceedings against him.

After a few weeks on the floor, as a team, we were beginning to get to grips with the calls and the nature of the job, especially in terms of the ACD dictating the work pace to us. I'd already lost count of the number of conversations I'd had interrupted by the whisper in my ear informing me of a call coming through. Apparently, from what some of the others had told me, yesterday Ollie found himself in trouble after becoming pre-occupied with joining in the banter rather than concentrating on the calls when they came through. He kept having to put customers on hold to ask for help because he was too busy messing around with the others to concentrate on dealing with his customers. Ollie was only 19 and very naive. He was easily taken in by the rest of us and I had never met anyone so easily distracted from his job. He really didn't help himself though, his loud and naïve manner had made him well known to the other teams, all of whom joined in taking the piss out of him.

Today, however, he was in serious trouble for his behaviour yesterday. As well as his lack of effort in helping customers, our team leader Donna caught him avoiding calls. There was a trick the floorwalkers showed us during our time in the academy whereby you could avoid calls in the last few minutes of your shift. When an agent was in 'ready' on the ACD, pressing 'release' and 'ready' again moved you to the back of the queue and less likely to receive a call in the final minutes of the shift. The ACD directed the call to the CSR who had been waiting the longest, so going to the back of the queue ensured a quiet end to the shift. When the floorwalkers told us this, they warned us that getting caught would result in a bollocking and we should be clever about doing it. Yesterday, Ollie did this over a dozen times in the last 15 minutes of our shift and Donna, monitoring our figures on her computer, spotted this and pulled him to one side. He was reprimanded and told he would face a disciplinary today.

This was the sole topic of conversation for most of the day. Ollie kept telling us he wasn't bothered about it, even when we kept telling him they were going to sack him. On our first break, Jack and I were talking to Ollie about the impending disciplinary. Jack, who was 24, intelligent and very level-headed, told Ollie, 'you're your own worst enemy mate, you don't know when to shut up or when to use your common sense. They'll be looking for any reason to get rid of any one of us – they've admitted they've got more people coming out of training each week than there are spaces on the teams. Be sensible or they'll kick you out and no-one wants that.' Ollie agreed and kept his head down for the rest of the day. As his disciplinary approached, Ollie asked me if I would sit in on it as his witness and I agreed.

The disciplinary did not last more than a couple of minutes but at least it got me off the phones. Ollie and I went over to the settees where one-to-one meetings with team leaders took place and we were joined by Donna and another team leader who was there to take notes. Donna explained that I was there to make sure nothing unfair was said so I sat back and listened. Times had clearly changed, as 20 years ago Ollie would have had a union representative with him rather than an equally powerless co-worker. Even if I felt something untoward had occurred, I wondered exactly what I could do about it. Probably nothing, I decided, as my job was equally as insecure as Ollie's and opposing anything management said might not have done me any favours either. They went over the charge against him and explained that call avoidance was very serious. I was surprised to hear that when the story had reached Janice, the floor manager, she indicated she would be happy to see Ollie sacked. Donna had talked her round but explained Ollie was effectively avoiding doing his job and it couldn't be tolerated. Donna, in my mind, had fought for Ollie with the managers because, as a new team leader, she wanted to prove that she was capable of turning Ollie into a good agent and impressing her supervisors. He received a written warning that would stay on his file for 3 months so he now had to keep his nose clean. He was very lucky, Jack and I had been right on our break, the turnover of staff was high and we had already seen a lot of new agents in the 5 weeks since we left the training group whilst there were limited seats on the call centre floor. They wouldn't think twice about getting rid of Ollie if he messed up again.

The ability to monitor agents remotely and electronically provides managers and team leaders with the power, potentially, to scrutinise every move a CSR makes (Taylor and Bain, 1999;

Townsend, 2005). As Russell (2007: 133) observes, the application and implementation of technology in the work place is often a reflection of power relations, in this case, statistics-obsessed managers can discipline agents based on the technological ability to monitor the work process. The call centre is not an electric panopticon in the sense that, whilst the system does monitor CSRs closely, the team leader still needs to be on hand to interpret the information. If Donna had been helping another CSR with a call then Ollie's indiscretions might have gone unnoticed. Going back to Ian's story about staying in 'wrap' while he drove to his friend's house, the system will have recorded his lengthy stay in 'wrap', yet if his team leader was not paying attention, he would get away with it. However, there is no doubt that electronic monitoring in call centres is far more advanced than many other occupations. The layout of the call centre floor also aids managers and team leaders in the surveillance of CSRs (Barnes, 2007: 254). Open-plan floor designs allow supervisors to see what CSRs are doing at all times and if a staff member looks like he or she is not working, a supervisor can choose to monitor him or her more closely. In Ollie's case, his behaviour ever since we arrived on the call centre floor had not gone unnoticed by managers capable of seeing him at all times, therefore it was hardly surprising that Donna was concentrating on him at the end of our shift.

### *The Modern Organisation Man?*

It always seemed to happen to me. I only had three minutes before the end of my shift when the beep went off in my ear. I had been packing away, getting ready to go and now I had a call to deal with. Fifteen minutes later after finishing the call, my team had already left, so I logged off the system and, as I was about to leave, Janice, the call centre manager, came across from the supervisors table in front of me. "Its Anthony isn't it?" she said, and then asked if she could have a word with me in the corner.

Although the internal radio was switched off on the call centre floor to ensure we did not lose concentration, the general noise level was very high. With over 75 agents talking to customers, it could be loud at times and often difficult to hear. We sat on the settees in the corner of the call centre floor and she started asking me how I was finding it. "Fine" I said. She went on to ask me about university and what I eventually saw myself doing when I finished my studies. Janice was about 40 years old, smartly dressed and exuded the confidence expected of a manager. She explained to me that she had seen my statistics and heard about my performance on the `phones and said, "While you're with us it might be good

for all of us to make the most of your skills.” I told her that Donna, my team leader, had mentioned training me to deal with email requests as well as `phone calls; by way of rewarding my performance I would not have to spend all day on the `phone. Janice agreed with me that this would be good for me; ‘a break from the `phones’ was how she put it. However, that was not what she had in mind: “I was thinking more of looking into giving you extra responsibility; maybe in the future an opportunity for team leader might be appropriate”. I said that I was still settling in and I would think about it and she said she would speak to me again in a couple of weeks.

A few things crossed my mind as I walked out of the building. Firstly, the managers all admitted to me that being on the `phones all day was ‘crap’ work. They all saw my getting off the `phones as beneficial to both parties; a reward for being good at my job would be to allow me to do something else. It was also interesting how having only been there 2 months, the management team had spotted me and decided to groom me for bigger things. The turnover of staff was high therefore, basic agents would come and go because the job we were required to do was stressful and at times difficult. However, when they came across someone with any sort of potential they aimed to elevate them to something different in order to keep them from leaving. I had a couple of weeks to think this over.

Spotting potential management material and grooming them for future promotion is not new, in fact Whyte (1956: 112) noted how companies hired young men as management possibilities and from the start began schooling them into thinking of themselves as such. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 17-18) argued that the ‘second spirit of capitalism’, from the interwar period up to the 1970s, was characterised by the ‘manager’; an organisation man who attains a position of power and is preoccupied with bureaucracy and rationalisation, long-term planning and the expansion of the organisation. As noted earlier, Boltanski and Chiapello have argued that we have moved into a ‘new spirit of capitalism’ which rejects the notion of long-term planning and unwieldy bureaucracies in favour of flexibility, decentralisation (in the form of subcontracting, outsourcing and temping agencies) and autonomy for managers all the while working within networks across global markets and companies. The move toward flexibility creates instability and uncertainty (Sennett, 1999; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) and therefore, for employees, the offer to carve out a place for oneself within an organisation is a throwback to an earlier form of capitalism, albeit without

any of the stability previously afforded to those seeking a career with a company. Long term investment in employees is expensive for firms and therefore unappealing, as many call centres 'sacrificial' HR strategy indicates, thus making it essential to catch talent early and move them up as fast as possible before stress or burnout diminish a CSRs satisfaction with the company. Meanwhile, as chapter 3 noted, call centres have a hard time trying to instil company values and win over the hearts and minds of employees therefore by recognising talented agents and hinting at possible promotion and a life within the company away from taking calls is one way to do this. In my case, I transferred to a new department a month later, without any say in the matter, and so could not follow up on Janice's offer. However, other agents indicated to me that university qualifications impressed Janice and she sought to groom those with an education in order to keep them with the company. During my time at Call Direct I knew at least one relatively inexperienced agent other than myself who Janice approached with this offer. By the time I left the company, this other agent was an acting team leader for a customer support team.

From a company perspective, this is good management practice. If call centres accept high turnover rates and even incorporate them into the business plan (Wallace et al, 2000), if the management default position is to expect high rates of CSRs leaving, then identifying potential relatively quickly is essential to ensuring good workers remain with the company. However, whilst this seems like good management that can benefit employer and employee, the insecure nature of the labour market and the lack of employee protection creates an oppressive side effect. Throughout my research, I personally knew several agents who had been seconded as team leaders, some for extended periods, without getting the support from the management in terms of sitting the team leader examinations to become permanent team leaders. This issue appeared in an interview with Chrissie, who had on several occasions acted as team leader yet after 3 years was still only a CSR:

Q – Have you looked to move up?

A – Yeah

Q – How have you got on with that?

A – Well, it...again, sometimes it's good and sometimes it's not. It depends on my team leader and the management team and what they want to let me do on that particular day. It's a case of, they know that I've looked after two teams on

my own at the same time as being just an agent and done it brilliantly with no problems, I monitor agents all the time but they won't let me put it into practice until they're desperate. When they don't need me, they say, 'get back and do your job' which is harsh really. A lot of people have a lot of respect for me, having been here that long and knowing what I know, but they don't value that. People think, 'she would do great things if they gave her a better job', really, all they're going to get out of it are agents like me who've been here that long, they'll leave because we don't get the respect we deserve and aren't valued.

Q – It's easier for them to leave you as an agent and then get you to do things from time to time rather than making you a team leader

A – Yeah, that's why they second people as team leaders and then just never make it official so they don't have to pay them that little bit extra

Q – It's like Gerry, he was seconded as a team leader the entire time I worked there, I don't know how long he'd been doing it before I started...

A – He hadn't. It was only when you started that he got seconded. Its like my old team leader, Mitch, he's been there for two years and is an excellent team leader. He's been for his assessment but he failed it so he's still only seconded. It's better than being just an agent but he's never going to get any further than that, he won't get the pay he deserves for all the work that he's doing. It is a bit shocking really.

Q – If they're going to get someone to do the job for any length of time then they should be paid accordingly.

A – They are just taking advantage of them because they know agents want to develop themselves so they'll say yes to seconding them but knowing that tomorrow they can just put him back on the `phones.

Call Direct appear to have taken a good initiative in terms of developing talented agents and transformed it into an oppressive, unfair practice that leaves CSRs with the potential to develop into career employees feeling disillusioned and let down. Marcuse (1964: 149) declared that scientific-technical rationality and manipulation were welded together into new forms of control and Call Direct appears to embody this. Managers manipulate keen agents into thinking they have a long-term future in positions of management whereas in truth they dangle the possibility of advancement in front of them before sending them back to their old

job when it suits management. The lack of union representation in call centres, at least in terms of Call Direct, has shorn employees of safeguards and support (Taylor and Bain, 1999) whilst unstable, insecure labour markets provide companies with the cover to manipulate employees in this way (Richardson and Belt, 2001). If employees grow tired of this treatment the management can accept them leaving knowing they can simply turn their attention to the latest new recruit showing potential and CSRs looking for advancement may be loathe to leave and start again elsewhere knowing they have to start at the bottom. Either way, it is the company who win and the employee who loses out.

This chapter, hopefully, has provided an insight into the management practices and strategies utilised in a modern call centre. Heavily reliant on the use of electronic surveillance and monitoring techniques, call centre managers and team leaders have the ability to track a CSR's work rate and performance level over an entire shift. However, as some of the examples above have shown, a human element is still required in the guise of the team leader. If a team leader does not interpret the electronic information collected on each agent then the management strategy falls down and there is room for resistance (a subject we will return to). Meanwhile management identification and early grooming of potential future team leaders shows an awareness of turnover rates and staff dissatisfaction. However, in practice, this policy often leads to further disillusionment as those who attempt to progress regularly face disappointment. The key point this chapter makes is that subtle manipulation of strategies continues to benefit the employer over the employee whilst good ideas are often substituted for bad practices as Call Direct management cut corners in order to satisfy clients. The next chapter focuses on ways employees attempt to resist the work process and management practices at Call Direct.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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‘The history of liberty is a history of resistance’

- Woodrow Wilson

Having outlined some of the issues concerning the daily grind of call centre work in chapter 4, this chapter will focus upon the ways in which CSRs attempt to resist the predetermined work pace and the intrusive forms of surveillance and micromanagement that frame the everyday work experience of Call Direct workers. The manner in which workers attempt to resist forms of control and exploitation in oppressive work settings has generated a great deal of sociological interest (Edgell, 2006; see also Hobbs, 1989; Mars, 1982; Ditton, 1977; Mulholland, 2004). Resistance, for the purpose of this study, involves employees actively attempting to modify the prevailing conditions of their situation; opposing certain working practices, demanding improved working conditions, better pay, or more benefits. As this chapter aims to highlight, there is a difference between this form of resistance and other forms of disobedience that occur in the workplace. This chapter offers a model which notes the specific distinction between disobedience and resistance; disobedience has an undermining function involving the failure to submit to the overt and hidden rules and norms of the workplace, often for instrumental ends. Laziness, dissatisfaction, taking back time, getting back at management can all be disruptive if enough people do it as it threatens the smooth running of the operation. Resistance attempts to alter the experience of the workplace by trying to change or remove these rules rather than simply subverting them. Resistance also involves a measure of sacrifice by the individual which is not present in disobedience. Union strike action was taken with the knowledge that strikers could lose their jobs, inspire the antipathy of management, and even lose pay whilst the strike was on. Resistance involves something bigger than the individual, whereas disobedience is undertaken for instrumental reasons with no bigger picture beyond the individual and their attitude. This distinction is crucial to understanding the nature of disobedience in call centres as opposed to workplace resistance from a different generation. Whilst the term resistance is used throughout the chapter, the difference between disobedience and resistance is distinguished by the aims of the protagonist.

As Blauner (1964: 166) notes, ‘the industry a man works in *is fateful* because the conditions of work and existence in various industrial environments are quite different’. Each workplace setting influences the nature of the work undertaken, the meaning each individual takes from that work, the extent to which each worker is free in their working life, and the extent they are controlled by technology or supervision (ibid). However, despite the vast differences across workplaces, one of the constant factors is the role of employee resistance, in whatever form it may take (Watson, 2003). A brief overview of some classic accounts of workplace resistance bears this out. The most authoritative account is offered by Mars (1982: 17) who noted that in industrial settings ‘fiddling was, in fact, entrenched, it was woven into the fabric of people’s lives’.

A classic example of disobedience rather than resistance that threatens the co-ordinates of the labour process, Mars’ study involved analysis of many professions and indicated that disobedience was present across a wide variety of jobs (Mars, 1982). As workplace deviance and resistance differed depending upon occupation, Mars developed a typology to delineate between types of worker and the forms of resistance they employed. Hawks, donkeys, wolves and vultures perpetrate workplace crime in order to exact their true worth from the employer, skive in order to take back time from the company, sabotage in an attempt to disrupt the employer, and bend rules in order to suit themselves (ibid). Although primarily addressing an industrial setting, Mars’ typology can still categorise resistance in radically alternative work settings. For the purposes of this chapter, the ‘donkey’ fiddle is particularly relevant in so far as they are ‘people highly constrained by rules who are also isolated from each other...the response of donkeys is to resist often by breaking the rules – to sabotage the systems that constrain them – or to fiddle. When they do the effects can be highly disruptive’ (Mars, 1982: 2). Mars argued that donkeys are in the paradoxical position of being powerless and powerful, powerless if they passively accept the constraints they face, yet powerful if they decide to be disruptive by rejecting the constraints upon them (Mars, 1982: 31). In terms of the motivation for cheating, Mars argued that the central reason for resistance was a lack of autonomy:

“Fiddles have to aim to gain control – to overcome a job’s constraints – and where jobs are so ‘over controlled’ that there is not even the opportunity to fiddle,

then here we are likely to find, as a counter-response, the move into sabotage.”

(Mars, 1982: 70)

Whilst Mars offers the most commanding account of resistance in the workplace, many other studies also highlight the phenomenon (see Hobbs, 1989; Ditton, 1977; Burawoy, 1989; Beynon, 1973; Sutherland, 1983). Sutherland (1983: 7) defined white-collar crime as ‘a crime committed by a person of respectability and high social status in the course of his occupation’. White-collar crime has become a popular area of research within criminology (see Slapper and Tombs, 1999; Croall, 1992). The dichotomy between blue collar and white-collar workers is addressed in much of the literature, however complex corporate crimes are beyond the scope of this chapter.

In Hobbs’ (1989) study of entrepreneurial culture in the East End of London, employees who embodied the entrepreneurial cultural traits of that specific locale would attempt to supplement their income by making a profit at the company’s expense whilst seeking to extract their true worth from the employer. Hobbs uses the term ‘good business’ to describe the practice of warehouse employees earning extra money on the side without resorting to outright theft (1989: 148). Deliberately damaging goods in the warehouse to ensure they are sold for scrap provides the employer with the opportunity to make money on the side:

“For this method trusted clients would order goods and negotiate with Nob as to the best method of damaging the goods so as not to hinder their function. The goods would be damaged in this specific manner, entered into the books as damaged, and sold to Nob’s customer at scrap price plus Nob’s commission on top.” (Hobbs, 1989: 152).

Earning extra income in this way combined an entrepreneurial outlook and cultural awareness, particularly in terms of which customers could be trusted to pull off such a deal without jeopardising the employee’s position. Utilizing knowledge of the trade, the company, and the employees, workers would employ alternative strategies to thieving that fell within the parameters of ‘good business’ (ibid).

Ditton's (1977) study of fiddling at a bread factory involved salesmen fiddling customers out of money and production staff fiddling the company out of bread and, occasionally, money. Ditton regarded fiddling as a 'subculture of business' (p. 173), as entrenched in the culture of the workplace as Mars (1982) believed. For Ditton (1977: 85), management attitude towards fiddling was interesting in that they worried about employees fiddling and cheating the company, but were much more ambivalent when it came to employees cheating customers. In this setting, fiddling was so entrenched that, in terms of the production staff, cheating was a group activity shrouded with a code of silence to protect the group involved. Seeking to extract their true worth from the employer features heavily in this study, as it did in Mars' research.

Beynon's (1973) classic study of employees working for Ford highlights resistance to management through union activity and strike action. During his research, Beynon describes strikes by workers over pay grade negotiations, working conditions, work practices, and overtime bans (p. 165 – 167). Meanwhile, some departments would strike simply because another department had made considerable gains in pay through strike action and workers felt the need for parity (p. 166). Alongside traditional union resistance, workers also resisted the automated pace of work by collectively slowing down or speeding up work on the line. For example, workers would collectively agree to speed up the pace for a short period in order to gain an unscheduled cigarette break. This corresponds with Mars' (1982) assertion that workers engaged in linear work can choose to speed up in order to take back time from the production line.

Beynon (1973: 110) also described how plant workers would dis-identify with the products they made in order to help cope with the tensions of working in such conditions. Workers remarked, 'I wouldn't touch the bloody things: not with what I see going on in that plant'. Resistance manifested in this form clearly signals a divorce between employees and their work, indicating high levels of alienation on the production line (Marx, 1999). This dis-identification corresponds closely to remarks heard regularly on the call centre floor at Call Direct. Many CSRs openly regarded Internet Plus broadband as 'shit', 'rubbish' or 'not as good as x', their insider knowledge of the products and disdain for the company manifested in a negative approach to the product. The changing nature of British labour markets stands out in this comparison, the Ford workers of the late 1960s dis-identified with the products they

*made* whilst the Call Direct workers of the twenty-first century distanced themselves from the products they *sold*.

Burawoy's (1989) Marxist analysis of the capitalist labour process also considers the nature of resistance in the workplace. Workers in the machine factory at the centre of the study were paid in 'rates' rather than 'piecework' (p. 161 – 162). Each operation on a piece received a standard rate, fixed at so many pieces per hour and operators exceeding the standard rate would receive a bonus. At times management would attempt to raise the rates by increasing the number of pieces produced per hour. Workers would adopt strategies to resist this change, preventing the 'speed-up' agents upping their rates, by adding extra movements to the process, running the job at low speeds, or engaging in deliberate 'go slows' to ensure they received a 'good price' for their labour, whilst work intensification remained reasonable. Interestingly, hostility was directed towards workers who would bust rates rather than the methods department who increased rates (p. 170). As Burawoy describes, 'everyone in the department comes to hear about rate increases, and gossip surrounds the guilty operator for years to come. Some operators threatened to beat up Ed; others wanted to tinker with his setups or hide his tools' (ibid). At a time of collective solidarity, breaking the workers code became more significant than management increasing work quotas, highly indicative of the 'us' versus 'them' mentality of industrial workforces.

In studying industrial labour and its resistance to working practices, Burawoy emphasises ideological manipulation and concludes that management tolerates some forms of resistance because they have the intended purpose, at least from capital's point of view, of maintaining control. Employees who feel they have a choice are less likely to resist management decisions and ultimately do not generate the class-consciousness required to cause a revolution in the workplace. When employees are limited to choices within the rules of the organisation, politically motivated resistance is less likely to occur.

Resistance was, as the above literature shows, partially institutionalised during the industrial period but given the changes in the labour market highlighted in earlier chapters, the world of work is a very different place (Sennett, 1999; Beck, 2000). The main question this chapter aims to address is how and in what ways do employees address a sense of alienation and exploitation in radically different times? For the purposes of this discussion, resistance in the

workplace falls under two categories; firstly, institutionalised, communal resistance, and secondly, individualised resistance. Historically, trade unions represented institutionalised, communal resistance (Beaumont, 1987), whilst individualised forms of resistance, such as ‘taking back time’, come to symbolise the institutionalisation of individualisation in a contemporary consumer capitalist society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This chapter will show how organised, political resistance aimed at procuring rights and benefits by forcing the system to change has been replaced by individualised resistance aimed at clawing back minutes and seconds from an employer, with little or no regard for altering the working conditions or securing collective rights. Institutional resistance such as the trade union movement represented a class movement, a political attempt to rehabilitate industrial capitalism rather than overthrow it (McIlroy, 1995).

### *The Labour Movement: The Rise and Fall of Trade Unions*

At the outset of the labour movement, a struggle took place for the soul of the Labour Party. Revolutionary socialists, or syndicalists, grounded in the industrial militancy of the early twentieth century, challenged the state with a conception of an industrial parliament in which workers would control their industries through revolutionised industrial unions and workers councils (McIlroy, 1995: 49; also Cannadine, 1998). On the other side, Labourism searched for a means of better working the system rather than dispensing with it. Built around the twin pillars of collective bargaining and parliamentary politics, Labourism embodied a strong attachment to the institutions of the British state (McIlroy, 1995). The Fabian Society typified the Labourism approach, favouring gradualist and reformist social democracy rather than revolution (McIlroy, 1995; also Kynaston, 2007). The collapse of the British economy in the 1920s signalled the end of syndicalism and victory for Labourism. From then on, unions and Labourism attempted to work within the capitalist structure, pushing for change and reform rather than overhauling the entire system (McIlroy, 1995: 59).

As industrial capital required a massed workforce, allowing forms of emotional or political mutuality to exist provided a useful stabilising function. This mutuality manifested itself in trade unions and collective bargaining that, to a certain extent, proved meaningful, at least on a political level (Watson, 2003: 225). The Labour Party and trade unions transformed the political consensus and helped significantly improve the lives of millions of workers. In Middlesbrough, once the era of paternalism from the local ironmasters and other businessmen

had ended (Beynon et al, 1994), the Labour Party enjoyed constant success in the polls and both local seats in the House of Commons remain safe Labour strongholds, even despite the recent MPs expenses scandal and the closure of the Corus steelworks elicited general disgust from the public.

However, capitalism could afford concessions to labour as wage increases, government regulation of business practices, health and safety, and employee safeguards was of little economic significance in the historical advance of capitalism (Fraser, 1999). As an 'iron curtain' was drawn across Europe and the cold war came to define global politics, Western capitalism found itself locked in a desperate ideological battle of self-justification: in order to demonstrate its central ideological truth, it must triumph over state communism and prove itself to be the social system most suited to economic growth and wealth creation. For the ideologues of Western capitalism, 'out-producing' communism laid bare the gaping flaws of collectivism by appearing to prove that self-interest was an essential ingredient for capital accumulation and economic development. To achieve a high level of productivity instrumental workers need to be motivated by the promise of tangible material benefits and in order to induce workers to throw themselves into the ceaseless battle for skills, there must be a material justification for their sacrifice. In this way the push for ever-increasing forms of productivity lies at the very heart of the capitalist project, not simply as a means of increasing the profit, the 'accursed share' (Bataille, 1991), upon which capitalism depends, but also as a complex form of ideological justification and actualisation, a supposed foundational 'truth' that connects economic imperatives to human subjectivity. As the cold war intensified after the Korean War, the national government in the 1950s actively encouraged collective bargaining and went out of its way to stimulate and strengthen the voluntary machinery of trade unions (Fraser, 1999: 178) as a tangible benefit and material justification for the sacrifice made by labour, whilst simultaneously ensuring increasing levels of productivity essential to win the ideological battle of wills with communism.

Going further, by placating trade unions and the industrial workforce, capitalism prevented itself reaching crisis point as workers felt safe in their jobs and advances in their living standards quelled any inclination to fight for revolutionary social transformation (Burawoy, 1979). Concurrently, the rise of consumerism acted as a measure of compensation for workers hard work and effort, economic growth provided opportunities previously

unavailable to the working class, suggesting that the lives of their children would be qualitatively better than theirs, particularly in terms of educational advancement and labour market prospects (Judt, 2010). By the final third of the twentieth century, with the ideological battle with communism won, the ‘end of history’ declared (Fukuyama, 1992), and discussions of ideology disappearing from public platforms (Eagleton, 2007), the masses bought into the rise and democratisation of consumerism (Barber, 2007). Liberal capitalism can realise even the wildest of dreams therefore social revolution is no longer necessary. The ideology of consumer capitalism manipulates dreams and desires, infiltrates consciousness, and creates pseudo-needs in a way that suggests that the working classes were slowly and subtly modified through their desire to alleviate material suffering through consumerism. The slow erosion of the traditional working class subtly shifted emphasis from collective betterment towards the compulsion of the individual to triumph in a battle of status attainment; capitalism, particularly in its consumer phase, is founded on individual freedoms and liberties and this ideology filters down to the individual (Harvey, 2010) – traditional dreams of social justice and equality fade away in the face of pseudo-reality, false needs, and the spectacle of western consumer capitalism (Debord, 1998).

Trade unions fought to improve conditions at work and home for millions of working people without seriously jeopardising productivity and the capitalist project. A key example is the nationalising of mining in 1947. It became practically compulsory to join the NUM (National Union of Mineworkers), yet despite their numbers, many were disappointed that nothing changed in terms of the running of the mining industry (Fraser, 1999: 194; also Kynaston, 2007). Workers saw wages increase and the introduction of safeguards to protect their jobs, but the unions did little to change the way the industry operated.

Industrial modernity was characterised by boom and bust economics. Periodic unemployment became a part of life for many industrial workers, particularly labourers who could only trade the physical power of their bodies. However, economic downturns were relatively short and shallow between 1945 and the late 1970s but since 1979 the crises of capitalism have been much more severe and taken a bigger toll on working people (Harvey, 2010). Some craftsmen and tradesmen would always be indispensable, in fact, the earliest trade unions stemmed from artisans and shoemakers, weavers and cabinetmakers looking to safeguard their craft from the vagaries of markets and regulations (McIlroy, 1995; Thompson,

1980). Traditionally, as capital needed labour (Marx, 1999), massed workforces were able to gain concessions and safeguards. As the labour movement grew, the government and employers offered more concessions to unions thus improving conditions for the workforce and making it difficult for employers to get rid of individual workers (McIlroy, 1995). For example, union unrest in the early 1970s saw the introduction of the Employment Protection Act in 1975 that extended employee protection against unfair dismissal (Fraser, 1999: 230). The disruptive nature of union militancy, coupled with the potential damage to profitability brought about by strike action, ushered in legislation safeguarding individuals from being fired or unduly punished.

Contemporary capital, on the other hand, no longer requires stability, nor does it pander to a politically aware or agitated workforce (Harvey, 2010). Of course, in order for markets to continue expanding, control of labour markets is essential whilst worker militancy, as seen in many developing countries (Mason, 2008) cannot become entrenched. In Britain, the labour market has been thoroughly domesticated, militancy no longer exists, and the interests of capital have triumphed, albeit through stealth rather than a direct fight with the interests of labour. Subsequently, employers no longer need to yield to the demands made by labour and trade unions (Heery et al, 2003).

With the decimation of union strength under Thatcher in the 1980s, the trade union stranglehold over employers disappeared and the potency of mass resistance in the labour market vanished (Harvey, 2005). Thatcher deployed a deliberate political strategy to smash the power of the unions in response to the embarrassment of the last Conservative government in the early 1970s (Campbell, 2009; Vinen, 2009). During Edward Heath's three years as Prime Minister, around 3,300,000 working days were lost to strike action in protest to the Industrial Relations Act (Fraser, 1999: 224). Following a standoff with the miners, Heath had been forced to introduce a 3 day week in order to save fuel, when the miners threatened an all out strike, potentially disastrous for the country in terms of power cuts and fuel shortages. Heath called a general election in order to determine 'who runs Britain'. Heath lost and Labour returned to power (Fraser, 1999: 229; also Beckett, 2009).

By the early 1980s, large sections of the public had grown tired of union militancy. Thatcher's election victory in 1979, in the wake of a 'winter of discontent', had come with a

mandate to tackle trade union power as the militancy of the unions left many questioning the power they held over the government, particularly after strike action brought about a 3 day week, power cuts, and tonnes of rubbish piled up in streets (Vinen, 2009). Children's hospitals, old people's homes, and schools suffered due to strike action. Notoriously, the Liverpool Parks and Cemeteries Branch of the General & Municipal Workers Union refused to bury dead bodies, leaving over 300 piled up in cold storage. As Marr (2007: 375) noted, 'funeral corteges were met at the cemeteries by pickets and forced to turn back. Strikers were confronted in local pubs and thumped'.

When many industries still employed compulsory union membership, individual workers began to resent having to pay dues to unions for rights they already possessed under legislation (Beaumont, 1987). In the eyes of the government, unionism would lose importance when the law guarantees employment rights. Individual rights enshrined through legislation not only reduce the need for collective bargaining, but also exemplifies the institutionalisation of individualisation in British society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). For example, the aforementioned Employment Protection Act of 1975 safeguarded and extended employee protection against unfair dismissal. Granting rights to individuals, particularly defensive rights aimed at protecting the individual, subtly incorporate the idea that there is no need for collective action on anything. If the state guarantees each individual their rights, it erodes faith in all collective forms and serves to convince the masses that the individual is the essential unit of analysis, each individual is in it for themselves and do not need to be encumbered by commitments to strangers. It also props up the belief that liberal democracy has triumphed because it can guarantee us our rights and provide us with everything we need thus further eroding the idea of the collective. If the state guarantees us our rights and protects us, why take up the struggle and sacrifice anything for collective improvement?

Also, some workers began to feel that, as prolonged industrial action began adversely affecting the lives of members, union leaders such as Arthur Scargill became less concerned with the individual workers and more concerned with refusing to back down to the government (Beckett and Hencke, 2009; Douglass, 2002). Acknowledging that Thatcher would not back down either, Scargill chose to stand and fight rather than reach a compromise that, with the benefit of hindsight, would have been worthless as the government was

determined to break the power of the union. The NUM would have avoided the embarrassment of defeat but eventually government persistence would have resulted in its victory further down the line. Displaying what Badiou (2007) would label as ‘fidelity to an idea’, Scargill refused to yield ground and was fully committed to an ideological position which envisioned either total victory or total defeat. This militant approach drew criticism from within the union as well as the general public. At the shop floor level, employees began to resent shop stewards who abused their position, as this ICI worker on Teesside recalls:

“It finished up, where unionism, I think, really destroyed itself because the shop stewards had their own offices and then the shop stewards went round like lords and masters. And we were working for two supervisors. The supervision was that weak that you didn’t know which side of the fence to sit on because you got a bigger bollocking off your shop steward than you did off the gaffer.”  
(Williamson, 2008: 72).

Ideological warfare for hegemonic control of the country pitted Thatcherism against the class-based social democracy of labour and the unions (Hall, 1988: 46). Thatcherism successfully appealed to ‘nation’ and ‘people’ against ‘class’ and ‘union’. More people found themselves interpellated into the ideological vision of ‘nation’ and ‘people’ (Althusser, 1971) as compared with the section of society concerned with ‘class’ and ‘union’. Interpellation occurs when pre-ideological individuals are encouraged to conceive themselves as independent agents for whom reality exists and thereby securing their performance of their actual role as a support to the prevailing ideology in the form of the ‘always-already interpellated subject’ (Callinicos, 2007: 275). In this case, the neoliberal ideology of Thatcherism encouraged individuals to accept the call to ‘nation’ and ‘people’. Winning the ideological battle was just as important as winning the actual battle with the unions (Hall, 1988). Paving the way for a return to free market economics required a strong State and, for many, the miners’ strike exposed the State for what it had become under Thatcher – the police force of the capitalist class (Richards, 1996: 118). Ironically, after Thatcher strengthened the power of the state in order to tackle the unions and unleash free market economics, the strong state began to weaken in the face of an unrestrained free market (Gray, 1998). However, in the wake of recession and financial crisis, it became clear that the state, rather than weakened and diminished, as Gray suggests, had been there all along facilitating

and encouraging the expansion of the free market and now had to step in again in order to bail out the financial services and prop up the market (Harvey, 2010).

By the late 1980s, after victories over the miners and the Fleet Street workers at Wapping, Thatcher was in a position to strip away the power of the trade unions and consequently pave the way for some of the management strategies highlighted in chapter 4. The 1988 Employment Act allowed individual union members to ignore majority ballots on industrial action and practically outlawed closed shops, whilst the 1989 Employment Act weakened an employee's right to claim unfair dismissal at an industrial tribunal (Fraser, 1999: 243). The 1989 Act also completely removed the right for workers to claim unfair dismissal if they had less than 2 years service with a company. The legacy of this act has already appeared in this thesis, particularly in terms of Call Direct's strategy to deny new workers the right to sick pay and other benefits in the first 6 months of their employment.

The management practices discussed earlier are direct consequences of political changes enacted since the late 1970s. Although Thatcher and the Conservatives laid the groundwork by deregulating industries and crippling the influence of trade unions (Harvey, 2005), successive Labour governments since 1997 bought into the monetarist mantra of light regulation and the 'third way' of economic management (Giddens, 1997; Seymour, 2010). Sustained economic growth under New Labour led many to believe that the 'third way' was the answer when, as the current economic crisis shows, it was not. In actuality, light regulation of business, banking and industry was remarkably myopic and opportunistic, riding the wave of economic growth and wealth creation, their narcissism fuelling belief that the 'third way' had ended boom and bust economics (Giddens, 1997). Failing to consider long term repercussions of light regulation, coupled with an opportunism fuelled by the ideological self-justification of neoliberal hegemony, saw New Labour veer dramatically from old Labour's social justice agenda whilst ushering in a raw capitalism, free from traditional government regulation (Seymour, 2010). Raw capitalism in this form enables call centres to employ radical management styles based on measuring statistics and time, micromanagement, and intrusive electronic surveillance. This management style became the focus of much individualised resistance rather than collective institutionalised resistance.

### *Forms of Resistance within the Call Centre*

Although much of the recent literature concerning call centres highlights a growing union involvement, particularly in Scottish call centres (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Deery and Kinnie, 2002) this appears to be a slow process. Call Direct had no union representation, indeed it was actively discouraged and prohibited. For example, one slow Sunday evening I sat discussing our feelings about management decisions and trade unions with some of my colleagues. Everyone was annoyed because there were only seven of us on our floor and none of us wanted to be there. It was also bank holiday weekend so while the rest of the world enjoyed the sunshine and took advantage of the extra day off we sat inside waiting for calls that never arrived. It was so quiet I did not take a call for the last 50 minutes of my shift. At one point the conversation got round to the new code of conduct and Ollie, who had missed our team meeting earlier in the week, in which everyone complained in vain about the new code, was convinced that we would be able to do something about it. 'If everyone in this building went on strike then they'd have to do something about it' he kept saying. It seemed not to have occurred to him that it would make no difference because we would be sacked for breaking the terms and conditions of our contracts whilst there would be plenty of people in the local area who would take our place.

The discussion then evolved to union representation and, even at 18 and 19 years old, some of the people in our team were aware of the possible power of union action in the workplace although they also knew that it was never likely to happen and therefore showed no signs of actually engaging in unionism. There was no union representation at Call Direct, although I was surprised to hear Fred tell me that he had heard of someone who was sacked for trying to form a union at Call Direct. If this was true then even attempts by employees to develop forms of representation would never work. Winlow and Hall (2006: 27) argue that young people see little benefit in joining a union, their instrumental attitude towards work and co-workers made it impossible for them to see the benefit of collective action. Although my co-workers correspond closely to those in Winlow and Hall's study, in particular responding to workplace frustration through absenteeism, 'tuning out' during shifts, or even moving on to other jobs, they also would discuss, however briefly, the potential upside of having some form of representation in the workplace.

It remains debatable whether these young men and women would have actually joined a union if Call Direct allowed it, yet it was, given Winlow and Hall's evidence, surprising to hear informal discussions take place although hardly unexpected to hear them give up so easily when faced with the truth about their situation. There is a big difference between talking about union involvement and actually getting involved. Reflecting a collective impotence (Fisher, 2010), nobody seemed willing to act, giving up time and money selflessly for the benefit of their co-workers. There remains the possibility that their understanding of collective action to transform their workplace emanates from an instrumental approach towards collectivism. Rather than becoming involved in union action to benefit their fellow workers, or through a strongly held belief in an 'us' or 'we' mentality, some workers may consider union involvement being of potential benefit to themselves as individual worker consumers. This is distinctly possible when one considers that the discussion of union involvement emanated from Ollie, who repeatedly demonstrated his disregard for many of his co-workers at Call Direct and only remained in regular contact with one person, me, after the company sacked him. In fact, his discussion of union involvement only started after he felt the new code of conduct implemented on the call centre floor inconvenienced him and was aware that, alone, he was unable to force change.

In some respects, the employees who talked of union involvement are condemned to live like moral vagrants (Bauman, 2005a); they always find faults and believe something better exists elsewhere prompting a perpetual movement which erodes the possibility of emotional satisfaction in their working life. 'Liquid life is a succession of new beginnings – yet precisely for that reason it is the swift and painless endings, without which new beginnings would be unthinkable, that tend to be its most challenging moments and most upsetting headaches' (Bauman, 2005a: 2). Rather than being capable of mapping out a linear outline for one's future, Bauman (2007b: 32) suggests that life, for many, has become pointillist or punctuated, marked by ruptures or discontinuities rather than cohesion or continuity. Jumping from one poorly paid, insecure job to another in search of elusive satisfaction, living for the weekend (Winlow and Hall, 2009a), and not planning for the future all symbolise a large section of young men and women currently engaged in the labour market.

Constant sideways moves were the best that many CSRs at Call Direct had to look forward to (Fenton and Dermott, 2006), indicative of a wider trend in youth career patterns that also,

particularly in places like Middlesbrough, involve periods of unemployment (Webster et al, 2004; Shildrick et al, 2010). Constantly moving from one low paid, insecure service sector job to another inevitably leads to growing unhappiness and disruption as young men and women consistently fail to settle into a job they like, preferring to move on somewhere else in the faint hope that the grass is actually greener on the other side. For example, after Call Direct fired Ollie, he went through long periods of unemployment punctuated by seasonal work at a local retail outlet and occasional forays into the black economy by doing several cash-in-hand jobs for friends and acquaintances in his local village. His longest unbroken spell in employment was around 10 months of full-time shift work at one of the few remaining chemical works in Middlesbrough until he was laid off during a round of redundancies. During one of his recurring spells collecting Job Seekers Allowance, Ollie even reapplied to Call Direct who, unsurprisingly given his behaviour during his first spell with the company, turned him down.

Trade unionism was built on the foundation of a 'we' mentality, the pursuit of collective shared interests (Fraser, 1999). In an increasingly instrumental and individualised world, the notion of collective or mutual interests sounds like a throwback to former times, resigned to a place in history. This is borne out by falling union membership, a far cry from the heyday of trade union power. In 2005, an estimated 6.39 million employees were members of a trade union (Grainger, 2006) compared with over 13 million members in 1979 (Fraser, 1999: 234). As noted earlier, many employees felt that the state had their rights covered, unions would no longer be necessary if a paternal state ensured individual rights were guaranteed. Law enforcement replaced collective bargaining. Some unions have survived, primarily as the workers in those industries see the benefits of collective bargaining, for example, most teachers are unionised in order to secure financial benefits and protection from lawsuits and allegations. Although the notion of class interests appears to have disappeared from the remaining unions, joining a strong union makes sense in today's climate.

In the service sector, union influence remains minimal and therefore joining a union may have little or no impact. As Taylor and Bain (2001: 62) point out, by the time call centres were established, 'the role of unions was confined mainly to 'traditional' bargaining items, leaving 'point of production' issues (other than bonuses) almost entirely at management's discretion. In short, managerial *carte blanche* has led to an intensification of work,

generating a host of grievances'. The biggest complaint among call centre staff is the pace of work (Mulholland, 2004; Taylor and Bain, 1999; Deery et al, 2002) and yet the demands of CSRs are almost totally beyond the scope of trade union agendas.

The lack of representation cost me several other things during my employment at Call Direct. I lost three days holiday at the end of the last financial year because HR rejected all the days I asked for. That meant that I received neither the days off, nor the money for them. I was not alone as several colleagues on my team lost out as well. I later found out that unless I put my holidays in at least three weeks in advance, I would have no chance of getting them granted. It occurred to me that, while I was upset at losing my holidays, a single parent in my situation would be affected far worse by losing holidays and money through no fault of his or her own. In comparison with the loss of holiday entitlements, taking back a few minutes and seconds from the company pales into insignificance for employees who rely on taken for granted benefits such as holidays in order to look after children. Effectively the company has ignored its contractual obligation to me by not giving me the holidays or financial remuneration for not being able to take the time off. I worked three days for free. It amounted to theft, primitive accumulation at its most basic. If I had ignored any of my contractual obligations to Call Direct, the company would have no hesitation in disciplining me or firing me, however when the roles were reversed it was perfectly acceptable for it to ignore its obligation and put the responsibility onto me for not having submitted my request sooner.

My team suffered as our shifts changed twice in a 6 week period meaning any plans we made for our days off had to be scrapped. After joining the Moving House Team caused me to change my shifts once, it became clear there were too many agents due to the lack of calls we handled, therefore some of the CSRs were sent back to customer support, the number of teams reduced, and a second team change and shift change occurred. We could do nothing about it and whilst the managers heard our complaints, they only pretended to empathise whilst never appearing to actually care about messing us around repeatedly. Worst of all, nobody actually requested to go on the Moving House Team, we were only told about it the week before all the shifts changed. I, like many others, was also told I had no say in the matter and I would be forced to join the Moving House Team, whether I wanted to or not. In 6 months, I changed teams 3 times and had numerous shift changes within those teams. One of my respondents, Shirley, spent 9 months at Call Direct and told me she had moved teams

four times. That meant four new sets of shifts and four new sets of co-workers to attempt to integrate with, although Shirley felt her personality helped her repeated transition into new teams:

‘Yeah, I think I slotted in all right but I think if you weren’t much of a people person then it would be quite hard to adjust from being with a team for three months in the training...I think everyone gets on so well with their training team and it’s just sad [breaking up the training team]’

Management blamed shift changes on the Internet Plus contract, refusing to take any responsibility for it whilst simultaneously appearing to be as inconvenienced by its demands as the CSRs were. The demand placed on outsourced call centres is well known and covered in the call centre literature (Taylor and Bain, 2005; Bain et al, 2002; Gall et al, 2003; Kinnie et al, 2008). As noted in chapter 4, Tracy worked on the scheduling team at Call Direct before I joined the company and she offered an insight into the process of mapping shift patterns to fit the client demands:

‘We were very much driven by what the client would give you in terms of the calls they would give you, you couldn’t say, ‘well, I’m sorry, I can’t staff at that time of the day’, they would say ‘that’s your problem, that’s what you’re paid for’. That often meant that we were given, I’d say probably, sometimes unreasonable shifts to staff, we were asking them to compensate for the poor call flow, but it was expected because it is an outsourced call centre, they would tend to say, ‘we’ll bend over backward for whatever the client wants’

By guaranteeing Internet Plus that it could deliver, Call Direct would do anything they could to meet its promise, the result being shift changes and team changes whilst blaming it all on the needs of the client. Another of my respondents Zoe, had also been subjected to constant shift changes early in her 5 year stay at Call Direct:

‘They do [change the shifts]. When they have a new team they tend to do that quite a lot. I know when I first started all the teams were new then, they changed the shifts all the time, you didn’t know where the hell you were and they brought

all that rota stuff in that didn't work [*shift rotation system developed around the number of teams in each department. On customer support it was a 12 week rotation, on the moving house team it was 4 weeks*]. I don't know what they're doing now but when that rota stuff came in it worked for a bit and then there was shifts missing and you'd look for your team [on the intranet] and the next 4 weeks would be empty. What time are we in on Monday? I don't know.'

Attempting to find a balance between the call flow and the number of CSRs working at any one time appears to be little more than trial and error with the employees losing out when management get things wrong. Shifts change at short notice and CSRs have to adapt to the new rotation. One of my respondents, Phil, did not lose holidays or money whilst at Call Direct but he did admit that the process of applying for holidays was problematic:

A – No, it's pretty bad. Only two people are allowed holidays at any one time where I am now, on moving house you just never got holidays.

Q – How many is there on your team now?

A – I think there's about fifteen.

Q – Fifteen people but there's only two allowed holidays at any one time?

A – Even though.... they've always had two off at any one time, even though they've just added three new people, they still only let two have holidays at once.

Call Direct used an intranet system whereby you would submit holiday requests to the team leader who escalated it to the unseen HR department, located elsewhere in the building. CSRs only knew whether holidays were accepted or declined by checking the intranet and any queries had to go to the team leader, not HR. The process became laborious when, as Phil indicated, only two members of a team were allowed off at any one time. With 15 people trying to put holidays in, more often than not, they would be rejected and CSRs had to go through the process repeatedly. In the run up to the financial year-end in April, we were told that any holidays carried over would be lost. Trying to repeatedly engage with a rigid process that allowed little leeway or support for CSRs left some unable to fulfil their holiday entitlement. Chrissie was particularly critical of the holiday request system at Call Direct:

Q – What do you think of the system they've got for holidays, that sort of thing?

A – It's pretty appalling actually.

Q – In what respect?

A – In the respect that you... they request that you put holidays in, they'll send an email round saying that the people who haven't had holidays need to put them in for a certain month and then when you do it, you can put the whole month in and not get a day. They actually tell you to use the holidays and then you don't get them so there's no point really.

Q – It is a first come, first served basis but do you think that it is too rigid in terms of being flexible towards people's needs? If something came up and you needed a day off next week then you wouldn't get it.

A – Yeah. There's no chance. I found myself that if you go the right way about getting a holiday then you won't get it, but if you then see the people you think might go that extra mile for you, they pick and choose who they want to do it for, you know what I mean? If they don't want to, there's no chance you're going to get it, if you really need a holiday for a week or two weeks, or even just a single day, they won't try their best for you. It's a case of taking the days off and you won't get paid, or just have unauthorised absences. They're just not flexible at all. They don't really understand personal issues, they should really do, you know, for long term agents that they've had working there for a long time and they know are reliable, they won't even be flexible with them.

Chrissie, having worked at Call Direct for nearly 3 years, was in a position to make claims about management practices and behaviour, having herself been subject to them for so long. In her opinion, favouritism on the part of team leaders played a huge part in determining holiday entitlement. Although HR actually grant the holidays, the requests come from a team leader therefore having a team leader that looks out for you and fights your corner, especially in case of emergencies or the prospect of losing holidays, was crucial. If a team leader was not too bothered then nothing happened. CSRs had to fight for their entitlements before anything happened. When I lost my holiday entitlements, I was new to the job and did not know how things worked.

Weakened trade unions mean that employers such as Call Direct have the upper hand. Rather than a full, stable workforce, Call Direct can survive in an area such as Middlesbrough, given

the constant stream of labour available to it in such an economically deprived area (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Webster et al, 2004; also Winlow and Hall, 2006). With unions in no position to negotiate, there is little employees can do to improve their situation. Whilst some workers may talk about the need for union involvement and representation, many seem to care very little about their job, feeling they can always look for something different (Fenton and Dermott, 2006). With this attitude, any sort of resistance or movement from within seems very unlikely; apathy, silence and indifference often dominate instead. Even those who do speak openly about their discontent do not seem to have any desire to fight for change.

There are many possible reasons for this. The unstable nature of the labour market, particularly during the current recession, leaves many call centre workers in a position where losing their job is financially ruinous. Speaking out against perceived injustices and unfair working practices jeopardises their employment and, for many, remaining quiet and getting on with the job is safer and easier. With the safety net of union representation or employee safeguards removed in favour of flexible, insecure and often temporary contracts (Sennett, 1999), the power no longer resides with the employee and therefore challenging management becomes a risk many are unwilling to take (Beck, 1992). Employees increasingly negotiate an unstable labour market on their own without any significant support (Fenton and Dermott, 2006).

Alternatively, many employees in service sector jobs find nothing to identify with in their workplace (Toynbee, 2003). Collective identity and solidarity, so important in Britain's industrial heyday have been eroded by an institutionalisation of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Recent studies have shown that solidarity and mutual experience in the workplace has disappeared in favour of an instrumental, individualised approach to work (Winlow and Hall, 2006). For many, employment is simply a way of earning enough money to participate in leisure and night-time economies (Hall and Winlow, 2003) or engage in hedonistic consumerism (Miles, 2000). When young men and women sculpt identities around consumer culture and leisure time rather than the workplace (Bauman, 2005b; Bauman, 2007b; see also Winlow and Hall, 2009a), then stepping up and making a stand against management injustice holds no interest for people entirely apathetic towards their job. Chapter 8 will take a much closer look at identity formation and consumer culture, although

at this stage it is sufficient to say that employees who do not foster emotional attachments to their working life find it much easier to not care, not speak up, and not attempt to change their working conditions. Huiras, Uggen and McMorris (2000: 257) contend that 'social investment in the form of career stakes reduces employee deviance'. When employees regard their job as a 'career' job rather than a 'survival' job, a reduction in employee deviance occurs whilst job satisfaction takes on an important role for those looking to forge a career (ibid). Fighting to improve the working environment is more likely to improve satisfaction, yet the majority of my co-workers at Call Direct regarded it as a 'survival' job rather than a 'career' job – keeping their head down, earning their pay, and moving on as soon as the opportunity arose were of paramount importance. Quitting and looking for another job becomes more desirable than staying and fighting for better working conditions.

#### *Taking Back Time: Individualised Resistance*

Whilst call centres appear devoid of institutional resistance, there is plenty of evidence to suggest individualised forms of resistance are flourishing (Mulholland, 2004; Taylor and Bain, 1999). Much of the early call centre research focused upon the 'electric panopticon', often ruling out the possibility of any form of resistance to the system (Taylor and Bain, 1999; see also Fernie and Metcalf, 1997). More recent literature indicates that many workers are developing techniques to 'beat the system' through learning about 'weak spots' in the system (Beirne, Riach and Wilson, 2004: 101). Despite intrusive surveillance and electronic monitoring, agents often find ways around it and claw back a few minutes and seconds of each shift (Taylor and Bain, 1999). Indeed, during my first week on the call centre floor at Call Direct, one of the more experienced agents, Chrissie, showed us various ways we could 'cheat' the system to earn longer breaks. By logging onto the system a few minutes before your shift starts and checking the system to make sure your first two breaks do not run over their designated time, the final break of each shift can normally be extended by a minute or two. We were told everyone did this and, as long as we still clocked up seven and a half hours every shift, we were entitled to it; 'don't give them any more of your time than you have to, they won't give it back' was the warning we were given.

The standard call centre practice used by CSRs of taking back time, whilst a seemingly small attempt to 'get one over' on the managers and the electronic systems, actually uncovers a fascinating philosophical discussion on temporality. According to Heidegger (1978), time is

significant. Our Dasein (being) is temporal and finite, as it can only run on to its death, not beyond. Whilst time may go on forever, our time is running out. This makes time significant, as we need time to do things whilst we become aware that we can also lose or waste time. Concurrently, measurement, as it becomes more refined, alters our conception of time. It stresses the present at the expense of other ecstasies; rather than taking pleasure in the doing of something, we become solely aware of the time taken to complete a task or undertake an activity. As Inwood (2000: 112) notes, ‘the time measurer is more engrossed in the movements of his watch, and less in the events in the world.’

Because Dasein can only look forward towards death and no further, we treat time in the same way, we talk of losing time or time passing away. In situations where we measure time so minutely, attempts to reverse this process and ‘take back time’ ultimately take on an unusual significance and importance. In call centre work, the measurement of time reaches an unprecedented level of refinement. Minutes and seconds take on huge significance given that CSRs spend their seven and a half hours under an electronic microscope monitoring their call times, idle times, wrap up times, break times, and even toilet breaks. CSRs and managers become engrossed in measuring time at the expense of call quality and job satisfaction. Heidegger would refer to this as vulgar or ordinary time, a homogenous unending sequence of nows and instants. Time becomes homogenous and boring, waiting for the clock to move round to break time or home time, therefore the idea of taking back precious seconds and minutes for oneself becomes a personal mission at the beginning of every shift. Can I, instead of losing time to customers, team leaders, managers and the call centre as a whole, take back some of my time in the hope of putting it to more authentic use elsewhere?

In a sense, this corresponds to Sartre’s concept of consciousness and the negation of a project through consciousness’s transcendence (Sartre, 2003). In Sartre’s example of a French waiter, ‘whatever game the waiter is called upon to play, the ultimate rule that the waiter follows is that he must break the rules, and to do so by following them in an exaggerated manner. That is to say, the waiter does not simply follow the unwritten rules, which would be obedience to a certain kind of tyranny, but, instead, goes overboard in following those rules’ (Bernasconi, 2006: 38). Rather than openly rebelling against his role, the waiter subverts the rules and expectations by following them in an exaggerated manner, thus his

consciousness of his role and the expectations of him allows him the possibility to escape. Call centre agents can only break the rules by following them in an exaggerated manner, understanding that the rules call for an unprecedented refinement and measurement of time, each agent can follow those rules to a heightened level and actually escape. Monitoring their own time more closely than the system or the team leader allows them to take back time for themselves, all the while still ‘playing by the rules’.

Underlying this type of resistance is the fact that taking back time is an individualised form of resistance; ultimately, it is a politically useless form of resistance given that CSRs ‘taking back time’ will in no way force the system to change or adapt. In the example of taking back time, resistance occurred only by following the rules, not by breaking them or resisting them. Collective resistance was once an effective bargaining tool for labour to maintain and enhance their position within the labour market (Watson, 2003). Forcing serious change through strikes and industrial action has made way for minor disobedience or deviance such as avoiding answering calls for a few minutes.

Another technique, which was touched on in chapter 4, was generally known as ‘ready-release’ among CSRs but referred to as ‘call avoidance’ by the call centre management. By pressing ‘release’ on the Aspect, a CSR would come out of the call queue and when he/she pressed ‘ready’ again, he/she returned to the back of the queue and therefore would more likely to have a longer wait for a call. More experienced CSRs pass this kind of tip onto new agents when they come onto the call centre floor, usually with the warning that being caught will result in a disciplinary. As seen in the last chapter, resisting his work mandate by engaging in call avoidance dropped Ollie in hot water with the management. However, as another form of resistance, call avoidance was a common tool for CSRs to fight back against the system. Throughout my interviews, all respondents had at least heard of call avoidance, as Ian suggests:

‘I was shown how to avoid calls by more experienced agents and other new recruits who were in the know. Because the statistics weren’t monitored as much as they should’ve been, ‘ready, release’ was easy and would put me to the back of the queue. Loads of people did it and I was never caught doing it. Apart from that, just sitting in wrap too long could avoid calls.’

This type of call avoidance and resistance relies on the fallibility of the electronic surveillance system. Without the combination of electronic surveillance and human supervision, CSRs could resist the work process using these methods and get away with it. Clearly, improvements were made at Call Direct as two of my respondents, Zoe and Shirley, felt that call avoidance had become harder to get away with:

Q – Were you aware of ways to cheat the system and avoid taking calls?

A – For a little while, yeah. You could do ‘ready-release’ but they keep an eye on it now, so you can’t do it anymore.

After Zoe explained that management had started monitoring call avoidance more closely, I asked Shirley the same question:

‘Yeah, I did that for a while but then they started doing print offs so they know when you’ve done one.’

Shirley was 20 and had recently left Call Direct after 9 months of working on a different contract to the Internet Plus contract I worked on. She also worked on a different site so it was interesting to note the similarities and differences in management style between sites. What Shirley’s observations showed was that management had started to combine electronic surveillance with more intense scrutiny by team leaders in order to clamp down on forms of resistance such as call avoidance. However, Shirley did admit to developing call avoidance strategies of her own, in particular the practice known as ‘dropping calls’, or simply releasing calls and hanging up on customers:

Q – Did you drop many calls?

A – Yeah, all the time. Apart from that one time, they never followed up on it though. I could’ve ran a training course on dodging the system at that place! I learned that as long as you kept saying hello for 30 seconds or so after I’d released the call then if anyone was listening then it didn’t look like I had dropped the call. Also, if I knew our manager hadn’t got back off their break yet then I’d do it because there would be nobody supervising our team.

Q – Did someone show you how to make it look innocent or did you learn it yourself?

A – It was just something I picked up myself.

After receiving a written warning for dropping calls, Shirley adapted her technique so it no longer appeared blatant. Indulging in intricate masquerades in order to avoid talking to customers and returning to the back of the call queue not only became a source of resistance for Shirley, it became a small source of pleasure in an otherwise tedious day.

During my employment at Call Direct, it became clear that resistance did not end with the CSRs. Team leaders engaged in acts of personal resistance against the demands placed on them by the floor managers. My last team leader, Gareth, was often vociferous in his disagreement with the expectation on him to meet the call monitoring statistics. Gareth was in his late thirties, short and skinny, with short thinning blonde hair and matching beard. His outgoing, friendly personality made him the sort of person who everyone knows and nobody had a bad word to say about him. This meant that I knew him and liked him before I was dumped on his team during the last round of musical chairs in the Moving House Team. I had handed Jimmy, our CCM (Call Centre Manager), my letter of resignation earlier in the week and was seeing out my one-week notice so Gareth saw me as an opportunity to cut corners. He came over with 20 minutes of our shift left and said, ‘Anth, write down 4 account numbers from customers you’ve dealt with today and bring them over to me’. I used this as an excuse to sign out into ‘idle’ and get off the `phones for a minute or two so I wandered over to where he was sitting and handed him the account numbers he wanted. When I asked him why he wanted the account numbers he explained that Jimmy had been on his back about his call monitoring again, ‘I’m just going to read your notes on these accounts and fill in a monitoring score sheet for you rather than sit and listen to someone’s call. You’re leaving anyway so it won’t affect your monthly review or anything. He expects me to monitor 55 calls every month and I’m losing 3 agents off my team this week – how else does he expect me to do it?’

Gareth’s attitude was simple, I know the agents cheat all the time and get away with it so why should I do things properly and get no praise for it when I can cut corners and make life easier for myself? During my interview with Gareth, although he admitted caring about his

job in order to pay his mortgage and look after his children, he felt the company did not care about him and at times felt undervalued and more inclined to cut corners. Again, though, while Gareth is clearly resisting the demand for team leaders to monitor 55 calls a month, the resistance is individualised and affects nobody but himself, he has beat the system but the system remains intact and undisturbed whilst the formal requirements made upon him by his superiors had not abated.

Another form of resistance displayed by CSRs during my employment at Call Direct involved deliberately closing customer accounts when a CSR knew the company would fire him/her. During the first 6 months with Call Direct, all CSRs are subject to a probationary review after which employees will begin receiving benefits such as sick pay. Employees are deemed to be on trial pending a probationary review designed to ascertain whether the CSR is good enough to remain with the company. Any CSR who falls foul of the disciplinary procedure on a regular basis whilst still in their probationary period can find their probationary review brought forward, usually indicating that they will be fired. However, Call Direct, in an attempt to squeeze a final shift out of CSRs always scheduled the probationary review for the final hour of a shift, thus ensuring that each CSR worked a final 6 hours before being released.

During my time with the company, I worked with four agents who had their probationary review brought forward. Each person was fired during their review, or, as management preferred to call it, they were 'released from their probation'. The only thing more certain than each CSR leaving the company after their probationary review was that each one of them spent their final shift arbitrarily closing customer accounts to spite Call Direct for firing them. Once an account was closed, it could not be reactivated so customers would have to go through the process of registering again or, as was more likely, beginning the process of clearing Internet Plus broadband from their telephone line so they could move to another company. In Ollie's case, his probationary review was held off until the last 30 minutes of his shift allowing him to spend the day laughing and joking with us, not concentrating on his calls, cutting off customers during calls, and randomly closing customer accounts. Having seen other CSRs do this, it came as no surprise but I still wondered why he would deliberately inconvenience people he had never met. His reply also came as no surprise. 'Fuck 'em. They've [Call Direct] never liked me, they're going to sack me later so I don't

care, not my problem after today. Most of the customers are dicks anyway and they shouldn't have used a shitty company like Internet Plus in the first place'.

Call Direct, in attempting to extract one last shift out of CSRs they intended to sack, left the door wide open for disgruntled employees to openly resist and fight back against the company. As agents were often 'released from their probation', it became common knowledge on the call centre floor that CSRs facing their probationary review would close accounts and thus cause unnecessary problems for Call Direct in order to get one over on the company before they left. If CSRs feel like the company they work for has no regard for them they are likely to feel disgruntled (Mulholland, 2004). Also, when CSRs are left to their own devices knowing they are facing termination, this anger towards the company manifests itself in resistance and sabotage. Again, this corresponds with Mars' (1982) configuration of a 'donkey' who, constrained by the rules and controls of the workplace, resists through sabotage and rule breaking. As the above examples show, resisting the rules and becoming disruptive by closing accounts or cutting off customers during calls can cause further problems for the company.

As Mulholland (2004) noted in her study of call centres, agents attempted to regain control by 'slammin', scammin', smokin' and leavin'', cutting corners, releasing calls, fiddling the system where possible, all in order to retract a measure of control, and as my research indicates, when fiddling or resisting becomes futile or impossible, outright sabotage in the guise of arbitrarily closing customer accounts acted as the final measure of revenge against a overly controlling system of management. Mars (1982: 73) goes on to note that donkey fiddles turn the job back on itself, notably in the way its occupants respond to rigid controls. Taylor and Bain (2001: 41) corroborate this through their findings:

"In an interview in June 1998 an organiser for the finance sector union, BIFU, stated, 'The more management monitor, the more resistance there is. You can see this pattern developing where the more management takes time off the workers, the more workers try to take time back from the management.'"

In the world of call centre work, taking back time is the personification of Mars' donkey fiddle, using the system against itself in order to claw back time from the employer.

Resistance is the CSR's response to excessive monitoring. Huiras, Uggen and McMorris (2000) found that job satisfaction had a strong and robust effect on employee misconduct. When employees suffer the levels of dissatisfaction reported in call centres, resistance and misconduct become almost by-products of the management style. Meanwhile, Knights and McCabe (2000: 421) also argue that 'bureaucratic regimes often stimulate resistance and the search on the part of the employee for ways of escaping management's control'.

Within the call centre literature there are references to informal collective responses and covert solidarity (Mulholland, 2004; Taylor and Bain, 1999; van den Broek, 2004), although given the rich tradition of resistance in the industrial period, this can only be regarded as some form of para-resistance whereby nothing actually changes (Marcuse, 1964). Resistance in the workplace is indicative of a wider issue. This symbolises the nature of contemporary consumer capitalism, particularly the institutionalisation of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Employees no longer envisage realistic alternatives to oppressive conditions within unstable labour markets whilst resistance to management strategies is a futile exercise, without hope of forcing any real political change. The shift in capital accumulation has rendered resistance and collective bargaining politically obsolete. Without hope of forcing any real changes to the management process or the labour market, employees focus on smaller, more achievable forms of resistance such as timesaving, making it individually meaningful rather than politically meaningful. Agents expend time and energy resisting a system and management strategy that inevitably will always win. Minor indiscipline and disobedience will in no way threaten the integrity of the system or destabilise capital. There remains the possibility that call centre managers know resistance takes place and, to a certain extent, tolerate some employee resistance. By allowing CSRs to indulge in techniques such as taking back time, managers do not have to worry about potential 'workplace revolutions', employees are content by concentrating on non-threatening forms of resistance (Burawoy, 1979). Ultimately, resistance of this kind only serves to legitimate the ideology of liberal capitalism, allowing certain forms of non-threatening resistance to highlight how liberal and democratic the system actually is. Without any real alternative or challenge, the dehumanising management practices will continue unabated and the employees will either accept the situation, walk away or be fired.

### *Resistance within Liberal Sociology*

At this point, a consideration of the various theoretical debates on resistance within liberal sociology is required. In much of their work, Hall and Winlow (2003: 2004: 2007) argue that resistance to liberal capitalism actually provides the system with the oxygen it needs in order to reproduce its own ideological dominance. Individual forms of resistance, be it crime and transgression, style or image, in no way interrupt the workings of liberal capitalism, in fact a great deal of individual resistance to the system ultimately is co-opted and subverted by the culture industry and commodified, breathing new life into liberal capitalism.

“All politically incoherent resistance *acting against* the centrifugal forces of ‘othering’ and exclusion is automatically transformed into the centripetal force of homogeneity. Whether or not the homogenised fragments can subsequently be ‘socially included’ matters little to the global elite, for whom the sight of marginalised individuals expending energy to claw their way back into the economy by fair means or foul is a comforting sign that the system is functioning normally.” (Hall and Winlow, 2007).

Cultural radicalism and resistance has been reduced to prefabricated ‘cut-out-and-keep alternative lifestyle signifiers and ‘narratives of dissent’, which simply buttress the myth that the contemporary liberal-capitalist order encourages liberty, diversity and the free and open exchange of political ideas and ways of being’ (ibid). Any form of resistance is bound up in the values of liberal-democratic neo-capitalism, therefore actual resistance disappears and the forms of ‘resistance’ that remain are politically futile and serve only to reinforce and reinvigorate the system. The dynamic movement of the economic system of liberal capitalism finds its basis in the interplay between enclosed centrifugal and centripetal forces (Hall et al, 2008: 162). The constant movement between rebellion and conformity, inclusion and exclusion, acts as the motor for the latest configuration of capitalism. Rather than seeing inclusion and exclusion as static categories (Young, 2004: 558), Hall et al (2008) regard this as a dynamic tension between the forces of rebellion and conformity, constantly moving and changing. Rebellion occurs only through engaging with and immersing oneself in the system to begin with, thus providing the economic system with a much-needed shot of energy. At the same time, the capitalist system uses the ‘existence’ of resistance to indicate how healthy western democracy is. The desire to listen to marginalised voices appears to make resistance

meaningful yet, in truth, marginalised voices and cultural micro-resistance remain atomised and sublimated, working within the system to ensure that the dynamic and balance of centrifugal and centripetal force remains unaltered (Hall and Winlow, 2007). Liberal capitalism needs resistance and superficial diversity in order to shore up claims towards liberty, freedom and diversity, allowing forms of resistance to work within the system serve to justify the continued existence of liberal capitalism.

On the other hand, Ferrell (2007) argues that minor, individualised forms of resistance indicate that we are on the edge of a progressive revolution that will enable individuals to garner even greater freedoms. Individual's ability to employ subversive cultural politics reveals widespread resistance to a capitalist culture busily inventing new forms of containment and control (ibid; also Ferrell, 1996). For Ferrell (2001: 109) resistance is more than simply holding out or holding on against authority, resistance inverts the usual relations of power and meaning and turns the machinery of everyday domination back on itself. The idea is that the revolution against the tyranny of everyday life is politically resonant and vitally important. Ferrell believes that individuals engage in political and collective resistance and stand up to the machinations of late capitalism and consumer culture by critically understanding the difference between their activism as a response to the system, and the system's ability to define their behaviour as a commodity:

“Born to these circumstances, a new generation of progressive activists seem well aware of them, by the way – and because of this, well aware that the point is ultimately not the thing itself, not the act or the image or the style, but the activism that surrounds and survives it. So, they throw adulterated images back at the system that disseminates them, recode official proclamations, and remain ready to destroy whatever of their subversions might become commodities.”  
(Ferrell, 2007: 96).

Individuals often indicate their displeasure at the commodification of certain styles and images through boycotting and creating new styles. However, Ferrell places too much faith in the power of individuals to subvert the complex workings of liberal capitalism and the culture industry – a culture industry that will simply commodify the next ‘new’ style or image conjured up in an attempt to escape the system. In Ferrell's (2001: 136) study of the

Reclaim the Streets movement, urban anarchy acts as meaningful political resistance to the everyday control of tyranny. Whilst the antics of these movements may indeed cause temporary disruption and inconvenience, they do so only through their engagement with the consumer-driven capitalism they rebel against. The Reclaim the Streets movement actually stated that they were ‘building counter-institutions within the shell of consumer society’ (Ferrell, 2001: 138). Whilst utilising anarchy in order to rail against the automobile culture, these ‘rebels’ do so from within a framework based on ‘alternative culture’, sadly for the anarchists, their alternative culture is another product of the liberal market capitalism they seem to despise. There is no significant political resonance when there is no grand vision of an alternative future, resisting from within the system and along the rules provided by the system is ‘safe’ resistance. Although individuals may gain enjoyment from their resistance or transgressions (Ferrell, 1996) there is no doubt that, through their rebellion, the liberal capitalist system thrives even more.

Workplace resistance has been reduced from meaningful political action to individual resistance and subversion through an ‘ideology of conformity’ that leaves workers remaining engaged within the hegemonic discourse of the workplace whilst internally rejecting this dominant framework (Bloom, 2008). The argument that ‘I don’t believe the company ethos or attitude but I go along with it anyway’, is the result of the subject realising that they ultimately depend on the system remaining in place and whilst they are cynical about their role within it, find a ‘safe pleasure’ in the comfortable distance they retain from an over-determining set of ideological relations. As Fleming and Spicer (2003) argue, when we dis-identify with our prescribed social roles through cynicism, we still perform them, often better than if we did actually identify with them. Dis-identification becomes just as crucial as identification in terms of the reproduction of power relations (ibid). Our resistance serves to reinforce the ideological dominance of liberal capitalism rather than undermine it. Cynicism becomes an ideological force, ironically, because we know in our minds that ideological manipulation is taking place and our cynicism acts to assure us we are not victims of ideological obfuscation (Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 164) yet an ‘enlightened false consciousness’ (Zizek, 1989) occurs as, whilst our minds resist, our bodies still undertake the tasks expected of us.

Call centre workers engage in individualised acts of subversion or manipulation of the system, fiddling their statistics or ‘taking back time’ due to their cynical, apathetic outlook toward their place of employment. Whilst capable of dis-identifying with their situation, they are unable to re-imagine their present circumstances as anything other than what it currently appears as, therefore cynicism (and resistance) actively serves to sustain the system and conditions of capitalist organisation. Valentic (2008) sums this up by stating ‘the problem is that today’s ‘radical capitalism’ is not ‘radical’ enough; it basically accepts the liberal capitalist horizon, and the logic of liberal capitalism is so total it makes any alternative unthinkable’. As noted earlier, we can imagine the end of the world much more easily than we can imagine the end of capitalism (Fisher, 2010; Jameson, 1991). Call centre employees have become disempowered from meaningful resistance or demanding positive social transformation. The real resistance comes from capitalism itself – it successfully resists concessions, alternative visions of society, political opposition and ideological debate. While low-paid service employees offer futile resistance to the electronic system by stealing back a few seconds, capitalism successfully resists any drastic changes to its system of operation.

Having considered the various forms of resistance in call centres, institutionalised and individualised, as well as debated the theoretical implications surrounding resistance in liberal capitalist society, the following chapters will offer an insight into the young men and women who work in modern call centres. The attitudes, ambitions, and outlooks of my Call Direct co-workers will raise some interesting issues that will be discussed throughout the remaining chapters.

## CHAPTER SIX

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“How can I take an interest in my work when I don’t like it?”

- Francis Bacon

As Bryman (2004: 279) notes, ‘many qualitative researchers express a commitment to viewing events and the social world through the eyes of the people they study’. While we have already met some of the key contacts I developed during my time at Call Direct, in this chapter I want to take a closer look at the lives of these call centre workers and their feelings about their work. What do they like about the job? What do they dislike about it? What do they think of the people they work with? Why are they working where they are? Will they still be with the company in the long-term? Do they have a career plan? If so, where does call centre work fit into their plan? By shining a light on the individuals engaged in call centre work, this chapter will attempt to put a human face to the almost dehumanised voice we encounter in our dealings with call centres. The agents appear to us as ‘just’ a voice, denied subjectivity as a disembodied voice representative of a faceless company. This chapter aims to redress the balance, using my co-workers and respondents to highlight some of the theoretical abstractions raised so far in this study. This chapter will hear 4 different voices offering varying opinions of Call Direct. Broadly representative of my overall sample, they offer a clear insight into the lives of the young men and women I met at Call Direct.

### *Darren and Zoe*

Darren was a 31 year old team leader at Call Direct. Although we did not work together, we made contact through a mutual friend who was aware of my research. Around 6 feet tall with a stocky frame, Darren was instantly disarming due to his warm, friendly manner. Although not over-confident or arrogant, he exuded a quiet confidence and it required no stretch of the imagination to see him in a position of authority. Having worked at Call Direct for 4 years at this point, he had previously been on a different contract to me and transferred to Internet Plus as a team leader after I had left. His work history had been varied, after leaving college he had worked in various occupations from fixing boats, to warehouse work, and seasonal work at a courier service. In January 2005, a visit to the job centre yielded an application for Call Direct as a CSR and he had been with the company ever since. After 4 months as a CSR on a mobile `phone contract, a team leader ‘went AWOL and never came back’ giving

Darren the opportunity to look for advancement. In his words, 'I just approached me manager and asked if I could have his job. Simple as that. She said 'fair enough'. They sent you just for an assessment which was analytical based, set questions, maths and English, role play, competency based interview.' Having worked as a CSR and as a team leader, Darren was in a unique position to offer opinions from a variety of angles.

Darren's feelings about the job were informed by his position of responsibility with the company, his desire for a long-term plan for his future, and his length of service at Call Direct. However, when asked what he liked about his job, Darren replied:

'Not a lot. I think it serves a means to an end, especially round here coz it gives you a decent wage, which isn't generally the going rate for this type of place, this type of town. I like the people, I like the camaraderie. I work with some good people. It seems to have waned off a little bit now, initially I did like the job, I liked the prospects the job offered, but with the downturn they've paid people off and its stagnated now so it's not where I want to be. I want to move on but there's no opportunities right now.'

Interestingly, Darren described working at Call Direct as a 'means to an end'. Despite his assertion that he saw Call Direct as a long-term career due to the initial prospects on offer, Darren's feeling that his job is a means to an end clearly indicated a certain distance between employee and employer. For Darren, it seemed like Call Direct offered a way of earning enough money to pay his bills and provide him with the opportunities to engage in leisure and social activities. It also demonstrated why employees, not just Darren, put up with the conditions and terms of their employment. If they identified with the company or the job itself then they would be more likely to actively seek improvement in working conditions and benefits. However, by merely seeing Call Direct as providing a means to an end, they were less likely to seek change in the workplace. Employees with this attitude, and many of my respondents displayed these feelings, were more inclined to see work as a means of earning a pay check and would write off their time at work as just 'something I have to do'.

Table 6.1 - Male weekly earnings comparison across UK

Median Weekly Rate for Men (UK)	£531.10
Median Weekly Rate for Men (North East)	£478.80
Darren's Weekly Rate	£298.10

Source: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (April 2009)

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdudir/ashe1109.pdf>

As a team leader with 4 years experience at Call Direct, Darren earned around £15,500 per year. Compared to a CSR earning £11,000 per year, a team leader's wage was a vast improvement, although, as Darren told me, 'the wages aren't brilliant but it's not the worst wage'. In terms of national comparisons, Darren's wage was well below the national average as Table 6.1 indicates. Given the difficulty of categorising a call centre team leader using generic occupation titles, the industry figure is deliberately omitted however the figures in Table 6.1 clearly show that Darren, a team leader with significant responsibility at Call Direct, earned dramatically less than the median weekly rate for men working full time in the North East. Geographical location is crucial to this figure as the North East has the lowest weekly wage for a man, £478.80, in all of England. In terms of an annual comparison, the same statistics show that the median annual income for men working full time in the UK was £28,300, showing Darren earned well below the national average.

As well as being well below the national average in terms of wages, Darren was hovering just above the minimum income standard ([www.minimumincome.org.uk](http://www.minimumincome.org.uk)). Although an admittedly crude test, the minimum income standard calculates that Darren and his girlfriend needed to earn £21,600 per year in order to meet the minimum standard of income. Between them, Darren and his girlfriend earned approximately £26,500 meaning they existed marginally above the minimum income standard. The interesting detail here is that without his girlfriend's salary, Darren earned well below the minimum and is classed as working poor, despite holding a management position with Call Direct.

When one considers Darren's position, as a team leader responsible for 10 staff members, £15,500 per year typifies the industry as a whole. As a contrast, someone in Darren's position working for the NHS could expect to earn at least £10,000 per year more, resulting in a more comfortable lifestyle with a salary commensurate to his or her position (see [nhscareers.nhs.uk](http://nhscareers.nhs.uk) for more information). The comparison between responsibility and reward in some industries as opposed to call centres is surprising. The disparity in income between public services such as the NHS and private companies such as Call Direct is readily apparent. The decline in take home wages, in real terms, has clearly emerged since the late 1970s, most notably in the private sector (Resnick and Wolff, 2003). Our ability to continue living a reasonable lifestyle has depended upon the ready availability of debt. Liberal capitalism found during the 1980s and 1990s that debt and credit could act as a substitute for high wages with the dual function of continuing consumer spending whilst driving down wages (Harvey, 2010). Despite company rhetoric about possible advancement and responsibility, reality shows the financial rewards for advancement in call centres remains pitiful at best. When those in positions of responsibility earn so little, those beneath Darren face a much tougher battle to struggle on.

As sociologists have studied the rise of low-paid service sector work for decades now (Fenton and Dermott, 2006; Newman, 1999), the term McJobs, coined by Etzioni in an article titled 'McJobs are Bad for Kids' (Washington Post, 24 August 1986), has come to represent all that is bad within the youth labour market. However, although McDonalds has long been the focus of sociology and negative press coverage, in reality, McDonalds offer better opportunities than Call Direct (see [www.mcdonalds.co.uk/static/pdf/aboutus/education/mcd\\_recruitment\\_training.pdf](http://www.mcdonalds.co.uk/static/pdf/aboutus/education/mcd_recruitment_training.pdf)). As a team leader, Darren earned £15,000 with limited scope for advancement. At McDonalds, the opportunities for advancement are there and the salary is commensurate with the position, offering up to £21,500. When positions and jobs long heralded as the bottom of the labour market offer better salaries and opportunities than Call Direct, it begins to show the reality behind working in modern call centres. Darren's call centre work, which in his mind offered adequate remuneration and a certain prestige, is in fact more of a McJob than a McDonalds' McJob.

Despite being happy with his salary, Darren's wage granted him none of the real or symbolic benefits of social inclusion (Hall et al, 2008; also Zizek, 2000). As a 'manager', ostensibly in a position to be admired and envied, Darren was unable to afford a decent home, nice car, or regular foreign holidays. In reality, he remained poor, yet, throughout our discussion, he kept returning to the theme that his wages were higher than those of his co-workers. Whilst undoubtedly true, it does not compensate for his wage not granting the lifestyle benefits expected of a man in a management position. As of 2009, a new, 2 bedroom apartment in Linthorpe (a southern suburb of Middlesbrough situated 4 miles from Call Direct) is available to rent at £500 per month. Before utilities, rent alone takes up almost 50% of Darren's monthly income. Meanwhile, according to local estate agents ([www.michaelpool.co.uk](http://www.michaelpool.co.uk)), a 3 bedroom terrace located 15 minutes from Call Direct would cost around £85,000. Darren would have to combine his and his girlfriend's salary to make buying a property in one of Middlesbrough's less desirable areas feasible. A deposit to buy the cheapest properties in the town would require 6 months wages, a mortgage and bills would consume the vast majority of his income thus making it incredibly difficult for Darren to enter the property market. Yet, Darren remained content with his salary, despite it effectively impoverishing him. While Darren's attitude towards his salary can be taken as a realistic appreciation for the depressed labour market and earning potential in Middlesbrough, in truth, it reveals the genius of liberal capitalism (Zizek, 2000; Badiou, 2000).

Darren thinks of himself in a positive light, as a winner, because he earns more than the people he works with, he appears content with what he has due to him making downward social comparisons rather than looking up the social ladder and envying those in higher positions (James, 1998). Although he sees himself as a modest success, if we look closely at Darren's situation it becomes clear that he has not won at all, his position has been devalued in terms of wages in order to bolster profit. That devaluation results in a situation whereby an individual in a position of responsibility and authority is effectively barred from socially inclusive benefits, such as owning property, through their meagre salary. If Darren looked up the social ladder rather than down he would see that he has been systemically devalued and used, bought off cheaply with a little bit of status and a slightly higher wage than those at the very bottom. Although Darren may feel like a winner in the office, valued for his skills as a manager, in truth he appears to be just another unit of production who is exploited and

ultimately can be replaced easily. As soon as Darren leaves the office he is no longer a winner, rather he is just another low paid service worker desperately trying to scrape by.

Again, through his position as a team leader and no longer taking calls all day, Darren's reasons for disliking the job concentrated upon more procedural and managerial aspects, although his main reason centred upon customer attitude:

A – I think it's the perception from some people, a lot of people who call into the building, when I take over a call from an agent, it's the perception of the people down the other end of the phone that people in the service industry are scripted minions, they don't have anything to offer at the other end. Other aspects I don't like is the amount of work they put on you which is outside your own remit, you've got no scope to argue with that. There's one view the company likes to portray that everything's hunky-dory but those who know inside the building know it's shaky and it's wobbly, it's nowhere near what it advertises itself as

Q – So when you see the adverts and they say it's a family atmosphere but once you get inside...

A – Yeah. They're getting away from it now, they've just done a bit of a purge where they have got away from it. It's that 'if your face fits', jobs for the boys attitude, it's now progressing to the right people getting in the right positions but it's taken a long time for them to get there, it'll take another year or two to get there, get rid of what you'd call dead wood.

Q – I know when I was there, the team leaders who were just seconded were just there coz they were mates with the CCMs

A – Yeah. That's the way... its got away, they've got away with CCMs who were there when the company started, they've naturally progressed to this role but now it's a case where if you're not good enough for the job, regardless of the time spent there, then you're not having it. They've proved that with the redundancies, they weeded them all out and were left with people who know what they're doing.

Darren felt that the unprofessional attitude the management displayed toward appointing competent Call Centre Managers generated a negative atmosphere that affected his

impression of the company. As with any business, the day-to-day reality differed drastically from the hype and promotion aimed at recruiting new employees. In fact, the recruitment tactics annoyed Darren as well who, from a team leader perspective, saw the downside of targeting school leavers and college students who were more likely to walk away when the going got tough, rather than looking for older, more mature staff:

‘The problem is, people go in there and realise they get a steady wage and they get a load of shit. With them being 17, 18, 19, and they target people who are 17, 18, 19, they’re the people who are going to get bored and move on. The people who are 25 to 40, maybe with a mortgage or high rents to pay, will go in and give the job the respect it deserves and likewise they’ll get the respect back. I think its quid pro quo in that sense.’

Darren had initially viewed Call Direct as a long-term opportunity and therefore had settled into life as a team leader. He met his current girlfriend through work, as well as making many new friends, a large number of which Darren felt were good friends who he would maintain contact with outside of work, ‘it’s probably a fifty-fifty mix. There’s some really good friends, some close friends and then there’s people who are just literally people I go to work to deal with, I wouldn’t really associate with them out of work, where the other 50% I’d happily do so’. By viewing his job as a long-term prospect, Darren began creating friendship networks with co-workers, seemingly investing in the kind of relationships Winlow and Hall (2006) claim are increasingly rare and instrumental in the modern work place. Call Direct workers fostered a strong social life built around work but completely independent of the company itself. Working near Middlesbrough town centre, within walking distance of the countless bars and clubs populating the night-time economy allowed co-workers to socialise together and develop instrumental bonds based on a mutual hatred for their work. I found, during my employment at Call Direct, that my co-workers, when finances allowed, were always willing to go for a pint after work or organise a night out at the end of the month. During my training, the team arranged to meet in one of the local pubs on the Friday night to celebrate the end of our first week. We all piled into the pub at 5:30pm with every intention of having a swift pint and heading our separate ways, however, at 11:00pm, the last of us drunkenly staggered out of the pub and headed for our beds.

Every agent I worked with and every respondent I interviewed all said the same thing – working at Call Direct was good in terms of the social life. And it was. However, few employees, me included, could claim to have made strong, lasting relationships during our short stay with the company. Only by remaining with the company over a number of years could Darren claim to have made strong friendships with co-workers, and, as the staff turnover rates show, few call centre workers remain with the company long enough to allow lasting relationships to form. Whether these friendships truly are altruistic in the ‘traditional’ sense of friendship is unclear in Darren’s case. Winlow and Hall (2006) suggest that a fundamental shift has taken place in the nature of human subjectivity making the complex cultural and social configurations of the past unsustainable. Seemingly strong and committed relationships can be entered out of purely instrumental reasons. Being nice to people in order to receive reciprocal benefits and nurturing friendships in order to make working life more bearable were common at Call Direct yet, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Bauman (2001a; 2005a) indicate, when these relationships are challenged they often reveal themselves to be formed on instrumental grounds rather than deep-seated commitment. However, it is important to note that friendships are differentiated in terms of quality, as well as being separated along specific distinctions (Pahl, 2002). My data showed that many work-based relationships were superficial and built on grounds of necessity; however some respondents indicated a small number of deep and meaningful relationships which had built up over time. This issue comes up again when discussing Sarah; how often do these ‘friendships’ survive when the primary reason for their development, working together, disappears as someone leaves work?

Looking long-term, Darren had settled on remaining with the company in a managerial capacity, however, with the onset of a recession hitting Call Direct, as it did with many companies in Middlesbrough and across the country, Darren’s plans were forced to change:

‘My plan is to go back to uni anyway. I’m 31/32 so maybe another year or two while she [girlfriend] sorts herself out, coz she’s going on to do physio, and then I’ll go back and retrain in something. Initially, I wanted this to be a long-term thing but the progression has been stopped and once you get to my stage, it is a big leap to the next stage and they don’t prepare you for it. And they’re not taking on either. Initially I wanted to progress but obviously circumstances have

made me reassess the situation and it looks like a college job [go back to college and retrain] and then maybe go away and work somewhere else.'

Although, unlike others at Call Direct, the recession had not cost Darren his job, the company had taken the decision to tighten its belt. Annual pay rises had stopped whilst what Darren referred to as 'stagnation' had changed his view of the company and forced him to consider looking elsewhere, although he recognised the lack of opportunities in the labour market at the time. The way the company handled a spate of redundancies also upset Darren, and had increased his desire to look elsewhere:

'Coz the GlobalPhone contract is going to Eastborough [another Call Direct site], that's led to all the redundancies, the perception from the company was by moving people to different sites, there was an actual perception that people would go 'oh, I'm not going over there' and they'd lose the additional staff through attrition but coz there's no work anywhere, people are going to have to start moving. So they've found themselves in a position where they have to get rid of staff, last in first out scenario. So they're moving them to Eastborough, some are, some aren't. It's not good, I don't like it, I think it's shady.'

Darren had given Call Direct 4 years of his life as well as planning a long-term future with the company, however, a combination of recession and general unhappiness at a lack of advancement opportunities led Darren to consider looking elsewhere. Although looking for another job, Darren's acceptance that his job was not perfect and his awareness of its flaws had not stopped him from believing himself to be a relative winner due to his slightly higher salary and position of responsibility. His attitude towards work mirrors western attitudes towards liberal democracy – it is not perfect but at least it is better than the alternatives (Badiou, 2000). In Darren's case, his job was not too bad because it was better than being on the 'phones. In liberal democracy's case, it is not too bad because it is better than totalitarianism; as Churchill famously said, 'it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried'. Badiou (2000) suggests that the best we can hope for is to avoid the worst of a bad lot, we have no faith in our ability to do something truly good and therefore accept the least worst option.

Zoe, who we met earlier, had worked for Call Direct longer than Darren had and had already taken the opportunity to leave the company when I interviewed her. Although not a team leader, her attitude resembled Darren's in many aspects and indicated that, among employees closer to 30 years old and above, call centre work offered more than the quick fix and even quicker exit routinely highlighted in much of the literature (see Deery, Iverson and Walsh, 2002; Mulholland, 2004).

Zoe had spent 5 years working across a number of different departments for Call Direct. 28 years old, small and slim with long blond hair tied back in a ponytail, Zoe was quiet and reserved. I knew her before I began working at Call Direct, which made her more comfortable and relaxed when it came to her interview. After 5 years at Call Direct, Zoe had recently (summer 2008) left to work in an admin team for a local health centre. At first glance, her quiet demeanour seemed ill suited to dealing with customers all day yet after 5 years experience at Call Direct, she spoke with authority about products, systems, procedures and policies, clearly demonstrating a confidence in her own ability and experience. Having worked on several teams including, technical support, retentions (cancellations), customer service, admin, and IT, she was in the exceptional position of having worked in almost every department. In her opinion, working on technical support was her favourite time at Call Direct.

Q – Did you prefer being on the `phones all the time or not?

A – When I was on technical support I preferred to be on the `phones but when I did admin I took very little phone calls. It's cos it's different sort of work and I didn't mind it. I suppose it depended on which part of the job you were doing.

Q – So being on the `phones all day didn't bother you as long as...

A – As long as it was busy it didn't bother me.

Q – Did you prefer it when it was busy?

A – Yeah!

Q – Why?

A – The day went quicker!

Interestingly, Zoe preferred to be busy, constantly speaking to customers, in order to pass the time until the end of the shift. In truth, speaking to customers and helping them with

technical issues seemed to be secondary in her mind, simply passing the time was most important and that meant talking to customers more often. Unfortunately, speaking to customers all day proved to be the thing she disliked most about being on technical support:

‘[On] Technical support, the customers weren’t very nice, that was the downfall because obviously they all had a problem and if you couldn’t fix it first time then they could be quite nasty sometimes... Basically, when you get some of the really nasty customers... obviously some of them have got genuine reasons to be angry but a lot of them just can’t be bothered.’

When Zoe’s happiest time at Call Direct was spent working on technical support yet the customers she spoke to all day were, by her own admission, the worst thing about the job, it seemed surprising that she remained with the company for 5 years. There were two reasons behind her staying so long; firstly, regularly changing departments and job roles allowed her to learn new skills, work with different people, and deal with different issues, her final job role on the IT department was more administrative and cut down the number of calls she dealt with. The second reason was her co-workers:

Q – Why did you stay there as long as you did?

A – The group of people, really. It was like a family, that was mainly it.

Q – Was that throughout the call centre itself or just the team you were on?

A – Throughout the call centre itself. I still have a lot of good friends that still work there.

Echoing Darren’s earlier sentiments, having spent so long with the company, Zoe felt she had made some lasting friendships which went beyond the boundaries of work, whilst, on the whole, the people who populated her day to day working life were good people who made the job more bearable. Later on, she expanded on her feelings about co-workers:

‘Like I say, I’ve got friends I’ve had since I started, like Emma and Neil, Emma... she’s been my team leader as well, and she bought a house in Redcar [small coastal town about ten miles east of Middlesbrough] on my recommendation and she still lives there now. And I’m going to her wedding in

January so I've made some really, really good friends, Sharon who works on recruitment, she's one of my best friends, if I ever go out it's normally with Sharon, were attached to the hip when it comes to going out! I've made some really, really, really good friends, friends I'll have for a long time, if not, like, for the rest of my life, sort of thing, that sort of friendship. And loads of people if I saw out and I was on my own, there's loads of people in town now that I'd be able to say 'can I stick around with you' sort of thing. I've made loads of friends. But generally I think it is to do with the amount of people, obviously the general age range. People are really nice.'

For Zoe, she felt some genuine, lasting friendships emerged from her employment at Call Direct which, she admitted, were the main reason she stayed so long. She also displayed an instrumental approach towards her co-workers, particularly in terms of socialising. Although Zoe regarded them as friends, a large network of acquaintances built up through working in a building with over 500 people, a great proportion of which were under 30 and frequently spent time in the pubs and bars not far from Call Direct's offices. While Zoe saw them as friends she could hang out with, in truth, they facilitated her involvement in social activities and the night-time economy. Both the long-term friendships and non-invasive instrumental attachments generated at Call Direct served to keep Zoe with the company for a remarkable length of time, particularly given her ambivalence towards the job itself:

'Yeah, and the people make it easier. If you're getting on with all the people then that makes it a lot easier, you're maybe...you wash over all the bad things cos it's slightly better in other areas. If you were working in a shop where you hated all the people and the job as well then you wouldn't stay would you? But if you've got something that balances it out then there's a reason to stay, unless you desperately need more money, stuff like that, then why leave. It's better the devil you know isn't it? Five years, that just proves it!'

Zoe was happy to stay at Call Direct while the balance between co-workers and the work itself remained level. Zoe only left after the balance shifted and she began to feel like she was ready for a new challenge. Having spent so long at Call Direct, Zoe's opinion of the company had changed dramatically from when she first started:

A – At first I absolutely hated it. Hated it, hated it, hated it! But towards the end, it's the same as any other company really, it's no worse than anywhere else. Like I said, the atmosphere made up for a lot of the downfalls of the company itself. I don't know if they created a good atmosphere, maybe with their attitude. Their laid back attitude was probably what caused some of the problems within the business but they have a good incentives scheme now so that makes up for some of it. Even though the wages are a bit lower than anywhere else they have a good incentive scheme, especially on other contracts, things like that. They have the best ones. Then you have things like all of the loyalty awards and stuff, they're good.

Q – Do you think the company cares about the agents?

A – Yeah and no. On a day to day basis, probably not so much but overall they probably do, cos like I said about the incentives and loyalty awards, they're better than any other companies. I know it's a higher turnaround so they've got to have loyalty awards after fewer years but even other call centres don't have them as low as Call Direct, you've got to be there ten years or something like that, fifteen years. At Call Direct, after three years you get an extra days holiday and fifty pound high street vouchers and a certificate. After four years you get a certificate and you get two hundred pound high street vouchers. Five years you get a certificate, a plaque with your name on, which I have, and another extra days holiday I think, I'm not too sure, and five hundred pounds holiday vouchers which I haven't managed to spend yet. I've had them nearly a year and haven't managed to spend them yet! So that's good, a lot of companies, even when you've been there twenty, twenty-five years, you still don't get that.

Zoe's emphasis on the holiday vouchers was interesting in terms of her response to employee remuneration. She admitted that the wages were low but seemed to accept this as normal and focused instead upon the rewards for long service, such as holiday vouchers. This practice is not without precedent. During industrial modernity, employers would head off possible strike action by their employees by offering incentives, for example a turkey for every worker at Christmas (Mittenthal, 1960). The employee shows a profound misunderstanding of their position in that by accepting the vouchers they effectively submit to the cheap removal of a

potential bargaining tool. A collective response could have forced a long term concession from the management in the form of a pay rise yet instead they choose the one-off bonus because of the associated symbolism of consumption in the form of vouchers. Zoe, by focusing on the advantages of holiday vouchers, high street vouchers or an extra days holiday, displays a lack of knowledge regarding her position – as long as she submits to the will of management by accepting its incentives her position, ultimately, will not improve. It also displays a social identity devoid of any notion of collective action or solidarity. The majority of her co-workers display similar characteristics, the idea of workplace solidarity is so alien to most young men and women entering the labour market today that they have no awareness of how potentially strong their position could be, their failure to acknowledge the power of collective action reflects a belief that they are not part of a collective, instead a collection of individuals serving their own immediate best interests. The political dimensions of social life have evaporated and the employees cannot see a way to change things so they prefer not to try. Management exploit this, expecting workers to be grateful to receive a voucher than a pay rise, thus taking advantage of a collective inability to contemplate the collective. As Zoe proves, she still had not spent her holiday vouchers. The question Zoe, or anyone else, seems unable to ask herself is, why not just pay her more and let her make her own holiday decisions? The answer is a combination of clever management strategy and a human ‘precommitment to enjoyment’, an issue we will return to later in the chapter.

Interestingly, Zoe suggests that Call Direct is ‘no worse than anywhere else’ she has worked. It appears as though work, for Zoe, can never be truly fulfilling or worthwhile, she sees it as simply a part of her life where ‘not bad’ becomes an acceptable response to questions about her working life. As we highlighted earlier with Darren, Badiou (2000) suggests this sort of response is indicative of our post-political culture. ‘Good’ has simply become the absence of ‘bad’. For Zoe, the majority of her time at Call Direct was good only in the sense that she described it as being ‘not bad’ and ‘no worse than anywhere else’. Her general satisfaction with her work life is an indication of the extent to which she is fully interpellated (Althusser, 1971) into the worldview of liberal culturalism. Rather than feeling genuine satisfaction or enjoyment at work, she displays a satisfaction clearly tied to the interests of capital. As long as it is ‘not bad’, Zoe could put up with it in order to bring in a wage. Exploitation, alienation and emotional isolation have become ‘doxic’ (Bourdieu, 1992), naturalised and unproblematically assimilated into a seemingly objective world view in which the downsides

of work are cast as 'the way things are'. For Zoe, the colourless world of work is only partially rehabilitated by the personal relationships she has established at work and the promise of future leisure opportunities. The hardship of work becomes inextricably connected to the pleasures of consumerism and life's principle of the work/reward dyad. One works so that one may consume, something which Zoe's employers seem keenly aware of. For Zoe to find enjoyment in this workplace clearly represents just how superficial and insipid work satisfaction has become.

Yearly loyalty bonuses attempt to make up for poor day-to-day management of CSRs although a considerable number of agents will never reach the 3 year bonus, let alone receive the certificate and plaque Zoe received for 5 years service. As Darren suggested earlier, the laid-back attitude taken by management led to numerous problems with the business and on the ground floor, leaving many agents, Zoe included, with a very negative view of the company. Zoe remained one of the exceptions who stuck it out and, as she said earlier, 'wash over all the bad things coz it's slightly better in other areas'. Given the high turnover rates experienced by Call Direct before the recession, coupled with the redundancies forced by the economic downturn, large numbers of employees cannot or will not stick it out and focus on long-term benefits such as extra holidays and high-street vouchers. Darren and Zoe represent a minority of workers at Call Direct, the older employee driven by more long-term goals, seeking stability and a settled career. However, as we have seen with both Zoe and Darren, the conditions within Call Direct inevitably conspire against the employee and have led both to reconsider their long-term plans. When young men and women in their late twenties and early thirties, after spending considerable time employed in a call centre, are still searching for a career or making sideways moves (Fenton and Dermott, 2006), it does not bode well for men and women in their teens and early twenties.

### *Ben and Sarah*

Ben had worked on the Retentions team for Internet Plus at Call Direct for 7 months when we arranged to meet. At 22, he was a lot younger than he looked, slightly over 6 feet tall and heavily built with a muscular frame, wearing dark jeans and a white t-shirt, and despite his age he cut an imposing figure as he sat down outside the pub. He sat down, rubbed his hand through his week-old stubble, took a long drink from his pint and lit a cigarette. Ben admitted that working at Call Direct was only a temporary measure; his chosen trade was as a

builder although the downturn in the building trade due to the recession saw him laid off 10 months earlier. After a period of unemployment, his friend recommended he try Call Direct in order to make some easy money while waiting for the building trade to recover. Seven months later, he was still at Call Direct with no end in sight. After leaving school, Ben realised that 'I'm not the brightest of people, I was never going to be college material so I started on the sites and did that for 6 years until I got made redundant'. Working on site brought in very good money and he was good at his job, unfortunately, the economic downturn saw him made redundant and now his Call Direct wages pale into comparison with his previous earnings.

'My monthly wage at Call Direct is the equivalent of about five days work on site, it pales in comparison with what I was on before. It's an insult being paid so little but I can't get stable work as a builder so I'll have to settle for this for the time being.'

Having taken on the financial responsibility of renting a flat with his girlfriend, Ben had been forced into thinking long-term and while he could get temporary work in the building trade, the stability offered by Call Direct was more appealing at present. Coming from a vastly different background to office work, Ben was initially annoyed by his shift pattern although he has adapted to the routine:

'I do rotation shifts and it's a six week pattern so I'll do three weeks of lates and three weeks of earlys. The late shifts are a bit evil, especially on a Friday when you go out for a fag and everyone's enjoying their Friday or Saturday night, it's dead annoying. They're not too bad to be honest, normally, when I worked on sites it was eight till half four every day but it's not too bad.'

Ben appeared to have a flexible attitude when it came to working in a call centre. Something that initially bothered him, such as his shift pattern, seemed to matter less to him the longer he did it. In much the same way, when he came out of training he felt unprepared for life on the `phones and wished training had been more practical and less boring, but soon got over his nervousness and adapted to the demands of the job. One area where he appeared particularly inflexible was his opinion of the management. Every practical issue of the job,

such as targets, monitoring, and call structure, did not necessarily bother him, however, the way management implemented these strategies left him with a negative opinion of his superiors:

‘Some of them are all right, there’s a few people on our floor are quite good at their job but the rest of them are just all up their own arses basically. It’s just an ego trip for the lot of them. But you’re going to get that in every place, but especially in there, its just ego’s on the lot of them. It’s no good.’

As far as Ben was concerned, the best thing about his job was the incentives offered on the Retentions team for meeting its weekly targets. High street vouchers were handed out to agents who maintained a 60% ‘save’ rate throughout the week, i.e. ensuring that 60% of the customers spoken to changed their mind about cancelling and remained with Internet Plus. Recently, his team had kept its save rate at over 60% and had received some vouchers which his team leader was holding on to in order to take the whole team on a night out at the end of the month. Ben felt that the incentives made for a competitive atmosphere among the retentions’ staff and gave him an extra reason to apply himself on every call. However, he was critical of the way management applied the targets and the expectation that comes with requiring a certain percentage of saved customers every shift:

‘Internet Plus predict every week what the save rate should be, I think, at the moment they expect the floor to hit forty or fifty percent retentions wise. It all depends though, they can set those figures but it might never happen, it all depends on the calls you get through.’

Target-based incentives offer a very cheap way to ensure worker commitment in the workplace. By offering high-street vouchers for job performance, CSRs automatically see it as a bonus and apply themselves in order to reach the required targets. The added bonus for Call Direct is the partial satisfaction the CSR feels when he/she reaches the target. Ben worked hard to meet the targets expected of him and took pride in doing so. The small measure of satisfaction he felt works in the company’s favour, he is temporarily distracted from contemplating the conditions he is forced to work under by focusing on the incentives. In terms of the CSR, incentives act as a ‘precommitment to indulgence’ (Kivetz and

Simonson, 2002). Most of the CSRs I spoke to highlighted the incentives scheme as a positive attraction for the company. They would rather focus their effort on receiving a high-street voucher than seeking a pay rise. Reflecting the rise of enjoyment as a key cultural trait of contemporary society, this recognised psychological characteristic predisposes people to select the option guaranteeing them a satisfying experience. In a consumer society, the opportunity to take real advantage of a sudden and unexpected piece of good luck and actually spend money proves too much for many. Money goes on essentials and bills whereas a voucher means a guaranteed consumer experience and a feeling of indulgence (Bauman, 2007b), far more important to them, especially when one considers a Call Direct salary barely covers the bills and essentials. The offer of a chance to consume without any worry about bills or essentials is too good to pass up.

Meanwhile, the management practice of incentivising targets ensures ever more work and effort from workers for the same money or even lower wages (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Bain et al, 2002; Taylor et al, 2002). This reflects a specific management strategy employed in call centres by which managers can push targets on CSRs and use the incentives to ensure the productivity level remains high, often without concern for the effect it has on the employee (Deery, Iverson and Walsh, 2002). This is broadly reflective of western capitalism over recent decades as downsizing and streamlining in order to maximise profit results in low wages for employees, yet the expectation of high work levels remains (Sennett, 1999).

Ben's view of retention rates factored in the possibility that some customers simply wish to cancel their service. Placating some customers with special deals or discounted rates is sometimes impossible. No matter what the retentions agent says, sometimes there is nothing he can do to save the customer. Faced with rigid targets (Bain et al, 2002), some weeks it is impossible to reach the required levels, yet both Call Direct and Internet Plus retain a belief that every customer can be saved and it is a poor reflection on the CSR when a customer leaves. Ben illustrated his point with a story about a representative from the contract, Internet Plus, demonstrating how little he knew about the practicality of dealing with customers whilst simultaneously reinforcing Ben's belief that all 'the suits behind the scenes are muppets' who know nothing about how to do the job:

‘During one shift, a representative from Internet Plus tried telling me that every customer could be saved and there was no reason why they should lose business to other providers. When I started giving him scenarios where customers won’t stay with the company, like when customers have had no service for 6 months and had to go through diagnostic tests with tech support over and over without getting any service, he said ‘so in that situation what would you do?’ and I asked, ‘are you testing me or do you really not know what to do?’ He said, ‘no, I’m asking what you would do, it’s not a test’ and when I told him I would cancel the account and waive any cancellation fee, he couldn’t believe it. He was so out of touch with real life situations that we deal with that he didn’t know what to do in a basic situation like that yet he still felt comfortable telling us where we were going wrong and what we had to do to improve our performance.’

As far as Ben was concerned, the management at Call Direct, including his team leader, was far too concerned with ensuring figures looked good and completing all the right paperwork, often at the expense of customer service. Call monitoring was another example where Ben felt the management attitude could be better. He agreed that the monitoring requirements were fair and had no problem with being monitored although he felt that his team leader concentrated on the wrong things and marked him down for minor indiscretions. Missing out key phrases in the call structure or not wording things correctly were things that his team leader marked him down for rather than giving him credit for actually sorting out the customer’s complaint and retaining his/her contract with the company. Inconsistency among team leaders was another complaint Ben made, particularly with call monitoring. Different team leaders marked down agents for different things whilst some team leaders placed more emphasis on customer satisfaction thus making it difficult for agents to know which way to proceed. When they could see some agents getting away with things they were marked down for, it became an area of contention which had never fully gone away with Ben.

In his final analysis, Ben admitted that he had no loyalty to the company, primarily because it showed none towards him:

‘To be honest, I’m not loyal to the company. I’ve got the site mentality of every man for himself, do your job and get paid for it. It’s an old cliché but it’s true,

‘you don’t go to work to make friends, you go to make money’. I wouldn’t go to work for the fun of it but if they looked after me more or at least tried to show they care then maybe I’d be a bit more loyal to them but I don’t see much loyalty from Call Direct. I think that’s due to the high turnover of employees, the company expects people to leave all the time so they don’t make the effort. As far as I’m concerned, I go there to get shouted at for seven and a half hours, get paid and forget about it.’

Ben appeared to believe that his attitude towards working at Call Direct was justified by its attitude towards him. His desire to leave as soon as possible also contributed to his attitude, because he did not view it as a long-term prospect, he preferred to come in, do his job, and go home. Interestingly, although he considered the long-term consequences of staying at Call Direct rather than returning to the building trade on a temporary basis, he admitted that his long term planning had been put on hold. Earning ‘shit money’ meant that he could not plan long term, ‘because the money isn’t good enough, once the bills are paid it doesn’t leave much’. Despite being grateful to Call Direct for giving him a job when he was unemployed, he does not want a long-term future there, nor does he think it would be possible given his personal outlook and his attitude towards the management. As he put it, ‘if you don’t arse-lick the TL’s then you get overlooked’. Ben felt he could not act like that and was often reprimanded for going against the grain, regularly arguing with his team leader over petty things that annoy him and strike him as hypocritical. During one shift, his team leader shouted at him for eating a sandwich at his desk, claiming it was against the rules. Instead of accepting this, Ben argued back by pointing out that his team leader was currently eating a packet of crisps at his desk. When he was told ‘that’s different’, Ben chose to ignore his team leader and finish his sandwich, thinking he was not only being petty but also displaying a ‘one rule for me and another rule for you’ attitude that he did not agree with. Ben’s attitude differed from Darren and Zoe in that he could never envisage a long-term future at Call Direct and could not wait to move on. Given the poor state of the economy at the time, this was not an easy option and therefore he had to bide his time and continue to put up with a management style he often chafes against and does not agree with.

Ben’s ‘every man for himself’ attitude reflects an opinion of himself as a profit motivated entrepreneur. Despite working in an occupation that amounts to a modern production-line,

Ben has identified the opportunities for him to make some extra money within the boundaries of his occupation. Working towards the targets in order to maximise his income demonstrates a conscious approach, working hard at what he does ultimately benefits himself. Ben appears to be on an instrumental journey, seeking opportunities to make money in order to satisfy his modest hopes and ambitions before moving on when he has exhausted each resource or his patience. As soon as the chance to make regular money as a builder appears again, he will leave Call Direct and continue his journey elsewhere. This raises interesting questions about aspirations and accumulation. Essentially a low-paid service worker, Ben has developed an entrepreneurial attitude in no way bound to his occupation. In a society that increasingly valorises accumulation of capital and consumer goods, Ben reflects this attitude in his own way and applies it to his working life. Although cognizant of the fact he cannot make huge sums of money or live an ostentatious lifestyle, his sense of self still clearly shows signs of aspiration and an accumulative nature.

Sarah had worked for Call Direct for 3 months and although the recession had made her aware of the fact that jobs are harder to find now, she had already made up her mind to move on as soon as possible. Tall, slim and pretty, with long blonde hair loosely tied back, Sarah was 20 years old and had already jumped around the labour market searching for an elusive 'career'. Upon leaving school, Sarah completed a college business course, followed by a year studying travel and tourism. 'I loved travel and tourism, we got to go to Spain for a week, a study visit they called it but we just called it a holiday.' Whilst studying travel and tourism, she found part-time work at a local supermarket. Sarah admitted that she enjoyed this job at first, meeting new people and getting paid relatively well, although after a couple of years she no longer enjoyed working there, the atmosphere had changed and she needed to try something different.

A – I applied for an apprenticeship in business admin and they placed me in Eye World [local opticians] in Middlesbrough, that was a bit like a call centre, I had to answer phone calls all the time, it wasn't sales, just booking people in for appointments and that, but I hated it so, why I went for Call Direct, I don't know! I found it annoying, you'd put the phone down and it'd be ringing again and that's all you got to do. The people had said, 'oh it is admin, not sales' but I wanted to do more proper admin, using software and stuff. Not just answering

`phones, photocopying. I told them, the company I done it with was North East Chamber of Commerce, I told them I hated it and they said 'we can't have this, we'll place you somewhere else'. I went on a few interviews and they actually had a position in their admin so I applied for that and got it. That was quite varied, different things to do.

Q – So you enjoyed doing that?

A – I enjoyed doing the admin, but once again, it was the managers! I didn't get kept on, I got finished last November and that's when I decided to apply to Call Direct. Really, I applied to Call Direct as a last resort, if I'm honest, it wasn't my first choice, I applied for loads of other admin jobs but no-one ever got back to me and when they did it was just rejection so when Call Direct got back to me and offered me a position I thought, it's better than nothing, I'll try it out and see if I like it but I can look for other jobs at the same time. While I've been there I actually have applied for other jobs coz I don't like it and I've had no luck so I'm still stuck there

Working on the Internet Plus contract for the Fault Management team, Sarah rarely took inbound calls, instead she dealt with technical issues, which had been flagged up by other departments, and had to phone the customer and help solve the fault. In this respect, she was involved in less calls than the inbound agents, although her team leader still set targets for call handling times and volume of calls, inevitably leading her to be on the phone most of each shift. Sarah saw her long-term future lying in the vague description 'admin', without going into specifics, almost deliberately remaining vague in order to keep her options open and not tying herself down to a specific field. Recently finding out she was pregnant had caused her to re-evaluate her position and factor maternal responsibilities into her long-term future. Raising a child on £11,000 per year would not be easy. Fortunately, she was realistic and, although admitting she hated the job, Sarah accepted that she may have to stick it out at Call Direct for longer than she anticipated.

The dual effects of a reduced labour market and the responsibilities of parenthood had forced Sarah to face a potential future in which she could not escape a job she openly admitted to detesting. 'I was even thinking of going on, if I'm still there, going on the earliest time possible for maternity leave coz I don't like it. I hate it'. Hoping that the recession had

abated after her maternity leave and the job market opened up is a best-case scenario whilst accepting that, in reality, remaining with Call Direct was a more likely option, unless something else materialised. Compounding this problem was the fact that her probation at Call Direct had not finished. Having already had one meeting to discuss her sickness levels, Sarah had been told that she had 3 months before they met again to discuss her future. Management felt they had not had the chance to assess her properly, given her sickness rate, therefore Sarah needed to prove herself to them. She felt that if her sickness was not pregnancy related, they would have sacked her by now, although she insisted they could not sack her because of her pregnancy, she was still on probation and therefore in a precarious position whereby her rights as a full employee were not secure.

After only 3 months in the job, Sarah had accumulated a number of grievances with the company and their management methods. When asked what she liked about the job, her answer was simple, 'the people really, that's about the only thing. I hate the job!' Echoing several other respondents, Sarah identified her co-workers as the main reason she liked working at Call Direct, although on closer inspection her attitude towards her fellow employees revealed a familiar approach:

A – Yeah. I think the one's I did training with, I'd class them more as friends than the ones I happen to be on the team I got put on. I know at the end of training we all went out on some night out to celebrate finishing on our training. But the people who are actually on...I'll have to go back to them as well coz all my other friends have left now and I'll have to go back to Middlesbrough, I just class them as work colleagues. Whether I'll get to know them better, I don't know, I probably will, there's always at least one or two people that you click with isn't there?

Q – Yeah

A – So at the moment they're just work colleagues

When respondents claim that their co-workers make the job more bearable, they appear to mean that the superficial camaraderie of the workplace makes life tolerable. Using co-workers to access leisure activities and night-time pleasure seeking becomes a ritualised part of working at Call Direct. A large percentage of co-workers socialise after work or at the

weekend, yet it remains an instrumental activity designed to facilitate access to the night-time economy whilst also developing surface-level friendships with people in order to help pass the time at work. When co-workers are the only positive thing about working at Call Direct, it pays to nurture those contacts by going out on the town with them or going for a drink after work. The key test will be how much effort is expended maintaining these ties when the close proximity of working with each other no longer exists. From my respondents, it appears that once the working relationship is severed, so too, in a large number of cases, is the 'close' friendship many claim to have built up through working at Call Direct.

Having so little to say in terms of enjoyment at work, Sarah was more expressive about the things she disliked about Call Direct. In particular, her lack of adequate training made her day-to-day life dealing with customers very difficult:

'I don't like the fact that I don't really know what I'm doing. I wish I'd had more training in the area of what were actually doing. I feel a bit stupid when I ring people and sometimes I get stuck as well so I have to put them on hold and straight away you go into the 'I'll just put you on hold'-mode and I'm thinking, well, if someone rang me and that was me, then I'd think they sound a bit stupid!'

After 5 weeks of training, Sarah still did not feel comfortable or capable doing the job. Calls involving specialised technical knowledge can last up to an hour, even when the agent knows what to do. Sarah admitted that she was struggling and her team leader shared her feelings. Upon realising she was finding it difficult, her team leader offered to let her shadow a more experienced agent for a few days in order to learn from them. Seeing it as an opportunity to learn, Sarah jumped at the chance, 'I was happy to do that but I don't really think that done much really.' The targets set by her team leader once Sarah reached the call centre floor became another area of contention. At first glance, 7 calls per hour seems relatively easy, however, the complex nature of technical calls make these demands harder to achieve:

'At first I thought they were fair but once I got into doing the job I didn't think they were that fair coz you can get stuck on a call for a long time with somebody really awkward or someone might have lots of problems so you could be there...I

know people who've been on calls for a good hour or so...It is, very complicated calls sometimes! Too complicated for my liking!

In tandem with Sarah's lack of confidence in her ability to deal with issues, the targets and demands placed on her created a level of stress and displeasure that she found hard to deal with on a daily basis. Throw in her pregnancy as well and it was hardly surprising that Sarah had been off sick for 4 weeks and was not looking forward to returning to work. Her sickness record and her immense dislike of the job make it hard to believe she will remain at Call Direct on a long-term basis, but, as she admits herself, the shrinking labour market in Middlesbrough make it harder to leave a job without having something else lined up.

One of the things to stand out in discussions with most of my respondents was, particularly among the younger workers, the importance placed upon seemingly small or trivial incidents. Little aspects of the job, such as having to finish calls after their shift has ended, became larger issues and areas of consternation among employees. During one shift Ollie and Bobby complained that the previous shift had seen them work 10 minutes over due to ongoing calls yet management would not let them leave early today or let them have a longer break. 'They'd be straight over here telling me if I didn't do my seven and a half hours yesterday but when I work over they're not interested, you get no thanks or nothing', Bobby complained. CSRs who resisted through 'ready release' mechanisms did so to avoid getting calls at the end of the shift and running the risk of 'working for free'. Going to the back of the call queue prevented CSRs receiving calls at the end of the shift but, as we saw earlier with Ollie, being caught was a disciplinary offence. Disgruntled agents often noticed the little things and turned them into bigger arguments. Not being paid for working beyond their shift and not getting time back for staying behind resulted in agents constantly complaining to each other and the team leader. Nobody bothered taking their complaints to the floor manager because they all knew it would do no good.

Staying back to finish a call occasionally caused bigger problems than not getting the time back. On late shifts, finishing at 11:00pm, team leaders insisted that a CSR dealing with a customer at the end of the shift had to stay until the call was finished. On several occasions, I did not leave the building until 11:15 or 11:20. Fortunately, I would have either a lift waiting or my car parked close by. Other agents were not so lucky. CSRs that used the bus to and

from work occasionally were held back on calls so late that they had missed the last bus out of Middlesbrough. With no other means of getting home, they had to use a taxi, often costing them more money than they had earned in the last hour. With employees drawn from all over the town and surrounding areas, many employees would complain about the cost of bus or taxi fares, finding themselves effectively working for free as they earned the money to pay for their transportation. Taking into account food and transportation to and from work, the daily wage at Call Direct shrank even more. Although many of the younger workers complained about the work process, the management pressure and targets, often the more mundane issues upset them most. In their eyes, they were sacrificing time and money in certain situations and getting nothing in return from management. As noted earlier, experienced CSR Chrissie warned us when we first started, ‘don’t give them any more of your time than you have to, they won’t give it back’. This attitude prevailed on the call centre floor as agents counted the repeated grievances against their employer.

This chapter shows that call centres employ a diverse group of people, some of whom seek a long-term future and actively invest themselves in the company, whilst others see a short-term fix while they wait for other avenues to open. Darren and Zoe saw Call Direct as a long-term prospect, career advancement and a stable income. For Darren, promotion and advancement raised his status within the company without raising his income to a level commensurate to his responsibility and position. In most professions, a team leader responsible for people will earn more than £15,000 a year and gain a level of respect higher than Darren had attained. After 4 years, Darren realised Call Direct would never match his ambition and had decided to move on. Zoe also sought the stability of long-term employment in a blossoming sector of the economy only to find, 5 years later, that the job no longer satisfied and her prospects had stagnated in much the same way the economy has. After 5 years, Zoe made a sideways move to another job and had to start all over again.

Meanwhile, Ben and Sarah highlight the younger call centre workers who mostly see Call Direct as a short-term option, a quick boost to the bank balance whilst waiting for something more desirable. The recession forced Ben out of his manual labour job and into a headset and swivel chair. Although grateful to Call Direct for keeping him in employment, he made no secret of his plan to jump ship as soon as the building trade picks up again. Sarah also turned to Call Direct after finding herself unemployed. Under no illusions about her reasons for

working at Call Direct, Sarah has looked into gaining more qualifications in her chosen field but her pregnancy and a stagnating labour market may result in an increased dependence on her job at Call Direct although in her mind she was still determined to move on as soon as possible.

All 4 examples in this chapter also display the utility of friendships built around work. For Darren and Zoe, some lasting friendships have emerged from their extended stay at Call Direct although, particularly in Zoe's case, they show an instrumental approach in terms of dragooning 'friends' into facilitating forays into the local night-time economy situated in close proximity to their place of work. In Ben and Sarah's case, their attachments to work colleagues not only allow for entry into the leisure economy but also serve as a surface-level bulwark against the iniquities of their employment. A sense of camaraderie with co-workers, however shallow or ephemeral, makes the working day more bearable. That these young people convince themselves these relationships are strong, long lasting and durable is indicative of a fragile sense of self, perpetuated by the demands of a consumer and leisure society (Bauman, 2007b) underwritten by the institutionalisation of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), and the mutation of traditional notions of friendship and mutuality. When call centre employees highlight co-workers or financing forays into leisure activities as their principle reasons for going to work, it indicates a shift in attitudes towards work (Beck, 2000; Winlow and Hall, 2006). Employment no longer holds a central place in everyday life (Rifkin, 2004). Chapter 7 will again focus on my co-workers at Call Direct in order to find out what, if not work, young people identify with.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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This chapter, again concentrating on the men and women employed at Call Direct, will consider how, in terms of identity, work no longer plays a central role in everyday life. Initially this chapter offers a comparison between workers in Middlesbrough during her industrial heyday and the attitude of my respondents to indicate a shift in attitude towards work. If, as my respondents suggest, work is no longer central to their outlook on life then what is? Through looking at the social lives of my respondents and the things that mattered to them in their lives, this chapter will show how the notion of ‘working to live’ is far more prevalent than ‘living to work’. There will also be a discussion on the contrast made by many of my respondents between a ‘real career’ and their current call centre job, particularly in terms of the significance they placed on the value of a real career rather than the lack of value they attributed to their current occupation. This idea of value appears again in the final section which will consider the shame or embarrassment felt by some of my respondents at the lowly nature of their work or the company they worked for.

As the previous chapter indicated, employees engaged in low-paid service sector work, exemplified by call centres, find little symbolic significance or any traditional sources of value in their working lives. Respondents frequently complained about disliking many aspects of the job, from managers and customers, to targets and monitoring. Even those few who had considered a long-term career at Call Direct eventually realised the improbability of long-term contentment with the company. Most call centre workers in this study saw it as a stopgap, a short-term detour on the road to their true calling, whether those ambitions were real or fairy tale daydreaming. For sure, the people in this study spent 5 days a week at work, however, traditional notions of pride or identity associated with the job they do was conspicuously absent.

During industrial modernity, an individual’s occupation was often a source of pride (Winlow, 2001; also Zweig, 1952). Not only did employees take pride in the work they did, they often identified with the company they worked for and built an identity around their occupation. Labels such as ‘miner’, ‘shipbuilder’, ‘steel worker’ were often deep sources of satisfaction and a realistic indication of their politics, beliefs, behavioural and class codes and

psychosocial bearing. Surveys taken during the 1940s and 1950s revealed a high level of job contentment amongst industrial workers in terms of the size of a wage packet and job security (Zweig, 1952). As Kynaston (2007: 423) argues, ‘finding a degree of satisfaction in its labours while overall stoically and unenthusiastically accepting its lot’ was not uncommon during industrial modernity. Taking satisfaction in the skill required to do a job or in the responsibility for co-workers safety became a common response in surveys, as was the bond and camaraderie that emerged from working in hard conditions. Despite the level of exploitation at work, little social mobility, gender and class inequalities, parochialism and little pleasurable consumerism, there was a level of ontological security within the working class that allowed them to be content with their lot and their place in the world.

On Teesside, for much of the twentieth century, the chemical plants of ICI employed vast numbers of men and women, over 16,000 at ICI Billingham in 1960, the majority of whom anchored their identity, family life, and social circle around the job they did. Williamson’s (2008) excellent social history of *Life at the ICI* offers a good insight into working life during industrial modernity. A collection of reminiscences from former workers at ICI Billingham (3 miles north of Middlesbrough), the book shows just how deeply employees invested in the company. There was no shame in working for ICI, as the following extracts show:

‘It was ICI and in those days to get a job at ICI was something special. Because there were so many people and it was known that they looked after their workers and their staff and you were selected. It was something very special to work there and they would look after you and the salary, of course, was a lot more than you would get at other places.’

‘ICI was stamped through people like in a stick of rock.’

‘I had a good time at ICI. It was hard work and we worked to strict rules. But you felt that you were treated by everybody as a real person and I was promoted to a job I really enjoyed.’

As of 2008, ICI no longer exists. The way of life described in Williamson’s study ceased to exist long before the company did. The paternalism demonstrated by ICI contrasts sharply

with the modern management style highlighted in chapter 4. Employees at Call Direct did not feel the same way as ICI employees, nobody argued that Call Direct was stamped through them 'like in a stick of rock', primarily because they did not feel the company cared about them, and, secondly, because they no longer saw work as an important indicator of their identity.

*Working to live, not living to work*

As some of my respondents noted in chapter 6, working at Call Direct was a temporary measure, investing themselves in the company ethos was a waste of time. Also, many did not see the point of developing attachments to their place of work because they had other avenues of creating and maintaining a sense of self. Consumerism and leisure activities were, for many, more important than work (Cross, 2002). Where they spend their money takes on a greater significance than how they earn it.

Sally was 21 when I started working with her on the Internet Plus Moving House Team and although quiet and standoffish with me when I first joined her team, once she felt comfortable with the new agents in the team she revealed a bubbly, cheerful side to her character that helped relieve the boredom and monotony. Having worked for the company for nearly 9 months, she had, without asking to, been moved from Customer Support to the Moving House Team, then bounced around the Moving House Team in the constant reshuffling, before finally getting off the `phones and working in an administration team. Although finally in a job role she liked, Sally had seen and been subject to enough during her employment with the company to have formed strong views. In her opinion, she did not care about the company because it did not care about her:

A - I think, this might seem two faced coz I work for them, but I really don't think they're great at all. People who are working in the head office will be fine, they'll all be on decent wages and company this and company that, but us, no. I don't think they care, if they gave us better pay then I think a lot of things will be better. They need to sort out their systems but there's nothing we can do about that, the systems and the processes could be better and cheaper, if they're not going to be able to provide everything the customer wants

Q – Do you think Call Direct cares about you as a person?

A – No! (laughing)

Q – Why not?

A – Coz they don't! I'm payroll number 21470 or something like that! No, they don't, just coz they don't! Nothing is personal.

This attitude led her to the consideration that, although she had to go every day, work was not central to her life at present. In her words, 'yeah, I work to live, not live to work, unfortunately. I'd like to have a job where I woke up in the morning and thought, 'yeah, great' but not in this job'. Work was a low priority in her mind; she placed much more emphasis on money, taking more pleasure in being able to afford the things she wanted, such as clothes, nights out, saving for holidays, than actually earning money. This shift in emphasis from work to leisure was reinforced by her attitude towards the company not granting her holidays over Christmas:

'That's what's going to happen to me at Christmas... You can't wait to book flights, especially where we're going, Houston, so I've already put my holidays in at the beginning of July, six months before I need the holidays and I've been put on a waiting list and I'm not going to get it coz only a certain amount of people will get them but if I don't get them then I'm going to have to leave. Simple as. I'm not going to not go to America for them!'

In Sally's mind, Call Direct was simply a means of acquiring enough capital to indulge in her social and leisure activities (Winlow and Hall, 2006). She was completely unprepared to put Call Direct before her dream holiday in Texas, resolving to leave if she did not get her own way. By requesting her holidays 6 months before she goes, Sally felt she had given them more than sufficient notice, if it would not grant them then she will leave. Poor wages, inflexible bureaucracy, management rooted in the interests of the company, and no attachment to the vast majority of her co-workers ensured that Sally felt no concern over walking out on a job she did not like.

Shirley was 20 and had worked at Call Direct for 9 months. Having since left the company, she made very little attempt to hide the fact that working for Call Direct was purely for financial reasons, 'I only worked there to get the money. It was never going to be a career.'

Shirley had a very strong work ethic. In the 3 years I had known her, it was not uncommon for her to work two jobs and attend college courses at the same time. Work was essential to her but only in terms of providing money for travelling and shopping. After leaving Call Direct, she had spent most of the following 6 months travelling around Europe and the USA before returning home and taking another short-term job in order to save up to go away again. The plan, in her mind, was simple, ‘To qualify as an acupuncturist, to go to China for a year, travel for about 3 years, then come back and think, ‘right, better grow up now!’’. At this stage of her life, Shirley saw employment as providing the money necessary to indulge in the sort of activities she would be unable to do when a long-term career came along. In fact, 6 months after our interview, she was travelling around the USA again.

Shirley also admitted that the money earned at Call Direct and other similar jobs went on clothes as well as travelling. In a surprisingly intricate answer, she justified spending sprees based on the time of year:

A – Clothes? It depends what type of month it is

Q – Why?

A – Well, if I’m going on holiday then I’ll spend more. If it’s near Christmas then I’ll spend more. If it’s just normal, I’d do one big blow out a month on clothes...but only the essentials. Do you know what I mean?

Indulging in monthly shopping sprees eats into the pay check, especially considering Call Direct employees earn less than £11,000 a year. Although her outgoings were reduced through still living at home with her parents who were in no rush to see her move out, Shirley still had car payments and other monthly bills, as well as additional college courses she attended. Given the financial demands of her leisure, social and educational activities, work, for Shirley, was purely a financial means to an end. Her commitment to spending indicates the impact consumption has upon her identity (Bauman, 2007b). Spending what little money she earns on a consumer and leisure lifestyle clearly demonstrates a commitment to the consumer society (Barber, 2007). Shirley’s comments resonate with Lasch’s (1979: 73) statement that ‘formerly the guardians of public health and morality urged the worker to labour as a moral obligation; now they teach him to labour so that he can partake in the fruits of consumption’. Call Direct was simply a way of affording the lifestyle she wanted before,

as she put it, 'it was time to grow up' (Barber, 2007). Maintaining that she never spent beyond her means, Shirley admitted she did not have an overdraft. Subscribing to the theory that 'If you don't have it, you don't spend it', it becomes overwhelmingly clear that Shirley was responsible enough to stay debt-free without denying herself the chance to play in the consumer and leisure economy. Call Direct and other short-term jobs facilitated this without ever impacting upon her identity and lifestyle. Not everyone manages to remain debt-free and still join in the pursuit of cultural significance and hedonistic pleasure seeking.

Ben, who we met in chapter 6, admitted that work had become a means to an end, having been made redundant in his chosen trade as a builder, he had applied to Call Direct to prevent him remaining unemployed. However, in his opinion, working at Call Direct was a way to pay the bills and, when possible, give him the money to go for a drink with his mates. He did not define himself by the job he did or the company he worked for, it simply provided him the money to engage in more rewarding areas of his life. Having recently moved into a flat with his girlfriend and given the substantial loss in wages he suffered by remaining at Call Direct, Ben accepted that his previous spending habits were on hold for the moment. Following Shirley's example, Ben refused to spend money he did not have, resulting in an almost hermit-like existence for him as his wages barely covered his bills. A tax mix-up when he first started at Call Direct had not helped either. Despite not being able to pursue avenues more central to his everyday life, such as regular nights out with his mates, Ben had not substituted these pursuits with his work. 'As far as I'm concerned, I go there to get shouted at for 7 ½ hours, get paid and forget about it.' Ben showed no indication that he identified with the company and rarely discussed his working day with his friends when he did manage a night out. Following the theme of the chapter, how Ben earns his money is far less important to him than how he spends it.

#### *'Real' careers vs. call centre work*

Ian was 19 when he worked for Call Direct and left after four months to spend a year in Australia. After travelling around Australia, he returned to the UK to attend university, completing his degree and applying to join the army. Working in a different call centre to earn some money in the meantime, Ian's entry to the army was held up resulting in him spending longer with his new employer than he intended. Staying with his new employer for 12 months was, in his words, 'soul destroying'. Now aged 23 and close to finally joining the

army, he had, much to his relief, quit his call centre job. His attitude towards both call centres seemed remarkably similar; at Call Direct he refused to identify with the company because, ‘In all honesty, it was more of ‘I’m going away in 4 months, I’m only here to get some money’’. Working for Call Direct was a means to an end; he did not care about the job and could not wait to get away from it. Four years later, working in another call centre, he held the same opinion; he was not staying, could not wait to leave, and was only there for the money. Travelling, football, and going out with his friends was far more important to Ian, working simply facilitated his other activities. Joining the army was a ‘real’ career for him, complete with long-term opportunities and progression, however call centre work was a short-term necessary evil.

One respondent, Liam, worked for Call Direct on a different contract to me. At 22, he had recently graduated from university and was working at Call Direct to save enough money to move away and train in his chosen area, teaching. When I asked him how important work was to him, his response was considered and enlightening:

‘Depends on the job. I mean at the moment with me applying to go back to university for 18 months, become a qualified teacher, because I think if you are doing a job day in day out, you need to have something that keeps you focussed on it, that you feel you’re actually getting something out of it, you know, in terms of if you were a teacher or a doctor or a social worker, something like that, you can say I am genuinely helping the community, things like that, but if you are just working in retail, it is just a means of paying your way basically. I think depending on the job you do it can be quite a good experience or just a day to day grind, if you look at the amount of people, especially doing that job, just look to the weekend, slog through the week and get through without any pride and then you know....’

Work was clearly important to Liam. After 3 years at university, he returned to Middlesbrough to find few opportunities, resulting in 9 months at Call Direct. In order to move beyond call centre work, he was preparing to move away from home and return to university in order to gain the qualifications needed to do a job ‘that you feel you’re actually getting something out of’. Essentially Liam has instrumentalised teaching, focusing on the

way he will feel about himself when he has qualified and is actually doing the job. In his mind, call centre work was not a long-term option, it was useful in allowing him the ‘means of paying your way’, rather than it being a vocation central to his everyday life. Working at Call Direct offered him the time to decide on his future and earn money to sustain his standard of living:

‘I think.... To be honest, obviously after I left university, I wasn’t really sure of what I wanted to do or anything like that, so you do fall into a pattern of, sort of, you do need to support yourself to a certain level, so you stay in employment.’

Given that Call Direct served as a means to an end, Liam did not view working there as essential, a stopgap had absolutely no bearing on his lifestyle or identity. In his mind, ‘slogging through the week and getting through without any pride’ offered little attraction to him and encouraged him to look into returning to university. The nature of call centre work had begun to dim his horizons:

‘Also, we’ve spoken about it before, but when you do work in a call centre environment, you do tend to slow down the pace you do live and how far you look to the future, your sort of thinking, ‘in six months time I want to be doing this, working on this’, you do think, ‘well, next week or whatever’. It is a comfortable kind of inertia where you do get into the environment.’

Orwell (1933) once claimed that poverty annihilates the future and horizons dim when there is no money to plan for that future. Liam appeared to echo that sentiment insofar as he felt that working in a job with no prospects, for very little money, fostered a mentality akin to Orwell’s notion of poverty. When the current situation offers an unpleasant vision of the future, survival can only happen if one dims their horizons and focuses on the present. Also, when young people are trapped at the bottom of the labour market, it is very difficult to look to the future (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). Rather than face the difficult reality that faces them, it becomes better to live for the present or fantasize about the ‘big break’ that will transform their lives and provide the social status they believe they are destined for. Brannen and Nilsen (2002) contemplate ‘futures on hold’ as young people enjoy an ‘extended present’ which allows them the comfort of not facing a difficult future. Devadason (2008) argues that

future planning is a necessity for young people, particularly if subjects wish to avoid social exclusion and unemployment. His cross-border comparison of young people in England and Sweden generated a typology of future orientations which showed the importance of realistic planning. Accepting that young people's capacity to plan for the future has been compromised, Devadason notes that vague wishes and blue sky thinking result from a misalignment between the individual and their social reality. Meanwhile, those who are aware of the reality of their situation either offer vague hopes or detailed, precise plans. Liam fits into the 'detailed/aligned' category, developing detailed, precise plans for his future. Understanding that their actual achievement is in doubt is critical to the process of looking ahead. For many, however, they prefer to stay in the 'extended present' or are unable to offer a detailed plan grounded in the reality of their situation. Dimming horizons and putting one's future on hold is more appealing than facing the harsh reality of the future, something Liam was conscious of and determined to avoid.

In reality, Liam had not intended call centre work to be a long-term part of his future and, although he had fallen into a 'comfortable inertia', the very fact that his occupation was not central to his everyday life, he was slogging through the week with no pride, and his avenues for pleasure were directed away from the place he spent most of his waking hours, he decided to return to university and move on. The desperate state of the graduate labour market also sees many recent graduates engaging in call centre work and other service sector jobs (Pearson, 2006). Leaving university with hopes of getting a well-paid job have diminished with the onset of the recession forcing many, for the moment, to dim their horizons and take whatever work they can. Meanwhile, as Brown and Hesketh (2004) have pointed out, leaving university with a degree in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain no longer guarantees a well-paid graduate job when the economy is booming, thus making it especially difficult during a period of recession. According to the Higher Education Policy Institute (2010), graduate unemployment in the UK rose from 11.1% in December 2008 to 14% in December 2009, a 25% increase. As Middlesbrough does not have a well-established graduate labour market, young graduates like Liam are increasingly forced to move away from the area in order to find work commensurate to their qualifications and skills. In terms of youth unemployment in general, the figures are particularly discouraging for young men and women. According to Tees Valley Unlimited (2010); as of June 2010, 30.7% of under 25s in Middlesbrough were unemployed, compared to 29.7% across the North East, and 27.8% in Great Britain. Almost

one third of *all* under 25s are unemployed in Middlesbrough, suggesting that graduates and non-graduates alike have limited opportunities for work.

What the previous extracts indicate is an attachment to a work ethic. Wanting to work rather than collect benefits propelled some respondents into Call Direct's arms. This links back to Hoggart (1957) and Bourke (1994) who found opposition to benefits in traditional working class cultures. As MacDonald (2008) found in his study of youth in Middlesbrough, being on the dole was seen as demeaning and conducive to leading a lazy life. My respondents also showed a desire to find meaning in their working lives, talking about settling into a job they cared about, finding a career which provided genuine prospects, or looking to find significance in their work all featured heavily in their discussions of work. However, Call Direct did not feature in these plans. For the young men and women who talked of getting 'proper' jobs, Call Direct was a stepping-stone designed purely to provide the financial means to indulge in whatever they wanted. For many at the bottom of the labour market, the dream of an interesting job where they are rewarded with value and a good wage cannot be realised within the current system. Rapid social mobility, as Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007) point out, is highly unlikely yet the pervasive narrative of potential advancement up the social ladder serves to keep people looking upwards.

Although they describe Call Direct as a stepping-stone, for many the best case scenario involves sideways steps rather than forwards, often to other low paid service sector jobs (Fenton and Dermott, 2006). In many cases, any moves made by call centre workers will not be progressive, wherever they end up these young men and women will continue to face low wages, exploitation and a sense of worthlessness. Despite psychological pressure to hope and believe they can still 'make it', any careful analysis will reveal that Call Direct is not a stepping-stone to some future success only a stepping-stone to something different. The psychological pressure this brings is huge as the individual has a psychological investment in a positive future, and the potential to make it to a position of social distinction (Hall et al, 2008). By using these measurements, working for Call Direct will not lead to the positive future many young men and women aspire towards. The impetus to make something better only comes from recognising how bad things actually are rather than dreaming of an unattainable future prosperity. The respondents who realise how bad the situation is are

identifiable by the concrete, realistic plans they develop for their future – joining the Army or training to be a teacher.

Rather than just accepting their lot and submitting to a career in call centre work, these young men and women embody the ingrained belief that ‘anyone can make it’. Class boundaries no longer exist in a meritocratic society, equality of opportunity creates the chance to ‘escape’ our origins and become successful (Seymour, 2010; Cannadine, 1998). The dream of rapid upward mobility is much more palatable than the reality of a life engaged in low wage work in the tattered remnants of the working class therefore they regard themselves as just ‘passing through’ on the way to something better. For some, like Liam and Ian who did achieve their goals, it is possible, but for the rest, the dream of ascending above their peers to a higher rung on the social ladder would not materialise.

This attitude was not limited to the CSRs. My team leader, Gareth, admitted many of the same feelings during the time I worked for him, as well as during our interview. He stayed at Call Direct because he had bills to pay, a mortgage, and two young children to support. He felt his attitude and outlook came from his home life rather than work and although he was often frustrated by his work he had not looked to leave. Echoing Darren’s remarks in chapter 6, Gareth was not looking to leave because he would not be able to find another job paying £15,000 a year. Interestingly, Gareth’s work ethic was obvious when I asked him why he stayed at Call Direct:

‘It is the money but, I was talking to Gail the other day and I said if I won the lottery I would still come to work, purely because I’d bored at home, there are only so many times you can go on holiday so I’d probably still come to work.’

Wanting to work for a living and maintain a structured life appeared repeatedly in my interviews and discussions with colleagues. An attachment to earning money through honest labour compelled young men and women, some with financial and familial responsibility and some without, to engage daily with work they openly admitted to, in some cases, hating, whilst many others acknowledged severe drawbacks in working for Call Direct. Gareth remained with the company to support his children but he also recognised his attachment to working life and the structural security and sense of responsibility accompanying it.

However, as with many of my respondents, working at Call Direct wore Gareth down eventually. Three years after he remarked about staying on, even if he won the lottery, he accepted voluntary redundancy from the company when the recession forced the company into job cuts. Although not as large as a lottery win, his redundancy pay off from Call Direct was large enough to allow him to leave after 6 years with the company.

Gareth's hope for a mythical lottery win raises some interesting questions about how, in a mediatised consumer culture, the modern subject no longer has the ontological security (Young, 2007) to remain contented and comfortable with our place in the world. We are condemned to scramble around for something better without any guarantee that there is anything better out there (Bauman, 2007a). The desire to be better and do better is ceaseless, resulting in us continually looking at our lives with either dissatisfaction or a stultifying inertia which leads us to see the task of changing our circumstances as too great and therefore pointless. We are constantly searching for 'something' to hold onto, unable to remain secure with our place in the world; a new consumer experience, a new job, a new partner, a lottery win. Gareth's comments about returning to work if he won the lottery appear to demonstrate how we crave instant submersion in spectacle rather than engage in a truly sociable or progressive life built around things such as politics, art, community or family (Adorno, 2001; Badiou, 2000). It is possible that Gareth's comments act as an expression of our inability to envisage any other ways of being that are radically different from the work/consumption dyad. Signalling the domination of modernity over human subjectivity, we do not know what to do with our days if we are not working or consuming. This absence cannot be filled up with something concrete, like community, politics or love therefore ephemera takes its place. Without a secure space in the world in which we can be contented and rather than contemplate our increasingly fractured and disjointed self, it becomes much safer and more secure for us to remain submerged in an instant, hyperreal world of spectacle (Debord, 2001).

Having heard from 2 team leaders, Darren and Gareth, it is interesting to hear them talk about how £15,500 is a good wage. Despite both having the skills necessary to be competent team managers at Call Direct, both repeatedly asserted that finding another job paying the same wages would be difficult, particularly given that Middlesbrough has around 9% unemployment ([www.statistic.gov.uk](http://www.statistic.gov.uk)) and very few job opportunities. In their mind, it may seem like earning £15,500 is a relative measure of success. However, as we noted earlier, in

comparison with other industries, Call Direct pay its employees much less than other employers. However, this fact appears to be lost on both Darren and Gareth who seem to believe that £15,500 is a good wage and could not be found elsewhere. Although both of these men are products of a town notorious for unemployment and poor opportunities, it is striking to hear two competent, qualified young men effectively writing themselves off in terms of finding work elsewhere paying the same wage they are on at Call Direct, whilst also seemingly dimming their horizons to such a level that £15,500 appears to be a good wage. Darren and Gareth appear to demonstrate just how prevalent low paid service sector work has become in places like Middlesbrough. Although the local labour market has contracted in the wake of the recession, it is inevitable that any future jobs boom on Teesside will be led by the same low paid service sector jobs found in places like Call Direct. When the only jobs around pay little more than minimum wage, taking a step up to team leader and receiving a higher salary makes them feel like a success, despite the fact that beyond the doors of Call Direct they remain low-paid, border line-poor, struggling to get by.

#### *Working towards the weekend*

Hall et al (2008: 26) argued that ‘for most of those who were economically active in these developing sectors of the economy a depressing and anxiety-inducing work experience became coupled with the expectation of continual consumption during time spent away from work’. The demand for continuous consumption appeared, in many cases, to steamroll over any sense of financial prudence as pay day was greeted with bouts of alcohol-fuelled hedonistic pleasure-seeking and cathartic shopping sprees.

Returning to Liam, he was very level-headed and admitted saving a lot of his money rather than spending it on consumer goods and nights out. However, in our discussion he admitted that not everyone was like him when it came to money:

Q – ‘Would you say a lot of the people you work with were more interested in getting the money and spending it?’

A– ‘Yeah, absolutely. I would debate with people all the time about the benefits of saving money. A mate of mine, with the first month’s wages he got, he bought a motorbike. Then he was like, ‘roll on next month’. If I would speak to people, certainly the younger members of staff, it’s the first money they’ve ever had

really, they would literally go mad and spend it on nothing. I was talking to a guy called Dave, the youngest guy there, about 17, after our first month's pay he was like, 'how much money have you got left?' and I'd say '£850' and he'd be like, 'I've got about fourteen quid!', this was literally just 6 days after we'd been paid!

For many people, disposable income is simply that: there to be spent. Often without regard for the rest of the month, let alone any long-term plan, many of the young agents at Call Direct spend their wages as quickly as possible, often over the first week or two, usually on clothes, electrical goods and alcohol. This mirrored a conversation I had with a girl on my team, Sheryl, one pay day.

Although it was pay day, I remember thinking it did not feel like cause for celebration as my sick day 2 weeks before cost me £40 in deductions and we were working 2:30-11:00pm, so I would be stuck there all night. When I walked on the floor it was its usual hive of activity, lots of noise and lots of people sat around the now all too familiar pods blankly staring at computer screens. I saw an empty pod so I sat down and started getting ready for my shift. While I was logging onto the system, Sheryl came and sat next to me. Dressed in dark trousers and sky blue jumper, Sheryl was 21, short, slim with short dark hair tied back into a ponytail. Although normally fairly quiet, I previously had the impression that she was quite sensible, particularly with money as she was trying to save up for a flat in the town centre. I hadn't spoken to her in a couple of weeks so we chatted for a few minutes and then she asked if I'd been paid today. When I replied, 'I'm not sure, I didn't check my bank account this morning', she was shocked. 'How can you not know if you've been paid today' she said excitedly, 'I've been waiting for today for ages, I've already spent £250 this morning!' Surprised, I asked, 'On what?' to which Sheryl casually replied, 'Oh, not much. Just some clothes and stuff.' From a wage of £850, she had spent almost a third of it on consumer items that she herself didn't feel were entirely necessary.

I had a similar conversation with another agent on my team, Bobby, a week after the conversation with Sheryl. Bobby was 18 years old, still living with his parents and at the time of our conversation was looking to move out of his family home and closer to town. He and Sheryl had discussed moving in together as neither could afford anywhere on their own.

Bobby stood just over 6 feet tall with a wiry frame, always smartly dressed and exuded self-confidence, bordering on arrogance or cockiness, which made him well suited to dealing with customers all day. His mischievous sense of humour would brighten up the shift at times and Ollie was always the butt of his jokes, although Ollie seemed to be the butt of everybody's jokes on our team. We were coming back from our break when I asked Bobby if he had been out much since pay day. 'Yeah mate, Friday and Saturday. Fuckin' quality nights, absolutely hammered all weekend. Cost enough mind, I spent two hundred quid over the weekend.' All I could do was laugh and shake my head. He agreed and as if he was already resigned to his fate said, 'I know mate, I can't help it: we get paid on the Friday and I just end up caning it over the weekend. I'm out Friday and Saturday night and just can't stop myself cos I've got money in my pocket.' Given their complete lack of restraint when they had any money, neither Sheryl nor Bobby moved into a flat in town during the time I worked with them. That so many young men and women at Call Direct were imbued with the philosophy of spending their wages as soon as they get them is indicative of the centralisation of consumption in everyday life (Bauman, 2007b).

Struggling through until pay day became a common experience whilst working at Call Direct. Everyone was in the same position of trying to survive from month to month on low wages. At the time, I had very few outgoings but still found it difficult to survive on the money I earned from Call Direct. The conversations most often heard around the call centre floor and in the canteen were of agents complaining about having no money left or agents willing pay day to come around faster. As pay day had become the light at the end of the tunnel, for many of my co-workers not even our scheduled weekend shifts would stop them from plunging into the hedonism of the night-time economy (Winlow and Hall, 2009; Northcote, 2006). The combination of having gone weeks without money and pay day falling on a Friday proved too tempting for virtually all of my team one month. After we had been paid on a Friday, the shift rotation had us down for 11:00pm finishes on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Virtually my entire team failed to turn up. Only Anne and I came in for the shift, we didn't even have a team leader. I had been in town before my shift and, as the sun was shining and everyone had been paid, the pubs and bars were starting to fill up with people making the most of the weekend. Sitting inside was torture because we were painfully aware that there were people, including many of our co-workers who should have been working with us, outside enjoying their weekend while we sat there taking calls; or not taking calls as

it turned out. I was signed on for 7 ½ hours and I only took 14 calls all day. I checked my statistics at the end of the day and I had been in available [available to receive a call] for over 5 hours. Many of my co-workers who had been with Call Direct for a while had recalled long, bad shifts where they hardly took any calls so I knew that this could happen, however this was of no comfort while I was sitting there with nothing to do.

I can recall feeling that this was the most boring, mind numbing experience of my life. It was so quiet because there were so few of us on the entire floor that when Anne got a call, I could almost hear the whole conversation through her headset. I'd never known a day drag so slowly, I honestly thought my shift would never end. Trying to pass the time when we were not allowed books, magazines or newspapers and not allowed on external websites was really difficult. Anne and I ran out of things to talk about around 8:30 so we ended up sitting in almost silence. It was a real struggle to stay awake whilst the lethargy in my voice must have been noticeable to the few customers I spoke to, especially on the couple of calls I took after 9 o'clock. Although I consoled myself with the knowledge that my fieldwork would soon be finished, the co-workers I left behind would have to sit through these shifts quite regularly if they managed to remain employed at Call Direct. From my seat I could see everything in the call centre but there was nothing to look at. There was nobody in and there was none of the usual buzz and noise that usually filled the room. Just empty pods everywhere I looked. We were literally counting down the minutes until 11 o'clock and then I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

Anne and I were fortunate that it was quiet, if it had been busy then the two of us could never have dealt with all the calls and probably would not have got a break. Although a couple of our team were on holiday that weekend, the rest just rang in sick. Having no money until pay day was such a regular occurrence that when pay day finally came, the urge to spend and indulge in the night-time economy proved too strong and work was simply ignored. They would deal with our team leader on Monday. Consumption and leisure seemed to hold far more importance than work for many of my co-workers at Call Direct.

These examples show how young call centre workers relish the opportunity to spend their hard-earned wages immediately with no regard for how they will get through the rest of the month. For them, work becomes essential only in terms of providing the means to delight in

consumer spending or alcohol-fuelled partying. Saving money emerged as an important issue for a large percentage of my respondents. Whether, as in Shirley's case, saving was necessary for travelling or holidays, or, as in Liam's case, for moving away and further education, saving money was a high priority for many and desirable for others who admitted they had trouble saving money but would like to if they were paid more.

Although many of my respondents placed a high premium on working for a living, call centre work tested the limits of their attachment to the workplace. Every respondent felt that work was important, some cited the self-respect associated with earning a living, many more saw work as a means of earning money for other activities. Although everyone saw working for a living in a positive light, to be able to hold their head up and say they earned their money honestly, not sitting on the dole picking up benefits, working at Call Direct caused several of my respondents to admit feelings of shame or embarrassment.

*No shame in my game?*

Returning to Sally, she took no pride from working in a call centre so, when asked if there was any embarrassment in working for Call Direct, she responded:

‘Well, I mean, I must be but I don't think I am. I think it depends who I'm speaking to. If it's the neighbours, well, they obviously know but I do play it down. When I speak to people I used to go to school with, who are at uni now, I don't say I work in a call centre, I say I work in an admin department working for Internet Plus broadband! (laughing) Well it's true! I'm not lying, I'm sort of bending the truth right backwards. I probably am but not major. It depends who I'm talking to. Admin sounds better than call centres, people don't tend to think much of people who work in call centres.’

When an employee deliberately shapes her answers about her working life dependent on the people she is with, working in a call centre not only causes feelings of shame, it also indicates that work, for Sally, is central to her belief about how she earns money and working for a living. Working for Call Direct is something she feels she must hide from people leading to the assumption that Call Direct has no central place in her everyday life. When an employee responds with this kind of answer, it is little wonder she finds other things such as

consumerism and leisure more central to her everyday life. Sally's answer is a significant contrast to the pride evinced by the ICI workers earlier. It also bears a remarkable resemblance to Newman's (1999) respondents in her study of fast food workers in Harlem. Her respondents would hide their uniform on the street, look for work away from their neighbourhood, or deliberately avoid answering questions about work from the young men and women encountered on the streets. Although proud of working for a living and not engaging in criminality, they also displayed a need to cover up where they worked in order to avoid ridicule from friends or acquaintances. Sally seems to clearly display some of these attributes when she bends the truth regarding working in a call centre.

As one of the floorwalkers when I first started, Chrissie, who was 21, became the font of all knowledge for our team, and I would frequently turn to her whenever I had an issue, particularly because her patience and calm was appealing to a new recruit. Although a qualified hair and beauty therapist, she had turned to Call Direct whilst at college and had now found it difficult to leave. Her motives for being there were clear, 'At the moment yeah, I need the money so I'm there for now.' Chrissie echoed some of Sally's sentiments when she suggested that working in a call centre, particularly Call Direct, posed a challenge for her when meeting new people or applying for jobs:

A - When people say 'where do you work?', you can't really lie but I say, 'I'm there but I'm just there for now'....

Q - There's always a 'but just'...when you say that isn't there?

A - When you do try and apply for jobs elsewhere, I made the mistake of saying I worked for Call Direct, I should have said Internet Plus, but I was only told that afterwards by one of my friends. The minute you say Call Direct, they say, 'oh sorry, we don't have any vacancies at the moment'. I don't know what kind of reputation Call Direct has but it doesn't sound like a good one.

Although not lying to people, Chrissie felt the need to justify her presence at Call Direct, as if working in a call centre needed explanation or justification. As with Sally, she learned to bend the truth, particularly when applying for jobs, by saying she worked for Internet Plus rather than Call Direct. This instrumental and practical approach to job applications was deemed necessary to get away from Call Direct as much as it covered any potential feelings

of shame about working in a call centre. Despite being widely regarded as one of the better agents, someone management turned to when they needed a temporary supervisor or floorwalker, Chrissie knew how the company felt about her:

‘That’s why they’re not too bothered about people like myself who would leave if I could, they’re like, ‘so what, she’s only one person’, even though I’ve been there over 2 years, they’ll just get somebody else in. They’re not bothered.’

In the face of this reality, Chrissie developed the commonly held attitude that ‘if the company doesn’t care about me, I won’t care about them’. Given this truth, work no longer became central to her everyday life, rather she concentrated on saving her money, looking for other job opportunities and spending time with her boyfriend and friends. Much more frugal than some of her colleagues, Chrissie did not go out as regularly as her co-workers, admitting that she was very responsible for her age and would rather save money than waste it, although living in Saltburn (a seaside town 10 miles from Middlesbrough) accounted for her lack of involvement in the local night-time economy almost as much as her desire to save money. She had no intention of staying with Call Direct long-term, hated the way management treated her and others, and only stayed because she needed the money while she looked for another job. Like many other respondents, working at Call Direct only retained importance through the opportunities it provided for other pursuits.

The young men and women in this study place high value on working for a living yet their daily engagement with call centre work has led them to value other pursuits much more than their working life. Each respondent regarded work as simply a necessary activity, important only in the financial rewards and resulting opportunities in other fields, such as consumption and leisure. These activities were much more central to everyday life, work no longer shapes their identity, in some cases work actually caused an identity crisis as employees did not want other people to judge them by their employer. Leisure activities, the night-time economy and consumer spending all figured highly in everyday thinking, although the recession, in some cases, forced a reality check and curbed spending in order to pay bills and stay out of debt. The wages offered by Call Direct remain too low for employees to indulge as much as they wanted to; work became more important in terms of paying bills although it still had not

taken on a central significance in everyday life as it did for the ICI employees of a previous generation.

This chapter, and chapter 6, have shown how call centre employees view their job and where they rank work in terms of everyday importance. Working life, for the young men and women at Call Direct, is important only in terms of providing money to pursue other activities. The importance and significance, for them, comes from how they spend their money, rather than how they earn it. The final chapter will take a theoretical look at identity and class, considering how the opinions and attitudes of my co-workers at Call Direct impacts upon traditional notions of working class identity.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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‘When people face what nothing in their past has prepared them for they grope for words to name the unknown, even when they can neither define it nor understand it.’

- Eric Hobsbawm

Throughout this study, one of the key themes has been how processes of deindustrialisation has transformed former industrial landscapes such as Middlesbrough. This deindustrialisation is first of all an economic and political process that has seen the withdrawal of traditional forms of labour, and its partial replacement with new, insecure, exploitative and often unsatisfying jobs that fit with the new economic and political logic of global neoliberalism (MacDonald, 2008; Webster et al, 2004; also Harvey, 2005). Of course, these processes have had a profound effect upon the lifeworlds of the local population (MacDonald et al, 2005; Webster et al, 2004). The distinct industrial culture of the North East has almost vanished. Only a shadow remains (Byrne, 1989). The younger generations, who have no living memory of the world of industry and its regimented social life, are clearly more attuned to new cultural realities of a substanceless postmodernism that relies upon symbolism, signification, abstraction and simulation, a world which appears to have surpassed the material (see Baudrillard, 1981). The impact of these historical changes has reverberated through the region’s cultural life to the extent that it now appears possible to talk about fundamental psycho-social shifts in the nature of ‘postmodern subjectivity’ (see for example, Zizek, 2000) – a subjectivity beset by ontological insecurity (Young, 2007) as the traditional symbolic order collapses, and as people are forced to engage with a dizzying array of choices, but without any durable framework for predicting outcomes. To claim fundamental shifts in the economy are the root of our new media-led, hyper-real, global culture and the historic transformation of human subjectivity often serves to inspire the entirely predictable response of ‘reductionism’ or ‘determinism’. These prefabricated liberal critiques of political economy are often guilty of the very crimes of which they accuse others, thoughtlessly reducing complex critical analyses of global capitalism down to basics so that any engagement with complex theoretical ideas, such as the connection between ideology, culture and our psychical life (Hall et al, 2008), can be neatly sidestepped as they move swiftly on to reassert culture and human ingenuity as the driving forces of history (for example, see Rorty, 1989; also Sorman, 2010; Friedman, 2000). In many cases, these

essentially liberal criticisms accuse contemporary political economy and critical theory of the ultimate crime of contemporary intellectual life: the heinous and unforgivable atavism of 'ideology'.

One of the outcomes of the epochal changes that occurred in the final third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that we in Western liberal states increasingly believed that we had transcended the ideological impasses of modernity (see Badiou, 2007; Žižek, 2008a). Postmodernism famously ushered in an age in which we were incredulous to metanarratives (Lyotard, 1974), a world of infinite fluidity and complexity in which the old intellectual world of grand theory no longer had the tools to explain what was happening to our world. As faith in truth and certainty evaporated, we were forced to become increasingly ironic in our cultural analysis (Rorty, 1989). The seemingly infinite number of versions of the truth produced an endless intellectual chatter that seemed to go nowhere, leaving sociological theory spinning its wheels, lost in pointless abstraction (Hall and Winlow, 2007). Those who continued to persevere with macro-level ideological accounts of global capitalism and its increasingly potent semiology were often dismissed as 'reductionists', stuck in the old world of modernist theory and divorced from the heady cultural diversity and fluidity that was going on 'out there', in the 'real' world. The demise of faith in metanarratives opened up opportunities for multiple 'truths', each pre-packaged and prepared for individual consumption rather than an overarching, unifying theory to which we could all subscribe. The fact that, in the wake of the collapse of communism, liberal democracy now had no more worlds to conquer only served to reinforce the belief that we had reached the 'end of history' (Nietzsche, 1969; Fukuyama, 1992) and that ideology was redundant. We had entered a 'post-ideological' era dominated by post-political biopolitics (Žižek, 2008a).

Post-political biopolitics for theorists like Žižek (2008a), Agamben (1995; 2005), and Ranciere (2007) signifies a politics shorn of any attachment to an ideological struggle or any utopian vision of the future. Once we have renounced grand ideological causes, all that remains is the art of expert management and administration with the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives as its primary goal (Agamben, 1995). When politics is no longer informed by a grand vision of the future betterment for society, modern states resort to the regulation of their subjects through 'an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation and the control of populations' (Foucault, 1998; see also Ranciere,

2007). As Badiou (2000) and Žižek (2008a, 2009) have acknowledged, this ‘clearing out’ of the old world of ideology creates the ground for the return of a hidden metanarrative that takes on the appearance of ‘the natural order’ (consider for example Guy Sorman’s *Economics Does Not Lie*, 2010). Now all political parties treat the market as a *fait accompli* (see Winlow and Hall, 2006, for discussion; see Giddens, 1997 for a prime example). We all immediately accept that liberal democracy, while not perfect (Žižek, 2008a; Badiou, 2000), is the best way to organise a state (Badiou, 2000). Even those who now occupy the space vacated by the traditional left diligently argue for a more humane capitalism rather than a new and progressive social order that is immediately distinct from it. Our politicians resolutely describe themselves as ‘not ideological’ (Tyrrell, 2006). Pragmatism, they argue, must rule the day (*ibid*). Rather than carrying the nation towards a utopian future, they focus on defending their subjects from potential victimization or harassment (*ibid*). We have what Agamben (1995) calls ‘a right to bare life’; indeed, the political organisation of human life during this period of late capitalism is founded solely on ‘bare life’. The power of the law separates ‘political’ beings from bare life, therefore a post-ideological, post-political biopolitics appears solely concerned with protecting our physical bodies rather than improving our lives as citizens in the broader sense (Agamben, 1995; Žižek, 2008a). Effectively, the only obligation the state has towards us is to keep us alive (and the rest is up to us). This becomes enshrined in law, part of the new liberal ideology of ‘human rights’ (Žižek, 2002, 2008a) which has replaced any traditional concern with social justice. In a world of increasing atomisation and social competition, sold to us as ‘natural’ (Sorman, 2010; see also Hayek, 1960; Friedman, 2002), the role of the state and its relationship with the citizenry has been transformed (Badiou, 2008). Žižek is right to suggest that this bland post-political vista necessarily contributes to the prevailing cultural climate of cynicism, apathy and what Fisher (2010) has called ‘reflexive impotence’. In the current political climate, the sole motivating political force is *fear* (Žižek, 2008a).

### *Jameson on postmodernism*

Rather than being the essentially ‘cultural’ and discursive phenomenon described by many liberal academics, Jameson (1991) firmly believes that what gets called ‘postmodernity’ is simply the cultural logic of late capitalism. Jameson suggests that postmodernism has a historical grounding: the colonization of culture by organized market capitalism. In a perspicacious analysis, Jameson suggests that ‘in place of the temptation either to denounce

the complacencies of postmodernism as some final symptom of decadence or to salute the new forms as the harbingers of a new technological and technocratic Utopia, it seems more appropriate to assess the new cultural production within the working hypothesis of a general modification of culture itself with the social restructuring of late capitalism as a system' (Jameson, 1991: 62).

Despite the liberal postmodernist belief in the decline of the metanarrative, the 'crisis of foundationalism' and the relativization of truth claims, Jameson (1991) argues that these postmodern positions stem from the conditions of intellectual labour imposed by the late capitalist mode of production. Essentially, the market retains its viability as central to the capitalist project by instilling our scepticism towards alternative metanarratives. The modernist framework had the capability to explain the complex differentiation between spheres and fields of life, as well as the distinct classes and roles within each field yet the postmodernist failure to achieve this understanding implies an abrupt break in the dialectical refinement of thought and a crisis of historicity (ibid). The postmodern phenomenon of merging all discourse into an undifferentiated whole was the result of the colonization of the cultural sphere. In previous times, culture had retained at least partial autonomy (see Winlow and Hall, 2006; Hall et al, 2008), however a more organised market-based capitalism now occupies the cultural sphere, merging all discourse into an undifferentiated whole and thus generating an inability to accept metanarratives in any sphere of social life (Jameson, 1991).

Jameson points out that claims regarding the end of metanarratives are fundamentally flawed and that 'the perception of everything significant about the disappearance of master narratives has itself to be couched in narrative form' (Jameson, 1991: xi). The intellectual labour of the late capitalist mode of production denounces all narratives with the exception of the market, thus creating what Jameson terms a 'Leviathan in sheep's clothing'; under the guise of free choice and the illusion of freedom, the market affords a model of social totality (1991: 273). For Jameson (1991: 263-264) 'the market as human nature' is the proposition that cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged; in my opinion, it is the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle in our time'.

Zizek touches on this exact point throughout his writing (for example, see 2002, 2009). Zizek (2000) argues that the problem with contemporary politics is that it is non-political,

that it accepts as natural the existing capitalist structure of society. The first step towards changing this structure is to recognise its ‘naturalness’ as an ideological formation ripe for critique. Žižek and Jameson are both in agreement that we have not reached a truly post-ideological era; rather, the existing late-capitalist structure has become a social totality. In proclaiming the end of ideology, we see the development of an increasingly penetrative, all-consuming ideology that hides beneath the surface of our apathetic, pragmatic and painfully aware global culture.

### *Žižek’s postmodern subject*

For many critics, late-capitalism, market society, liberal democracy, postmodernity or any of the other epithets used to describe recent social change (see Savage, 2009 on sociological ‘epochalism’) has stripped away the ideological foundation of modern society. The sense of newness, of disjuncture, appears to have contributed to the marginalisation of political economy, especially in the field of sociology and cultural studies. An increasingly globalised, liberal and aggressive form of ‘parliamentary capitalism’ (Badiou, 2008) is now understood as ‘natural’, and this process has cleared the way for an unprecedented domination of public culture by the market. For Žižek, it now makes sense to talk of a new, postmodern subjectivity.

For Žižek (1992; 2000; 2008a), the subject is the individual shorn of all social and cultural characteristics and beliefs, reduced to an ‘anti-humanistic’ subject devoid of all distinctive qualities. Žižek claims that democracy is anti-humanistic largely because democracy has no place for individual characteristics – we are all treated as being fundamentally the same. For example, the most famous example of democracy in writing is the US Declaration of Independence, built around the notion that ‘all men are created equal’. Democracy is not made to the measure of actual people, rather measured on and built around a formal, heartless abstraction – the Žižekian subject stripped of all distinctive cultural and social characteristics and beliefs. In this sense democracy has no place for the fullness of concrete human contact; instead it acts as a formal link of abstract individuals (ibid).

By stripping the subject of all distinctive cultural and social characteristics and beliefs, we are left with ‘bare life’, a subject shorn of any unique qualities, individualistic traits or beliefs (Agamben, 1995). Agamben considers modern society to have shifted to a new paradigm

where the notion of biopolitics dominates. Originally, man had essential life and a political being, whereas today, man's very existence is drawn into the political through the inclusion of natural life into the mechanisms and calculations of state power (ibid). Once the state focuses its attention on the 'right to life' and protecting the 'bare life' of its subjects, the individual becomes reduced to this Zizekian subject, devoid of any social or cultural characteristics and reduced to an anti-humanistic subject. Of course, for Zizek, the thought that we can function in certain spheres of social life as more than simply an abstract individual without definitive social characteristics appears to be a futile pursuit. We 'are' this subject in virtually all contemporary social spheres – the anti-humanistic nature of democracy leaves us little or no room to exist as anything other than a dehumanised subject. Our desire to exist as something other than a dehumanised subject represents the elusive desire to return to the Real (see also Badiou, 2000). It remains elusive due to the fact that our socio-political structure reduces us to abstract individuals, we are not treated as 'whole' individuals, and our social experience is denied the possibility of genuine community links. This would seem to have an enormous impact on our sense of selfhood, colouring all social relations, and would go a long way to explaining some of the issues raised so far, particularly the acceptance of 'the way things are' in the workplace, a lack of consciousness or awareness regarding collective action, and, importantly, the seemingly instrumental nature of workplace friendships. In this regard, contemporary call centre structures mirror the processes and structures of liberal democracy. Human subjectivity is stripped down to a formal abstraction devoid of unique social or cultural characteristics. Given the nature of the postmodern Zizekian subject, operating in a world of post-political biopolitics, fundamental questions arise as to the impact these changes will have upon issues such as the traditional working class habitus, as well as class relations as a whole.

Going further, Zizek (1992; 2000) argues that present society, or postmodernity, is based upon the demise of the authority of the big Other. In a Lacanian sense, the big Other refers to the Symbolic Order as experienced by individual subjects. Comprising everything from language to the law and all social structures in between, the Symbolic Order constitutes a considerable part of what we call reality, the impersonal framework of society and the arena in which we take our place as part of a community of fellow human beings (Zizek, 2000). The big Other, as a purely symbolic order, is a collective lie to which we all individually subscribe, disavowing the brute fact of the Real in favour of a modicum of idealization.

Zizek's favourite metaphor for the big Other is the parable of the emperor's new clothes – in the Symbolic Order we would rather believe the emperor is fully clothed; only through the demise of the big Other do we recognise that, confronted by the Real, the emperor stands before us naked. The big Other also confers an identity upon the contemporary subject, our socio-economic position, for example, being determined by the parts of our personalities that register within the Symbolic Order and are thus recognised by everyone else.

The collapse of the traditional Symbolic Order and the demise of the big Other stem from the universalization of reflexivity and freedom of choice inherent in the cultural logic of late capitalism (see Beck, 1992; 1994; Giddens, 1990). The most obvious result of stripping away the traditional symbolic framework of society and an explosion of freedom of choice and reflexivity is that we are no longer subject to nature or tradition but rather subjects of choice. We have the power to choose who we want to be, cut loose from all conventional ties, and therefore everything we do appears to become a matter of choice. The official ideological compulsion to 'Enjoy!' signifies the return of the superego. Traditionally, the superego acted as an internal agency of prohibition, the voice of the Symbolic Law inside our head, mediating our desires. However, in the face of the demise of the big Other and the collapse of the Symbolic Order, the superego has become the obverse of the Law, feeding on what the Symbolic Law represses (Zizek, 2000; see also Hall et al, 2008). The superego now orders us to enjoy what we are allowed to enjoy, to find pleasure in those social pursuits that are sanctioned by the Symbolic Law. However, as Zizek notes (2000), when enjoyment becomes compulsory, it is no longer fun. The superego imperative serves as a stultifying effect, leaving us indifferent or unable to enjoy. This is precisely what Fisher (2010) means by 'reflexive impotence': the imperative to enjoy serves to deprive our life of actual enjoyment, yet we cannot drag ourselves away from the sugary gratification of our immediate mediated and consumerised popular culture. Zizek regards the superego imperative to enjoy as far more effective as a way of hindering access to enjoyment than a direct prohibition from the Law. The notions of unlimited choice, freedom and reflexivity at the heart of postmodernity *miss the reflexivity at the heart of the subject*. We may choose, but our actual choices become meaningless abstractions. Our choices occasionally function as a non-choice, in as much as, no matter which option we pick, the result remains the same. We are also, on occasion, offered a choice because a weight of social expectation makes it feasible only to choose the designated option. As Zizek and Badiou are at pains to point out, the

excess of choice has long been misunderstood by politicians and the liberal intelligentsia: choice is, in itself, not fundamentally liberating. As many of my respondents were painfully aware, choices come with a burden of responsibility and are destined always to be considered negatively in retrospect as our consciousness becomes littered with alternative biographical narratives that somehow worked out better and are ‘free from the travails that blight the actuality of the present’ (see Winlow and Hall, 2009b). This is not to suggest that my respondents were always pessimistic and felt their lives to be hindered by the often harsh realities of our individualised culture. Rather, they oscillated between optimism and pessimism; a blind optimism and an often Nietzschean pessimism of *awareness*. In keeping with the theoretical approach of this thesis, I understood this as the freedom one feels when one is denied the opportunity to perceive of any other way of life (see Zizek, 2000).

Given that the collapse of the Symbolic Order has stripped away the traditional symbolic framework of society and reshaped the superego imperative, the implications for notions of identity and habitus are glaringly obvious. The following section will attempt to determine these effects and make suggestions as to the nature of a contemporary working class habitus.

#### *A Working Class Habitus?*

Having outlined my approach to postmodern subjectivity, the remainder of the chapter will focus more specifically on how working class identity has changed, how the conditions of market capitalism and late modernity has radically shifted emphasis from traditional forms of identity and collective character to a more reflexive individuality. Utilising Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of habitus, this section will discuss how changes to the economy and employment opportunities in Middlesbrough has directly affected the notion of a ‘working class’ identity with its suite of internalised dispositions. The key question this chapter aims to answer concerns what a new, post-industrial, consumer-driven, service-based working class habitus looks like. As Atkinson (2008: 1) has accurately noted, ‘as sociological concepts go, few have been subject to the same level of continual contestation over not only their nature but their very utility as class’. In light of the evidence presented in this thesis, this chapter will also aim to outline and further the debate regarding ‘the death of class’ (Pakulski and Waters, 1996).

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus is a useful starting point for a debate on class. Habitus attempts to move away from old debates regarding structure and agency by developing a concept that integrates both. Each individual acts in an autonomous way whilst simultaneously being influenced by the social field in which they operate. The values, beliefs, tastes and dispositions of a particular class or group, in short, what Bourdieu (1984) calls habitus, frame what we understand to be 'working class culture'. Rather than simply being manifest in behaviour, habitus is integral to and an active component in the psychosocial processes that shape behaviour. The habitus finds its initial form in the early years of life, but Bourdieu's theory is far more refined than Sutherland's theory of differential association or the liberal symbolic interactionism of Blumer and Mead. The power of habitus derives from the thoughtlessness of habit and habituation rather than consciously learned rules and principles (ibid). The key to understanding the notion of habitus is that it is embodied in the interaction between the individual and the social context (Turner, 1999: 254). As Bourdieu notes, modern society was structured around a clear class hierarchy which structured habitus and reflected class location. The individual is exposed to the world therefore capable of being shaped by the material and cultural conditions of existence, values and dispositions become doxic after prolonged exposure and repetitive interaction (Bourdieu, 1984). Crucial to the concept of habitus is the social field in which we operate. Neighbourhoods, schools, families, and communities are all fields in which we move through our early life and as we do so the values and behaviours of these fields become engrained within us. Patterns of speech, modes of comportment, accepted behaviours and cultural tastes are all shaped and influenced by the cultural and social world around us. In his discussion of the intellectual life of the British working classes, Rose (2002: 6) suggests that 'our grand rules for processing information are developed in the particular society we emerge from therefore working class experience determines how working class people 'read' situations'. When individuals and social groups are imbued with the values and habits of a particular field, this undoubtedly shapes their response and behaviour in certain situations. During industrial capitalism, the need for a strong, compliant working class labour force capable of working in physically demanding circumstances contributed to the structure and content of a working class habitus that incorporated the values required by the capitalist system (Hall and Winlow, 2004). This is not to say that all forms of modern working class life were totally dominated by the logic of capital accumulation; indeed, there seems to be evidence that oppositional politics and independent cultural forms were much stronger during the majority

of the twentieth century than they are today (Rose, 2002; Winlow and Hall, 2006). However, for working men their relationship with the means of production was irreducible to masculine working class cultures. As Hall and Winlow (2004) note, 'physical hardness, fortitude, persistence, endurance, mental sclerosis and a general hardening of the psychosomatic nature were at the core of this being' (ibid).

These internalised dispositions were created from, and crucial to, their immediate environment and the practical needs they faced. The individual is not merely a biological being, but a reflection of the social process (Adorno, 2005: 228-229). As Byrne (1989: 40) noted, the culture of the entire North East of England, not just Middlesbrough, was derived from industrial relations. In terms of Middlesbrough, Bell (1969) describes the birth of a working class culture built around the economic necessity that transformed pre-industrial agrarian Teesside into a world of mass industrial production, most notably with the ironworks. Middlesbrough, as we have stated elsewhere, originated as a result of the natural resources conducive to industrial production and therefore, from the earliest stages of development, working class culture was inextricably bonded to industrial labour. In traditional working class cultures and communities, particularly during industrial modernity, a working class habitus emerged based around family, community, hard work, mutuality, collective responsibility, toughness, endurance and a general sense of collective identity and destiny (Winlow, 2001). Emphasis was placed on the family unit, the male breadwinner worked for a 'family wage' whilst the female occupied the traditional role of homemaker, venturing into the labour market only as far as secretarial work or part-time factory or shop work (Walby, 1990). Patriarchal relations aside, the certainty of work and exploitation had become doxic by the time deindustrialisation struck in the 1970s. A community spirit and sense of collective identity lingered on even during the rapid changes that define post-war British society, and they did so, at least in part, because the range of employment opportunities was so narrow in an industrial working class town such as Middlesbrough that a feeling of 'everyone being in the same boat' prevailed, usually because one's neighbours worked in the same or similar occupations (Bell, 1969). The germ of aggressive individualism had yet to fully contaminate the entirety of the social body; the compulsory search for individual advancement and social distinction (Hall et al, 2008) that gradually corroded what should have been the principle source of continuity and progress had yet to be

fully democratised by the ideology and culture industries of market capitalism as it yet again ‘revolutionised’ (Zizek, 2008a) itself from within during the late 1970s.

Atkinson (2009: 898) emphasises the tight relationship between work and community, echoing Bell’s (1969) argument, by claiming that ‘it was precisely through work, its degradation and ultimately exploitative character, that workers would consider themselves to be in the same boat, rally together as a ‘class-for-itself’’. A strong adherence to hard-work, often in the form of robust, physical labour, stoicism, and taking responsibilities seriously became integral to the mainstream, functional elements of the working class habitus. By the last third of the twentieth century, a fully-formed working class habitus based around these principles had guided generations of men and women, not only in terms of directing them towards particular forms of employment, but also providing class-based norms that gave individuals a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1992) that shaped individual attitudes and behaviours.

As we have seen already, the collapse of the Symbolic Order signals a changing world in which traditional sources of identity and behavioural and attitudinal structures have been eroded, or in which they have mutated, often in problematic ways (Hall et al, 2008). Huge practical changes, combined with more complex and esoteric adaptations in the nature of working class life, have transformed the contours and content of the working class habitus. When global changes, with particular (but not unique) local consequences, change the field dramatically, old norms, behaviours, tastes and dispositions inevitably come under a great deal of pressure. This crucial shift, that has fragmented and then destroyed the modernist sense of collective identity, mutuality and shared destiny and replaced it with a culture of egoism, narcissism and social competition, all structured in relation to the new demands of an entirely different phase of capital accumulation, underlies the contemporary ‘death of class’ debate. To what extent is it reasonable to talk of a ‘working class’ if few within it define themselves as being a constituent part of that class? In a culture that can reasonably be defined as a one of ‘liberal individualism’, in which the interests of the individual are paramount not just for those individuals who occupy the margins of society, be they the bohemian middle classes, the free-marketeers or those who inhabit areas of permanent recession, but for *everybody*, the traditional idea of class is challenged, reduced to an abstract formulation that serves merely to categorise. *The industrial working classes used to possess a*

*potent political potentiality*, but the low grade service workers cannot be the source of progressive change as they appear to be devoid of any sense of collective identity and destiny that might one day coalesce into progressive political intervention (Winlow and Hall, 2006). Hall et al (2008) also suggest that, in those areas that used to be the very epitome of working class life, there now appears to be a marked sense of antipathy towards those who would have once been seen as potential brothers in a progressive political struggle that aimed to create a more egalitarian Britain.

If we insist on retaining ‘class’ as a concept that can be used to make sense of social hierarchy, it seems entirely reasonable to claim that ‘class’ is still alive and well because we continue to live in a grotesquely hierarchical society in which the gap between rich and poor is widening with every passing year (Harvey, 2010; Dorling, 2010; Seymour, 2010). We, as sociologists, can ‘see’ class in educational attainment, in health, in imprisonment, in all kinds of statistical analyses of the social; we see it as a structure of life that ‘exists’ below the surface, below our immediate field of vision, something that subtly affects our lives and life chances. However, if we address class purely in this way, we are complicit in a process that removes the traditional political content of class, as it developed from the richness of real life, the thickness of community and collectivity, the very real substance of class itself, the ‘thing’ that made class as a concept real in the imagination of populous of modern Britain. As Winlow and Hall (2006) suggest, class has become something to escape from rather than stay and fight for. Class becomes the starting point in a subjective narrative in which one ‘triumphs’ over the ‘problem’ of one’s background, or in which one fails as a result of one’s background.

So what constitutes a contemporary working class habitus? Through the research undertaken for this project, working daily alongside many young men and women who would quickly be categorised by sociologists as ‘working class’, interviewing co-workers and finding out about their daily lives and their outlook on life and work, it can be reasonably suggested that a modern working class habitus orbits around the dominant cultural themes of our time, while at the same time indelibly marking these individuals with its stain, its localised variants: self-interest and the ‘project of the self’, leisure, consumerism, and status and capital accumulation, both directly influenced, and in more subtle ways contributed to, the sense of self that was felt by my respondents.

To take one facet of the traditional working class habitus, a concern with and struggle towards collective betterment emanated from a sense of obligation and togetherness stemming from community and industry, whereas my respondents repeatedly demonstrated how little interest they had in collective bargaining. Primarily their social relationships were mediated by work rather than through community bonds resulting in them feeling no durable sense of attachment or obligation to one another. Although this chapter argues that a certain semblance of working class culture still exists, the overt political consciousness of the traditional working class failed to survive the social upheaval of the last quarter of the twentieth century. As noted in Chapter 5 the idea of collective action in terms of trade union membership was discussed one slow evening at Call Direct but those who even understood the potential power of a trade union dismissed it as being unrealistic to think it would have an impact, a relic of a bygone time, whilst several agents were completely unaware such things existed. During the course of interviewing my co-workers, only one respondent admitted he would join a union and could see the benefit of union protection. Interestingly, that respondent was Darren who, at 31, was born at the end of the 1970s and was old enough to remember a time when unions had considerably more clout than they do today. Zoe's thoughts on the prospect of joining a union followed a similar theme amongst my respondents:

Q – If Call Direct had a union would you have joined it?

A – Err, no.

Q – Why not?

A – They have one where I work now but I haven't joined. I'm not interested and I'm too lazy. Probably, I don't know the word to describe it...I don't care, I can't be bothered! That's me generally. I'll whinge and moan about something and try and do something but if I can't then that's about it.

Or take Sarah's response to trade union membership:

Q – If the call centre had a union would you have joined it?

A – I don't know really, I haven't been there that long

Q – Has anyone ever mentioned it, or mentioned the lack of a union while you’ve been there?

A – No. The only time I’ve heard mention of a union is in the letters, when they’ve wanted me to attend interviews, it says you can have a colleague or a union rep with you. That’s the only time I’ve heard of unions at Call Direct.

Q – Have you ever taken a colleague in with you?

A – No

Even given the opportunity to bring a representative to an interview to discuss her status with the company given her absence due to pregnancy, Sarah failed to realise the potential benefit of the collective attitude trade unionism offers. Mutuality, collective bargaining and the protection of trade unions are so foreign to young workers in today’s economy that it clearly shows a shift in values, a change in habitus away from traditional forms of collectivity or mutuality towards an individualised self-interest which completely fails to recognise co-workers as potential allies in a struggle for future betterment. As we have discussed, work has become an increasingly marginal task in terms of importance to young people in their everyday life and identity, a task to be completed in order to finance more meaningful activities without impinging upon or actively shaping one’s identity. It can hardly be surprising then that the modern working class habitus lacks a desire for collective betterment in the workplace, particularly as it has been shot through with individualism, instrumentality and social competition, all anathema to the concept of group or mutual improvement. Politics has become a spectator sport in late modernity (Zizek, 2009) whilst the concept of ‘the public has been displaced by the consumer’ (Fisher, 2010). The modern working class habitus bear out these ideas, the political realm no longer welcomes or expects active participation by a cynical public whilst the idea of a collective ‘public’ is increasingly irrelevant in a market society geared towards consumerism and a superego reconfigured towards unrestrained individual enjoyment. In other words, ‘active democracy requires co-operation between large groups of people who do not know and may not entirely trust each other...the fragmented character of the new consumerism, fully developed in the 1980s and 1990s, has made such collaboration much more difficult’ (Cross, 2002: 227). Marr (2007) sees the victory of shopping over politics as the biggest change in the twentieth century, the new forms of identity emerging at the start of the twenty-first century appear to bear out this process as consumerism triumphs over ideas of political solidarity and collective co-operation.

As chapter 7 indicated, leisure and consumerism are central to everyday life for young people in our 'liquid' society (Bauman, 2005a) or 'late' modernity (Giddens, 1990). Having already heard from my respondents in chapter 7, this section will serve to analyse the importance of leisure and consumerism in relation to the lives of young men and women engaged in routine, service-based work. Where work once provided the record of one's life achievement or failure and provided the main orientation point in reference to which all other pursuits could be planned, today work is regarded as a means to an end for many (Bauman, 2005a: 17). In a society dominated by consumerism and leisure, the continuous pursuit of goods is the standard of social differentiation and evidence of pecuniary strength (Veblen, 1899: 43). Reflecting on the peculiar nature of commodities, Karl Marx noted the similarities between the way 'commodities enchant and take possession of our world and the way the gods of religion bind the world to their spiritual powers' (Kleinberg-Levin, 2005: 62). Consumerism has been argued by many to be almost the new religion of contemporary society (Miles, 1998). Work is no longer regarded as the ultimate status symbol; rather the ability to display status through consumption and leisure is the social indicator of contemporary society. In this sense, Miles (2000) argues that 'although class continues to play an important role in the construction of identities, that role is not so all-powerful as to *determine* young people's lifestyles', essentially, class still impacts upon identity, but it plays a subordinate role to the pressures of consumerism. To put it another way, class matters less today because the framework of contemporary society has made the political consciousness formerly associated with class relations increasingly impotent and marginalised, seeking individual differentiation and cultivating the 'project of the self' is all that matters now.

Consumerism requires a level of individuality that was impossible until the ascendancy of liberal democracy and the institutionalisation of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). During periods where social-democracy placed strong emphasis on social justice, durable social bonds and a structural inclination towards the collective served to prevent rampant individualism, the needs of the group were often put before the needs of the individual. However, liquid life is a consuming life and 'the rise of individuality signalled a progressive weakening – falling apart or tearing apart – of the dense web of social bonds that tightly wrapped the totality of life's activities' (Bauman, 2005a: 20). Bauman (2007b) offers an important distinction: consumption is primarily a trait and occupation of individual human

beings whereas consumerism is an attribute of society. Contemporary society and the market economy are fuelled by the creation of desires and the constant emphasis on satisfying those desires (Barber, 2007). In fact, the genius of consumer capitalism reveals itself in the fact that these desires do not present themselves to us as desire, rather we are convinced that we *need* each specific consumer product. Creating *pseudo-needs* and then ensuring we can never satisfy them ensures the economy keeps going on the back of our thwarted desire (ibid). The internal logic of consumer capitalism is simply to ensure that our desires are never achieved, we must keep spending in order to fuel the economy, ‘without the repetitive frustration of desires, consumer demand would quickly run dry and the consumer-target economy would run out of steam’ (Bauman, 2007b: 47). Given, as we have seen, the new superego imperative to enjoy (Zizek, 2000), the internal logic of consumer capitalism bombards us with seemingly endless opportunities to satisfy our desires whilst all the while snatching satisfaction away and replacing it with further pseudo-needs.

After 9/11, President Bush encouraged the American public to get over the tragedy by going shopping. Consumer spending drives the economy. As such, advertising has become a science in its own right, dedicated to the art of manipulation. ‘In a simpler time, advertising merely called attention to the product and extolled its advantages. Now it manufactures a product of its own: the consumer, perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored. Advertising serves not so much to advertise products as to promote consumption as a way of life’ (Lasch, 1979: 72). An incessant drive to consume has been instilled in young people (Hall et al, 2008). In the case of my co-workers, lavish shopping sprees and hedonistic binges in the night-time economy attempted to slake their thirst for satisfaction, often with the result of sending them into overdrafts, parental handouts or long periods without money whilst waiting for the next pay check to either pay off debts, dive back into pleasure-seeking spending sprees, or often both.

### *The End of Class?*

By way of concluding this chapter, we return to the class debate in order to determine whether class, as a concept, has any relevance in contemporary society. This thesis serves as a reflection on the meaning of class in a changing world. Throughout this study I tried to investigate what recent changes in the formal economy have meant for the everyday lives of young working class men and women trapped in the lower sections of the new economy.

Indirectly, this led to my investigation of the 'state' of class relations in Britain. I had hoped to find a real sense of social class still in existence but, unfortunately, I did not. Finding real social class would have meant there still existed the potential for progressive social change however I found no commitment to collective social responsibility or determination to fight for progressive betterment or advancement. Instead, without real class interests, in a world in which we are reduced to passive consumers who have no commitment to anything above the shallow interests of the self, we remain trapped in the neoliberal epoch.

Sociology has maintained a strong debate surrounding the very existence of class for some time now (Atkinson, 2008; Pakulski and Waters, 1996; Goldthorpe, 1987; Gorz, 1982; Crompton, 2010). The debate rests on two key issues; class as an object and class as a subjective experience. In the former sense, class still exists as an indicator of social division, in the latter it has become increasingly difficult to defend class in terms of subjective experience. Quantifying class is a difficult task; can we still talk about class in a meaningful way? Many writers argue, convincingly, that we cannot. Pakulski and Waters (1996) feel that the economic, political and cultural conditions essential to sustain the traditional class system have undergone radical transformation in the late twentieth century therefore class theory and class analysis is no longer relevant. Similarly, Gorz (1982) felt that the end of the era of massed industrial employment led to the end of collective social action and the rise of individualism thus ushering in a new era and the end of the working class. If the rise of individualism and instrumentalism, enforced through the institutionalisation of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), has fractured the notion of collective identity then how can we talk about class as a subjective experience? The logic of capitalism compels people to feel individual rather than enclashed. Now that the imperatives of capital have become doxic they therefore appear to have no ideological content and as such individual achievement has become 'natural' rather than a natural urge to strive for collective betterment. Individuals, particularly young people, no longer have the vocabulary to contemplate class relations (Beck, 2007) although they are acutely aware that inequality and social hierarchies still persist (Pakulski and Waters, 1996). Beck (2007) argues that political consciousness lays at the very heart of social class relations and therefore, given the death of class consciousness, we should abandon the term 'class' in favour of 'cosmopolitanism'.

Academics agree that inequality and social hierarchy (Cannadine, 1998) still exist, yet for many this is not an indication that class still exists. As Pakulski and Waters (1996: 5) argue, 'post-class societies will remain internally differentiated in terms of access to economic resources, political power and prestige'. In some respects, the argument echoes that of C. Wright Mills (2000), societies are inherently hierarchical but divided by power relations rather than specific class divisions. Although American society traditionally displayed less class characteristics than the UK, Mills' argument finds a new home in post-class analysis, power centres on those with the political and economic will and opportunity rather than their membership to a particular class. Inequality is not class based, purely opportunity-based. As contemporary society focuses upon on the individual, the message appears to be clear: focus on yourself and the opportunities for advancement will appear. The structural reality of contemporary society contradicts this idea (Pakulski and Waters, 1996).

As Marks and Baldry (2009) argue, despite claims that class consciousness and class identities no longer hold the same importance to modern life as perhaps they did a generation ago, their respondents still resort to class as a form of self-identification. The key issue in Marks and Baldry's work appeared to be that, although respondents referred to class, they had some difficulty in establishing which class they belonged to given the way social life in modern Britain has evolved. Although social life is different in contemporary society, the difficulty in locating oneself within a particular class comes from the declining use of class vocabulary in public discourse, rather than an increase in upward mobility. The cultural boundary between the working class and middle class is now incredibly difficult to determine. Jameson (1991) argues that consumerisation, 'dumbing down' and the declining importance of cultural hierarchy account for this; money becomes more important to *everyone* across the class spectrum rather than the cultural aspects of class. The class boundary blurs because people want to get rich and indulge in the kind of spending relative wealth affords them, not because they identify with the cultural aspects of middle class lifestyle. Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007) found in their study of social mobility that whilst downward mobility was not increasing, upward mobility was not increasing either. Among my respondents, many had not looked far enough ahead to plan a career. Fred was 22 when I worked with him and when I asked him what his ideal job would be, his vague answer was representative of many of my respondents:

A – Probably, see I wouldn't know, coz I often thought about joining the police but I don't have the fitness for it, but it is something that's often interested me which, to be fair, has absolutely nothing to do with this job, but I suppose it does build up my people skills. I'm thinking of going into sports and stuff, I'm probably going to go to Nottingham university and do something in sports there so I'll probably end up in something in sports, either managing or psychology, something strange like that.

Q – So you're not looking for a full time career in call centre work then?

A – I look at the people, especially in Call Direct, I look at the people and it's not what you know, it's who you know. Even if I did like it there, I couldn't work somewhere like that. Maybe in a different call centre it might be different but you see people who aren't good TL's and because they're friends with the right people...straight through. You see people in my position, normal call centre agents, that are really good but they don't get the stepping stone to go up because either they don't know the right people, or, you know what I mean? It's who you know.

Fred was typical of many respondents in that he had no specific career plan although all of his ideas were not out of the realm of possibility for him. A 'stable' career like the police was often the furthest step up the ladder for many of my co-workers at Call Direct. For Ian, the Army was his desired profession, for Shaun it was the fire brigade. For many, they had no idea and just lived month-to-month. The key point here is that social mobility is not as fluid as liberal-democracy pretends it is. As Pakulski and Waters (1996: 16) argue, 'the further down the hierarchy one goes the less likely it becomes that a person will move up to class I'. For those at the bottom of the labour market, there is very little chance for rapid advancement. Crompton (2010) argues that the limitation of social mobility ensures that employment still acts as a crucial class indicator. Along with the family, employment serves to foster class identity. The argument for many academics is that those at the bottom of the labour market do not constitute a class because the subjective realisation of class occupancy is non-existent in contemporary society whilst social hierarchy does not necessarily indicate class divisions (Beck, 2007).

Crucially, for Pakulski and Waters (1996: 133), the abandonment of class-based voting and class politics at the end of the twentieth century is a crucial indicator of waning class relevance, largely because class politics is the key determining link for class relations and reproduction. No longer voting on traditional class lines indicates the declining significance of social class. The 'decline of the use of class imagery and consciousness in politics' has become apparent in recent decades, for example, in the build up to the general election in 2010, Prime Minister Gordon Brown was criticised for resorting to old fashioned class politics by suggesting that the Conservative manifesto was thought up 'on the playing fields of Eton'. This is interesting because it highlights how the ideology of liberal democracy and capital has become doxic. There is no room in liberal-democratic ideology for a return to class politics and any attempt to reintroduce the vocabulary of class division is attacked. Regardless of the fact that millions of people experience life in such a vastly different way to the leaders of all political parties, mentioning class in the public sphere is no longer palatable. This serves as an example of a post-political culture whereby the ideology of liberal democracy has drained politics of traditional ideological difference (Agamben, 1995).

It is also important to note the relationship between productive capitalism and class (Marx, 1999). During industrial modernity, when production was the engine driving the British economy, class was everywhere to be seen (Thompson, 1980). However, now that production has moved overseas, class debates have become passé in this country. The developing countries currently expanding on the back of productive capitalism are more suited to traditional class analysis (Mason, 2008; although Mason gets it slightly wrong by suggesting the working class has gone global rather than remaining specific to countries built on productive capitalism). Production in these countries often occurs in terrible conditions, regular news reports about multinational companies exploiting indigenous workers through low pay and treacherous conditions attest to this. Class is happening here and class analysis can still be productive in these places. The workers at Call Direct cannot be linked to these populations, the way class 'happens' in developing countries is vastly different to our current experience of class and common ground is hard to find. More likely, we need to find new ways of thinking about collectivity, identity, hierarchy and social justice.

Zizek (2009) offers a new way of thinking and a unique perspective on the class debate. Rather than tethering class to traditional ideological differences or focusing on the end of a

political working class, Zizek offers the radical assertion that we are all proletarians now and as such should seek the return of communism to right the current social inequalities we face. Adopting Hardt and Negri's (2004) concept of the 'commons', or the shared substance of our social being, Zizek argues that the looming threat of ecological catastrophe, the privatisation of intellectual property and the socio-ethical implications of techno-scientific developments such as biogenetics act as domains over which we share commonality rather than difference and around which we should unite in struggle:

“What unites us is that, in contrast to the classic image of proletariat who have ‘nothing to lose but their chains’, we are in danger of losing *everything*: the threat is that we will be reduced to abstract subjects devoid of all substantial content, dispossessed of our symbolic substance, our genetic base heavily manipulated, vegetating in an unliveable environment. This triple threat to our entire being reduces us all to proletarians, reduced to substanceless subjectivity.” (Zizek, 2009: 92).

The very shift in subjectivity which we earlier described as being fatal to the traditional working class offers, for Zizek, the opportunity for renewal of communism in order to tackle the issues which affect us all. The thought of us all as substanceless Zizekian subjects, dispossessed and ravaged by genetic manipulation and ecological catastrophe serves to make proletarians of us all, substanceless subjectivity unites us all and, for Zizek, signals a potential for collective solidarity no longer available to the traditional working class.

Although class debate has been removed from the public sphere due to the ascendancy of liberal democracy and the logic of capital, it does not mean that class no longer exists. In a Marxist sense, the exploitation of the worker is more important than whether or not they fit neatly into a boundary or social group. Class emerges through exploitation by others, ‘objective class interests are essential realities even if the class formation is inchoate, so that boundaries are less important than exploitation and struggle’ (Pakulski and Waters, 1996: 59). This thesis has clearly shown how Call Direct employees are exploited by their employer therefore it can be argued that an exploited working class still exists, however the political potency that gave the traditional working class its name no longer exists whilst it has become passé to discuss class in a liquid society occupied with the individual and brimming

with opportunities for personal social advancement (Bauman, 2005a). Whether larger themes and issues such as those laid out by Žižek (2009) serve as a common bond around which a 'new' proletariat can rally also remains to be seen. However, as things stand, the demise of a potent working class seeking collective advancement leaves us firmly entrenched in the existing neoliberal epoch and, at present, this shows no signs of changing.

## CONCLUSION

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‘Something was dead in each of us,

And what was dead was Hope’

- Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*

This thesis has served as an examination of the relationship between capitalism, labour and identity. This study follows a long tradition of workplace ethnographies and has attempted to examine a workplace significantly different from classic industrial ethnographies of the 1950s and 1960s (Blauner, 1964; Beynon, 1973). Although older studies represent a particular form of capitalism that no longer exists, there remains continuity in the sense that the needs of capital have not changed. The difference emerges through the changing relationship between capital and the social world; capital markets have evolved and reshaped the world to fit its needs. The working class heyday of post-war Britain famously brought Harold MacMillan’s comment that ‘most of our people have never had it so good’ (Sandbrook, 2005: 80). That world no longer exists; industrialism is a waning memory for the old and totally insignificant for the young yet the same logic of capital still applies, albeit in a new economic climate dominated by the free pursuit of profit. This study has shown how, in many ways, things are worse now than they have ever been as the core ideology of capital is much more intrusive, seeping into many aspects of society, subjectivity and social life previously impervious to the demands of capital. Workers are deprived of identity in much the same way Marx (1999) described over 150 years ago whilst contemporary workers also miss out on the cultural compensations that existed in the post-war ‘golden age’ of the British worker. For many of my respondents, there does not appear to be any sense of progress or improvement across the lifecourse, there is no compensation in the form of an identity grounded in class or community. Instead, our compensation comes in the form of the seductive imagery of consumer signification. The young men and women in this study accept things as the way they are, see low pay and intrusive management practices as the norm, and resign themselves to the fact that things will not change. They alternate between moments of nihilistic bleak pessimism, where they see their job and identity for what it actually is, and a simple repetition of the ideological line running through contemporary

culture of upward mobility and future betterment (Hall et al, 2008). Sally summed up this bipolarity when asked her opinion of call centres in general:

“For us being the employees, it’s just like, I see it as a kind of stepping stone. It’s the kind of job that either older people would want, you know, they’ve been out of work for a while, or students, someone who needs a job for a few months, using it as a stepping stone for experience before moving somewhere else. No one stays long enough anyway; it’s not really a serious job.”

Tellingly, although Sally saw the job as a stepping stone to something better, she could not say what Call Direct was a stepping stone towards. At times, future prosperity is just around the corner, the next move will be the ‘right’ one, their optimism stemming from their inability to engage practically with the reality of their job and identity. Although this will be discussed in detail later in the chapter, it is important to note that, for many, oscillating between nihilism and optimism comes not from rational responses to their lives and prospects but from a reflexive impotence that renders them incapable of action in the face of reality (Fisher, 2010). They know their situation is bleak but they nihilistically accept it, the task of changing the situation is too great, nobody else is interested in changing things so their efforts would be a waste of time. Unable to find satisfaction in their situation or the means to change things, they cling on to the optimism afforded by contemporary culture and the ideological promise of a brighter tomorrow. They display what Fisher (2010: 21-22) refers to as ‘depressive hedonia’; an inability to do *anything* except pursue pleasure and satisfaction. The depressive, nihilistic reaction stems from the knowledge that ‘something is missing’ but they have no appreciation or understanding that this ‘something’ exists beyond the pleasure principle. This sense of lack continually returns leaving many, including some of my respondents, desperately searching in vain for contentment. This is a uniquely postmodern form of poverty; they are paid poorly, and while they are not starving, they struggle to remain attached to our mainstream consumer culture. Despite the positive rhetoric trumpeting meritocracy and a new skills economy, the chances of upward social mobility remain negligible. They are not paid adequately for the work they do and consequently cannot strike out on their own and make a life for themselves. However, as bad as this material poverty is, in my view, the true poverty facing the young men and women engaged in low paid service work is an existential poverty, a poverty of culture and inclusion, a poverty of personal value.

Despite being fully incorporated into the myth of potential rapid social advancement, they seem to be forever on the outside; for these workers social mobility is not the impending benefit we are led to believe. Some of these issues are discussed later in the chapter but at this stage it is important to stress that, in my view, things are worse today because the impending doom of cultural exclusion and the incessant desire for inclusion forces many to move back and forth between pessimism and blind optimism which has a destabilising effect on personal worth and value and leaves many struggling to find some measure of stability or security.

Meanwhile, this study has also highlighted the fluctuating fortunes of Middlesbrough in a fluid global economy which sees some specific localities rendered irrelevant in the continued pursuit of capital. Given the heavy reliance on iron and steel and petrochemicals during industrial modernity, Middlesbrough was hit particularly hard by the restructuring of the global economy during the 1980s. The needs of capital pushed global competition and economic profitability to previously unknown levels leaving many localities facing economic ruin. Middlesbrough's lack of infrastructure and a diverse labour market brought hard times to the area which has never fully disappeared. Regeneration in the late 1990s, built to a certain degree on inward investment in the service sector took advantage of the conditions, particularly welcoming local authorities offering incentives for investment and a large surplus labour supply, and saw Middlesbrough restructure around the service sector as many other areas had (Richardson, Belt and Marshall, 2000). Call centres featured heavily and employed thousands across the town and region.

However, the onset of recession in late 2007 had severe negative consequences on the town again as much of the inward investment that had contributed to the partial regeneration of the town was pulled out leaving many facing unemployment again. Also, high levels of government spending in Middlesbrough had helped to keep the town alive but the proposed spending cuts announced by the coalition government threatened Middlesbrough's survival even more. In a study by the BBC in September 2010, Middlesbrough was rated the least resilient place in England in terms of having the ability to weather economic shocks brought on by spending cuts ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk), 2010b). The high volume of public sector jobs in Middlesbrough were vulnerable to cuts in spending, threatening more misery on the town. Like many post-industrial northern towns and cities, Middlesbrough has benefitted from the

relocation of public sector jobs now threatened by government spending cuts; if these jobs disappear then it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the urban middle class is in danger of extinction in these places. Meanwhile, the last remnants of the steel industry disappeared and service sector jobs also went, including hundreds of call centre jobs. Middlesbrough's fragile economy and unstable labour market proved once again that when the global economy stumbles, Middlesbrough falls flat on her face. In relation to other parts of the country, and other western post-industrial economies, Middlesbrough remains economically vulnerable. Of course, Middlesbrough has never prospered in a way that afforded relative wealth for her inhabitants. Even during the most economically productive periods, capital rested in the hands of a few, the workers lives improved but they still remained unable to control the means of production. Rising real wages and job stability led to stable work and home life but did not mean increased prosperity for the many. However, it appears to me that in many ways the exploited working classes of the industrial modern period were 'better off' than many contemporary workers. Materially, those working in the contemporary labour market feel they are better off than their predecessors, nonetheless I feel that a declining sense of community has led to increasing atomisation and social isolation, rising insecurity in many aspects of social life leads to fear and instability, social competition has eroded any sense of collectivity or mutuality, again reinforcing a sense of social isolation. Consumer culture has created a sense of enforced dissatisfaction which negatively affects the psychic stability of the individual as they constantly search for new ways to satisfy their desires or fulfil their aspirations. Without any social support in the form of community or class to rely on, the individual in contemporary society is beset by instability and insecurity at every turn, they have no safety net to fall back on, thus heightening the risk involved in their decision making. The family becomes the last salvation for many, the only safety net available. This is something we will look at in more detail later but it is important to note that the family takes on increased significance, particularly in terms of parents extending financial support to children far beyond anything seen during industrial modernity. The transition to full adulthood and independence becomes blurred and extended as children find they cannot afford to strike out on their own in an economy dominated by insecure, low-paid service work (Webster et al, 2004; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). At least during industrial modernity the exploited working classes had a social space in which they found relative security and stability, in the form of community or class, which tempered the rougher edges of their exploitation. That no longer exists for those in contemporary society. There is no

brave new world of economic prosperity in Middlesbrough's future. At the time of writing (summer 2010), the local labour market remains incredibly tight as few jobs are available, many remain out of work and proposed government spending cuts threaten public sector workers in Middlesbrough too ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)). While I was lucky enough to leave Call Direct at a time of relative stability in the local labour market, those who try to move on in the current climate find their options severely restricted.

### *Enough is Enough: Withdrawing from the Field*

After 6 months working full time for Call Direct, I was more than ready to leave. I had only been with the company for a relatively short period but I was already regarded as an experienced agent and it felt like I'd been there for a lot longer. With 6 months service, working for two different departments, I was practically a veteran as opposed to the relatively new employee I actually was. However, a large proportion of those who started with me did not stay as long as I did; many of them had already left or been sacked, the majority of those who stayed after I left were to move on in the not too distant future. Long term service in call centres is markedly different than in other occupations. Long service recognition came after 3 years at Call Direct rather than, for example, 22 years in the police force. Despite my somewhat short stay with the company, new CSRs on my team would come to me for advice and knowledge of procedures and policies clearly feeling that I had been there long enough to be regarded as an authority on the job. The work intensification at Call Direct meant that 6 months had felt like several years and thankfully, having analysed the data I had accumulated so far, the decision was taken that I had gathered enough information and could begin to think about withdrawing from the field.

After a week off, my first shift back was Monday morning, 7:00am until 3:30pm. For many on my team, this was the best shift to work; the first hour and a half was usually quiet, new teams arrived every two hours to lighten the volume of calls we had to deal with, then at 3:30pm we had the rest of the day free. The first hour had been quiet so I had shown Gareth, my team leader, my letter of resignation. He knew I was thinking of leaving soon so it came as no surprise to him and he told me to give it to Jimmy when he came in. When I handed Jimmy my letter, the feeling of relief that came over me surprised me, obviously I wanted to leave but after putting up with so much over the last 6 months, to know I was actually leaving at the end of the week was almost indescribable. Jimmy showed no reaction whatsoever,

didn't question my decision at all and barely even looked at me. He just said 'ok' then got up and walked out of the office, presumably to inform HR. After seeing dozens of people leave, for various reasons, I knew Jimmy did not care, the company did not care but by now I did not care anymore anyway, I was leaving on Friday.

My team seemed surprised and one or two were genuinely disappointed. However, everyone was pleased for me in the sense that I was 'escaping' and throughout the day many told me they had similar thoughts themselves. I genuinely hoped they would leave because most of the people I had met were nice people and they deserve better. Just before I went home I told Bobby and Jack, two agents I had known from day one. They were both pleased for me as we had all said so many times how much we disliked the job and did not want to be there. Jack even admitted to me he was planning on handing in his notice next week whilst Roger, another of the agents I had known since my first day, told me he had just had an interview with a kitchen company. When I attended his wedding a couple of weeks later, he was still at Call Direct but he left soon after. On my last day, Gail, the tall, heavy-set 40 year old mother figure on our team who had, during the 2 months I had worked with her, demonstrated incredible kindness to all of us, as well as a frighteningly sharp tongue when she felt it necessary, had arranged a collection amongst my team and bought me a card and present. I knew the company would arrange nothing for me so the small pewter tankard my co-workers bought me was a nice gesture. She was upset that I was leaving because, after being bounced around from team to team, she had finally found a team she liked working on but it had recently begun to break up. Sam walked out the previous week, I was leaving, and Roger had told her he was going too. Inevitably, nothing stays the same at Call Direct, teams are changed around and agents are split up and moved elsewhere so I understood Gail's frustration; I liked the people on my team but I definitely wasn't sad to be leaving. Their reaction appeared to belie the notion of rising instrumentality, showing a genuinely emotional response to my departure. Whilst there could undoubtedly have been a subjective reaction from some of my co-workers I felt that, in some cases, I had developed a real connection with these people, their lives and their work. I believe I experienced this work in exactly the same way they did, we had gone through the same experiences both in terms of calls and management practices, we held similar opinions about the job and we had worked alongside each other for long enough to have built a strong relationship within the workplace.

None of the managers spoke to me on my last shift, except for Gareth, and at 11 o'clock that night I signed off for the last time, gave Gareth my headset, handed my security pass to the guard on the way out, said my goodbyes and went and got drunk. Some of my co-workers and respondents would later confirm that I was not alone in feeling a profound sense of relief upon leaving Call Direct; of not having to get up tomorrow and worry about walking into that building again, of not having to log on to the system, go into available and wait for the whisper in my ear, of not having Gareth or Bev or Jimmy reprimand me for my call handling time being too high, of not having to worry about being castigated for spending too long in the toilet, of not having to sit and take abuse from irate customers, of not having my days off switched at the last minute because the management misjudged the call profiles and got the shift pattern wrong. The relief brought about a feeling that I had something worth celebrating, that it was an achievement to have finally walked away from Call Direct and that feeling of wanting to mark the happy occasion propelled me into the pub for a celebratory pint. Obviously, I was aware that my sense of relief was heightened by the knowledge that I had the safety of academic life to return to; many of my respondents' relief would be tinged with a degree of anxiety over starting a new job, paying bills, or raising children. For me, leaving Call Direct felt like a liberation, however I was more than aware that their initial sense of euphoria would rapidly fade only to be replaced by a profound sense of anxiety and apprehension at what the future held. The people I left behind would have to continue their everyday lives in precisely the same way they had before.

I knew my fieldwork was coming to an end, not that it made difficult calls feel easier or pretentious managers less irritating, but at least there was an end in sight. For my co-workers, this would be the daily routine for much longer. Many of those who did leave Call Direct depressingly ended up working in different call centres. Chrissie, who had often told me of her desire to utilise her qualifications and move into hair and beauty therapy, left Call Direct for another call centre paying slightly more money (I believe it was around £7 an hour). Moving to another job that paid less than £2 an hour more than Call Direct served to reinforce the futility of sideways moves; Chrissie was hardly likely to be capable of significantly improving her circumstances on the salary her 'new start' offered. A few months after I left I received a text message from her asking how I was doing and when I replied saying that I was back at university and everything was fine she responded saying:

‘I’m really pleased everything is working out for you Anth, I just wish I’d done something with my life.’

Chrissie was only 21 years old at the time. Despite having been to college and gained qualifications, almost 3 years at Call Direct had reduced her to feeling that she was stuck in a dead end job, working for terrible wages, being treated poorly, and without any possible way out. Her eventual way out saw her move to another call centre. She had effectively written her life off before it had really begun. Jack had been unhappy at Call Direct and did leave within a month of me. However, the last time we spoke he was a team leader at another call centre. Ben also moved on to another call centre. The building trade still had not picked up and, after he left Call Direct, he started working for another call centre in Middlesbrough for slightly more money. It seemed like most of those who left Call Direct made sideways moves, usually to other call centres, claiming that the money was better and conditions not as bad as at Call Direct. This corresponds with Fenton and Dermott’s (2006) analysis of the labour market, particularly for young people who make regular sideways moves rather than moving up the job ladder. In places like Middlesbrough, call centre jobs and other forms of service sector employment are as good as it is likely to get for many. With this in mind it is necessary to draw some conclusions about life on the call centre floor.

#### *Final Remarks on the Call Centre*

As we noted earlier, call centres have emerged as a representative form of employment in a labour market restructured around the service sector (Taylor and Bain, 1999). The historical shift towards unrestrained free market capitalism in the late 1970s ushered in an era dominated by privatisation, deregulation and competition that created an economic landscape fertile with new market opportunities and awash with new technological innovations capable of increasing productivity and therefore profit (Harvey, 2005). The shift from a traditional manufacturing base to a service economy uprooted local labour markets that had still to recover when call centres began to surface at the end of the 1990s (Richardson, Belt and Marshall, 2000). For formerly industrial and manufacturing towns in the North East, as well as many other regions across the UK, call centres arrived at an opportune moment in their attempts to attract inward investment for regeneration and therefore call centres offered new employment opportunities for areas still suffering above average unemployment. In

Middlesbrough, the service sector has become as critical to the local economy as iron and steel and petrochemicals had been in earlier generations.

However, after 6 months working for Call Direct, I was forced to recognise that significant sections of the call centre market are essentially a barbaric form of employment, reflecting the predatory nature of capitalism and ultimately leading to the exploitation of the young men and women engaged in call centre work. The concern with targets, efficiency and productivity, as highlighted in chapter 4, reflect the current version of predatory capitalist accumulation at the expense of employees' well being and dignity. It serves to exploit employees through low pay, fast paced automated work processes, oppressive micromanagement and a sacrificial HR strategy that favours employee burnout and staff turnover rather than concentrating on employee well being and job satisfaction. In Marx's (1999) configuration, the nature of industrial production was 'barbaric' because it alienated each individual worker from their co-workers and the product of their labour. Each individual was transformed into a single unit of profit accumulation whilst the labour process deprived them of autonomous self-governance in the workplace. For Marx, the individual who becomes dependent upon these exploitative, alienating and unsatisfying forms of labour is denied any real sense of humanity. Despite the relaxed informality and comfortable furnishings of the office setting, the 'barbarism' inherent in industrial production is still in evidence in modern occupations such as call centres. The evidence gathered at Call Direct reveals its existence still persists as employees remain completely divorced from their co-workers and the product of their labour; there is no sense of identification with the job or the company, no source of satisfaction typified by what Liam referred to earlier as having to 'slog through the week and get through without any pride'. The data gathered at Call Direct highlighted the often brutal conditions imposed on employees. Granted, we were not underground, hunched over, attacking a coal face, yet we were subjected to conditions and treatment that pushed the limits of our dignity, heightened stress levels and increased the possibility of burnout. In a Marxian sense, and in much the same way as those now extinct coal miners, the workers at Call Direct were worn down by the raw barbarity of the labour process. The emotional burden was reinforced by the manufactured image of call centre employment, complete with a veneer of respectability, professionalism and comfort that forced each individual worker to make some sense of the spectacle of a workplace that seemingly existed to disguise the continuous and normalised forms of exploitation they

experienced on a daily basis. Their continued dependence on paid labour in an economic period best understood as the restoration of classic liberal capitalism (Harvey, 2010; Badiou, 2007) underscored their continued exploitation in the workplace. There are two aspects to this; the work process, and the management attitude towards employees.

Make no mistake call centre work is very tough. Naturally, there are periods of downtime which provide a measure of relief from constantly taking calls whilst, depending on whether management have judged the call profile correctly, there can be, as we discovered in chapter 7, extended periods of immense boredom with no calls to deal with. However, for the most part, the calls come through and the CSR cannot determine the pace they work at; the autonomy highlighted in many studies as being critical to job satisfaction (for example, Tuten and Niedermeyer, 2004) is absent, the ACD sets the work speed and CSRs have to be ready to deal with the next call, regardless of whether they have finished writing up the account notes from the previous call or whether they have just been verbally assaulted by an irate customer. The idea of an ‘assembly line in the head’ (Taylor and Bain, 1999) is appropriate; the next job is automatically thrust upon the agent regardless of his/her preparedness. Emotional labour also takes its toll on the employee (Hochschild, 2003). The level of performativity involved in dealing with customers is very high; ‘smiling down the phone’ and portraying the appropriate emotions for the call is very demanding. Emotion becomes a commodity in the call centre. Inducing or suppressing feelings in order to sustain the outward appearance that produces the requisite state of mind in the customer becomes part of the routine for CSRs. None of my respondents identified wholeheartedly with the job which should have meant less chance of stress or burnout, however when coupled with the automated work process, performing emotional labour becomes difficult for the employee. Adjusting the self to the role is different for each person, however not performing at all is not an option. The level of monitoring at Call Direct was high enough that any agent continually refraining from offering some level of performance would soon come up against management. One of my team leaders, Bev, reminded us on several occasions how ‘smiling down the phone’ worked, customers ‘felt’ our attitude down the phone and therefore by performing at our end we increased the level of service the customer received and improved the customer experience. The enthusiasm for this among my co-workers was predictably low – many claimed to feel ‘like an idiot’, smiling to themselves whilst they talked to customers. Also, it was difficult to maintain a cheerful disposition when customers adopted a threatening

or aggressive tone and began swearing at us. Many did resort to apathy or cynicism in order to restrict the downsides of emotional labour.

The difficulties CSRs at Call Direct faced when doing the job were exacerbated by a management strategy that, as chapter 4 revealed, pushed targets, efficiency and productivity ahead of employee well being. Many of the respondents have admitted that they felt the company did not care about them, only their productivity. As an outsourced call centre, Call Direct faced many pressures in meeting the demand of its clients (Kinnie et al, 2008) and these pressures were manifested in the management strategy forced onto the agents on the `phones. As Call Direct evolved as a call centre, its monitoring practices became more intense. Representing the latest institution on Foucault's (1977) 'carceral continuum', the call centre is as much a figurative prison as the actual prison described by Oscar Wilde in the quote at the beginning of the chapter. Control societies, through increased visibility, locate power in the hands of individuals. The prison, the hospital, and the call centre floor all use supervision and surveillance as a means of regulating behaviour. However, control is only successful if the individual is complicit and throughout this study my respondents showed their complicity in terms of monitoring and surveillance. They tried to undermine the system at times for personal advantage but there was nonetheless an acceptance of the close supervision and monitoring they were subject to. This only served to legitimate the practice and further endow the management with the power to increase surveillance and supervision of employees. Checking call handling times, wrap or idle times, how long someone has taken for their lunch or how long someone has been in the toilet were all part of a daily routine designed to improve each individual employee's efficiency. Less time spent in idle or wrap meant each agent could handle more calls, more calls handled meant more business (and therefore profit) for the client, which meant that Call Direct would retain the contract with the client. Call Direct even installed a code of conduct for our floor which prohibited anything that could potentially distract our attention from taking calls and dealing swiftly and efficiently with the needs of the customer. Newspapers, magazines, books, `phones, iPods, drinks and food were all banned. Looking at external websites was prohibited. Every second we were on the floor was to be spent taking calls or improving our knowledge of products and company policies in order to make us more efficient at dealing with enquiries and problems. In effect, Call Direct had stripped away anything that did not revolve around hitting targets, increasing efficiency and improving productivity. This signified a naked

pursuit of profit at the expense of the comfort and satisfaction of employees for whom relief from the pressure of work was not the company's problem and should be sought after the shift had finished. It serves as a clear indication that the organisational structure of Call Direct is a self sustaining entity, totally divorced from human morality, blindly following its own self interest without any consideration for the human costs. Just as capital follows its own interests in the pursuit of further accumulation (Harvey, 2010), with no consideration for anything or anyone else, the organisational structure at companies such as Call Direct clearly replicate this pattern of behaviour.

These conditions reveal the inherent logic of neoliberalism at work in modern organisations. Employees no longer remain long term assets for a company, instead they are regarded as sacrificial offerings to be freely given up on the altar of efficiency, productivity and capital accumulation. The pursuit of targets and the micromanagement behind achieving these targets is also indicative of the neoliberal desire for increased productivity. The call centre organisation is completely moulded around the pressing requirement of increasing productivity to accumulate capital. Forcing more and more work from fewer individuals, under the guise of scientific management, increases the surplus value for the company whilst offering little reward to the employee other than their minimum wage and the threat of being fired if they fail to achieve quality and quantity in their work.

The instability of the labour market, and in particular the local labour market in Middlesbrough, leaves employees acutely aware that their jobs are far from secure. In the absence of any sense of collective mutuality, this results in call centre workers facing two choices; quit and look for another job, or accept the conditions at Call Direct and stay. In the wake of the global recession, Middlesbrough's labour market has constricted to the point where quitting is no longer an option; there are no other jobs out there. Young men and women must submit to the ruthless conditions of the call centre and the broadly oppressive management strategies of call centre operations. Given the fact that the recession has hit Middlesbrough so hard that even call centres are constricting their operations, employees must accept the call centre regime more than ever as companies looking to make cuts will not hesitate to lay off those who buck up against the system. When companies such as Call Direct are representative of the sort of work available to the majority of young men and women entering the labour market in Middlesbrough, what does this suggest for the future?

There is a cultural factor at play which also makes call centre work inherently difficult. The work is a relatively isolating, individualised process, exacerbated by the lack of belief that things might change or there is any possibility of progress. This is reinforced by the fact that, outside of work, many employees return to a culture in which the overwhelming feeling is that everybody is out for themselves, in which there is little sense of belonging in a fluid, unstable social world. The ascendancy of ephemera in popular culture, from fashion to technological innovation, increasingly creeping into jobs and relationships, engender a feeling that the world lacks permanence and that we are just passing through. We live in an unforgiving world in which we are entitled to nothing and must fight tooth and nail for any accomplishment we seek. Employees in low paid service sector jobs are forced to rotate between seeing themselves as soon-to-be successes and absolute failures. This psychic bipolarity is exacerbated because there is a clear absence of the cultural compensations once afforded by industrial modernity. Call Direct workers, it would appear, are increasingly deprived of any sense of cohesion, community and mutuality that can serve as a marker for them to orbit and provide a sense of ontological security. As chapter 8 demonstrated, when global shifts occur on the scale we have documented, old values, habits and dispositions become under increasing pressure. The old working class habitus breaks down and is replaced by a set of values heavily influenced by the dominant cultural themes of our time. Self-interest and the project of the self, status, and consumerism all permeate our identity thus further diminishing bonds of community and mutuality. We no longer see logic in the collective, we believe that everyone seeks to act in their own self interest and therefore this begins to break the fabric of social cohesion (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Bauman, 2001a; 2001b). This outlook increases insecurity as we know traditional safety nets no longer exist (Beck, 1992), we cannot fully rely on our co-workers to provide meaningful support when we know ourselves that we attempt to surrender as little of ourselves to the workplace as possible (Bauman, 2005b; Winlow and Hall, 2006).

Outside of work this culture of individualism and self interest further erodes bonds of community; new and more complex culture industries (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) ensnare us with promises of individual desires and satisfaction. Aware that we are effectively trapped in low paying jobs, unable to satisfy our desires through consumerism and leisure, and possessing a subjectivity so thoroughly infused with the cultural logic of liberal

capitalism, believing self-interest reigns and there is no benefit to community, collectivity or mutuality, many struggle to overcome this discontent and frustration. Throughout this study, my co-workers frequently displayed a disappointment with their current situation and a desire to search elsewhere for some degree of satisfaction and fulfilment. We look at our lives in dissatisfaction as we search for something better, something secure. Chapter 7 highlights many of my co-workers plans for the future, looking for contentment in their lives, believing it would come from a new beginning away from Call Direct. When there is no cultural support to fall back on, work becomes even tougher, more exploitative and more dissatisfying. Not having the support of class, community or meaningful friendships to rely on makes changing one's conditions and situation more difficult, more risky and more frightening. This leads to what Fisher (2010) calls reflexive impotence. Aware of the scale of the task, many simply cannot act and therefore resign themselves to the life they have. This increases dissatisfaction and heightens sensitivity to exploitation as the individual is aware that he is in a precarious position, cannot act to improve his lot to any significant degree, and has little support behind him. Wanting to move upwards to a brighter, more successful future is not as easy as the rhetoric behind our meritocratic society suggests. The young men and women at Call Direct, as chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate, all had dreams beyond the call centre but realising them was incredibly difficult. There is no configuration in which Call Direct is seen as appealing; either employees maintain a sense of dissatisfaction with their lives and thus search for new horizons away from Call Direct, or they see themselves as soon-to-be successes, a dream that does not involve wearing a headset and answering calls 5 days a week.

A society that has seen the collapse of the symbolic order, removing any durable framework for predicting outcomes, becomes a society inherently laden with risk and insecurity. The universalisation of reflexivity and freedom of choice at the heart of the decline of the symbolic order, and central to the logic of contemporary liberal capitalism, works to support the individual in all spheres of social life (Zizek, 2000; 2002). Employment in an occupation dominated by an individualised work process and individual targets serves to isolate individuals and thus prevent any sense of mutuality or collective understanding to emerge. Indeed, some relationships can develop over time but the individual can come in and do his/her job whilst only interacting with a handful of people. Hard, exploitative work without the comfort or benefit of the collective attitude of co-workers makes work a dissatisfying

experience, even more so given the instability of the labour market. Isolation and insecurity dominate the workplace. Outside of work, contemporary culture has reconfigured around the individual, meeting his or her demands and fuelling his or her desires. When consumer culture promotes the well being of the individual over the group, it appears to endorse the belief that we are all out for our own ends. This brings risk and insecurity as we search for identity in a cultural minefield, constantly aware that we are one wrong decision away from cultural oblivion. These risks are exacerbated by the removal of cultural compensations such as community and class. We have nothing to fall back on if we fail. Reflexive impotence is one of the side effects of a society dominated by the ideology of liberal capitalism. We are told that we can be anything we want to be but, outside our immediate family, we have nothing to fall back on when we fail, we have nobody to support us in searching for something better and looking for change so inevitably many find themselves unable to act. The risks are too great. Better to accept our situation or dream of a brighter future. Dissatisfaction is the inevitable outcome when all spheres of our social lives have lost any of the traditional compensations central to social life in industrial modernity; we know something is wrong but without any kind of support or cultural safety net we are unable to find a secure place for ourselves in the world and are thus destined to continue finding heightened levels of dissatisfaction or nihilism in the various spheres of our lives, including the workplace. Not having the benefit of an alternative discourse, a different set of ideas which could bring meaning and understanding to their lives is the result of what Bourdieu (1992) calls 'symbolic violence'. Symbolic violence involves the tacit acceptance of dominant modes of social or cultural control occurring within the everyday habits and behaviour of subjects that serves to legitimate the social order. The dominant ideology is then accepted as right or just by the individual. As liberal capitalism allows no room for alternative discourses many young men and women are left grasping for meaning in their lives whilst still retaining the belief that 'something is missing' (Fisher, 2010). This absence or lack of substance created by the lack of alternative discourse is reflected in the continuing oscillation between hope and despair regularly indicated by many of my co-workers.

### *The Future's Bright...*

The argument consistently espoused by the liberal intelligentsia over the last three decades is one of progress, prosperity and hope. Yes, things might be difficult for many but look at where we've come from; life is vastly better than they way things were in the 1950s.

Individually we have been liberated from the constraints of tradition and class; occupationally we have left behind unsafe, dangerous work in the mines and shipyards for the relaxed informality of the office; materially we can have it all through the expansion of available credit and the explosion of a consumer culture designed specifically to appeal to our every whim and desire. How could life not be better than, say, the dull austerity of post-war Britain?

This thesis has tried to demonstrate how this belief is fundamentally misguided. In many ways, social life today is worse off than during the 1950s. Firstly, workers were once paid a family wage rather than an individual wage (Dennis et al, 1969). Those wages were the result of backing by strong unions successful in securing important benefits and improvements for workers; wages, safety, the threat from arbitrary redundancy and rising living standards (Fraser, 1999). These workers operated within a community of their peers which fostered durable friendships, practical and emotional support, as well as a real sense of place (Hoggart, 1957). Significantly, workers in the 1950s benefitted from the predictability of everyday life both at work and outside of work. Importantly, clear gender roles, the solidity of marriage and relationships and a clear sense that their children would be better off than they were, all served as grounding for individuals in their work, family and community life (Kynaston, 2007). Perhaps most important though is the fact that people did not have to cope with the existential angst that plagues many contemporary workers in the new economy (Hall et al, 2008). Most industrial workers were generally happy in their own skin, happy to be working class and happy to acknowledge that they were no better or worse than their peers (Kynaston, 2007). Generally, they were happy with their work identity as well as with their leisure lives. There was value in the job they did; being a good welder brought a degree of satisfaction and respect no longer found in many of the jobs offered in the new economy. There was no real sense of lack, no powerful drive to acquire or display forcing them to live beyond their means, no deliberately cultivated sense of apathy and political withdrawal. Undoubtedly, these men and women were exploited. Women found equality to be sadly lacking, racism and discrimination was openly accepted, working men were exploited by their employers and subject to difficult and often dangerous conditions on a daily basis. However, despite this, working class men and women in the 1950s had a clear, secure sense of self and of their place in the world. They had a clear, immediately comprehensible cultural identity, rooted in habitus that provided them with an important stabilising role. Finally, as

noted in more detail later, there was also a clear and entirely reasonable faith in incremental progress; their children would do a little better than they did (Winlow and Hall, 2006). Today, all of these things can be called into question. We are subjects of doubt and scepticism, not believing in anything and therefore unable to ground ourselves in the way previous generations could.

Whereas being a good welder brought respect and satisfaction, being a good call centre worker counts for little; few people care if someone is good at processing moving house requests or efficiently dealing with billing enquiries, success for these young men and women will be judged in more competitive spheres than the world of work. When the employee takes no personal satisfaction in his or her job then why should anyone else afford him or her a measure of respect? Ben acts as a perfect example because he has a trade in which his skills as a builder are respected and bring him a degree of satisfaction. Putting those skills aside in the wake of recession, Ben takes no satisfaction in his work as a CSR, in his words:

‘I go there to get shouted at for seven and a half hours, get paid and forget about it.’

Whilst taking little satisfaction in their work is one thing, gaining respect for their profession is something that does not exist within wider society. Whereas having a skilled trade was often respected in previous times, call centre agents do not garner any respect or praise from people despite, as chapters 3 and 4 demonstrated, it requiring a high level of skill to become a competent agent. The lack of respect shown to call centre agents manifests itself in Chrissie and Sally’s responses in chapter 6, hiding or shaping the truth when asked about who they work for. Low-paid service sector work brings little satisfaction and no respect and is regarded as a ‘McJob’. This goes some way to explaining the attitude adopted by many customers; they often treat CSRs as poorly educated, lacking prospects or hopes, and somehow not deserving of respect if this is the best they can manage.

Rather than receiving a family wage, workers in the new economy are paid a meagre, individual salary, just over the minimum wage. These wages are forced down by a surplus supply of labour, particularly in places like the North East, Wales, Merseyside, and other places struggling to rebuild after deindustrialisation (Harvey, 2010; Byrne, 1989). As we

showed with Darren in chapter 6, his wages were far from sufficient in terms of potentially raising a family. The institutionalisation of individualisation has shifted the focus from the family to the individual in terms of wages, making it difficult for people with families to survive without support from extended family or the state (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The move towards individual rights guaranteed by government legislation as opposed to collective improvements and guarantees won by trade unions is also indicative of a shift towards the individual, to their detriment. Whereas unions had fought for the collective improvement of everyone, improving working conditions, pay, benefits and living standards, the protection of our individual rights by the state shatters faith in the collective whilst masking the reality that by protecting our bare minimum rights, we allow greater injustices to take place. Although we are guaranteed a minimum wage and the threat of arbitrary redundancy no longer hangs over us, our move away from collective strength allows, as witnessed at Call Direct, companies the ability to offer contracts and working conditions that heavily favour the company, often at the expense of employees' well being in terms of stress and burnout. This lack of employee protection leaves them with hardly any recourse to question management or fight for what is rightfully theirs, exemplified in this study when my co-workers and I lost holidays and pay because the structure in place for requesting holidays was inadequately managed. Management practices that belittle employees and strip them of their dignity go unchallenged because we no longer believe in the need for, and effectiveness of, collective solidarity. It is indicative of a world of post-political biopolitics (Agamben, 1995). Guaranteeing our right to 'bare life' through legislation leaves the state with an administrative role, to protect our rights rather than shape a world based on a vision of the future. The abandonment of social justice in favour of 'human rights' (Zizek, 2002; 2008) is symptomatic of a liberal ideology which preserves the right of the individual ahead of state intervention and social justice or inclusivity. By guaranteeing our most basic rights in the workplace, the state effectively backs away, adopting a laissez-faire attitude, and leaves us to our own devices. Given that the neoliberal ideology behind this has also undermined notions of community or collectivity, we effectively face a situation we are powerless to change. The state guarantees the bare minimum and tacitly allows greater injustices to take place while we no longer have the collective component in our identity that will force us to seek out communal responses to these problems. Throughout my employment at Call Direct, I often witnessed great levels of discontent at the situation we faced but very little active interest in finding group responses to any of the issues that caused anger among my colleagues.

The erosion of forms of community and a sense of place or tradition also serves to dislocate the individual in contemporary society (Bauman, 2001b). The predictability of everyday life, central to the stability and security of identity in the 1950s, has gone leaving a vacuous, fluid space in which the responsibility falls on us to fill. The individual in the new economy must blindly navigate the stormy waters of social and cultural identity with no map to follow or support to fall back on. With no sense of tradition, place or community to guide or support us, the individual must grope around for anything to cling onto, anything for them to fashion an identity from. As Hobsbawm (1994) suggests, ‘when people face what nothing in their past has prepared them for they grope for words to name the unknown, even when they can neither define it nor understand it.’ If this task was not difficult to begin with, the huge diversity of social, cultural and economic pressures that bear down on contemporary workers makes this almost impossible. Being bombarded with ideological messages to advance, become upwardly mobile, stand out from the crowd, be better than your peers, all add pressure to the individual trying to carve an identity in contemporary society. Modern life has become a race; a meritocratic competition in which we face off against each other, striving to outdo our contemporaries and ascend the social ladder to wherever we think we deserve to be. The triumph of neoliberal ideology and the belief in a meritocratic society promotes a cultural ‘war of all against all’ where individuals compete with each other for status, recognition and identity, looking out for their own interests against every risky proposition rather than seeing security and satisfaction in the group, collective or community. In a social world beset by instability and insecurity, the individual risks involved create a situation whereby the individual risks of failure are exceptionally high. Whereas once the individual worker could be satisfied in his work and secure at home knowing he belonged to a particular class or community, contemporary workers no longer have security or satisfaction at work or at home. The absence of this security or satisfaction is more keenly felt when we strive to achieve some measure of success in our lives only to find our goal unattainable. Our optimism, fuelled by the ideological machine empowering us with the belief in meritocracy and the belief that we can be anything that we want to be, gives way to a defeated, nihilistic appreciation of the reality of our position. This has profound implications for our social and psychological well being when we consider that the safety net of community or class is no longer there to catch us if we fail.

Returning to a point raised in the introduction, there is an interesting point to make about this idea of progress, life being better now than in the ‘golden era’ of the twentieth century, relating directly to the mid-century belief of working class parents that life was improving in a way that would offer better opportunities for their children (Hoggart, 1957). In contemporary society, many people are forced to rely on parental support well into their twenties. The family becomes, for many, the only remaining safety net. Remaining financially dependent on parents allows many young people to remain attached to mainstream culture. Their own financial situation is such that they would be unable to support themselves. Many of my respondents acknowledged the role their parents played in offering financial support. Shirley was still living at home with her parents thus freeing up her income to travel abroad, and despite working in both Europe and the United States as she travelled around, she was still dependent on her parents – if she no longer lived in the family home her income could not support her travelling. Ben had recently moved in with his girlfriend when he agreed to take part in this study, however, not long afterwards it became clear that their rent and bills were taking up a dangerously high proportion of their income so he moved back into the family home rent free. Shaun was in his late 20s and still living in the family home while he went through the process of applying for the fire brigade. Although he admitted contributing towards the mortgage and the bills, he accepted that he was still dependent on his parents for support, given the salary he earned at Call Direct.

Remaining dependent on parents encourages ‘youthful’ consumerised lifestyles, endlessly forestalling the onset of responsibility and real ‘adulthood’. Shirley admitted as much when she laid out her plan to gain qualifications and go travelling for three years before, in her words, deciding to ‘come back and think, ‘right, better grow up now!’’ By stalling their transition to adulthood, they essentially experience a process of infantilisation (Barber, 2007). From a social and economic perspective, this signals a historical rupture in our faith in progress (Gray, 2008). Working class children find it extremely difficult to reproduce the relative affluence of their traditionally working class parents. Throughout the twentieth century, the general belief was that children would do better than their parents; be better educated, get better jobs. Although children today are more likely to be better educated than their parents, and often children have attended university, in fact their true economic position remains vague because of their parents’ largesse. If the social landscape and, in particular, the labour market have changed so dramatically that young people entering the world of work

continue to rely on their parents' generosity for an extended period of time, can we really describe our society as progressive? Would it not be more suitable to suggest that the baby boomers have proven to be a 'golden generation', arriving at a specific historical juncture whereby they were on hand to be recipients of rising wages, relatively stable biographies and income patterns, cheap home ownership, rising educational opportunities and real pensions? Subsequent generations seem unlikely to receive any of these certainties and benefits; house prices exclude many people from getting a foot on the property ladder as home owners, wages have stagnated in real terms, leaving many hovering around the poverty line, stable biographies and income patterns have been abandoned in favour of flexibility, do-it-yourself biographies and unstable labour markets, while my generation seems resigned to the fact that a real pension will not be waiting for us when we finally reach whatever the retirement age will be in the future, despite the fact that we have contributed our income to today's generation of pension recipients.

All of these issues serve to indicate a future in which something must change. Continuing with more of the same is an unacceptable answer to the historical problems we currently face. Having let the situation fall to such bleak depths, hope comes from the optimism that new paths have to emerge. The young men and women I met at Call Direct looked to the future both in hope and despair. Many felt that a better job with higher paying wages was round the corner or further down the line. At the same time, many were cognizant of the fact that there were many barriers and impediments between them and a 'dream' job. An insecure labour market dominated by low-waged service sector work is the reality facing the majority of young men and women in Middlesbrough. The conditions in these jobs, as this thesis has revealed, is harsh, oppressive and demeaning, leaving those who engage in these occupations feeling stressed and alienated. When the management treat the employees as little more than a payroll number, without the workers' collective involvement to temper the most destructive aspects of the process, it is hardly surprising to find that many of my co-workers did not identify with their job or the company and, although the idea of work was central to their lives, working at Call Direct was not crucial to their life or identity. Working for poor wages makes it difficult to save money or get on the housing ladder whilst the comfort of a pension upon retirement looks less and less likely. These are some of the many reasons why the men and women in this study can be forgiven for adopting a bleak outlook when looking to the

future. In these circumstances the question of class consciousness can be re-examined; with a present and future looking as unwelcoming as this, why not seek solace in the collective?

The answer to this is the ideological domination of consumer capitalism and the symbolism of the society of the spectacle. Why worry about our future or the oppressive conditions we face now when we can lose ourselves in the symbolic world of the cultural sphere? Consumer culture caters to the individual, appealing to our desires and seemingly offering a way to satisfy them. Of course, we are never satisfied and this further fuels our immersion into a world of infinite possibilities. The ideological victory of liberal democracy promotes individual achievement and individual satisfaction ahead of the community or family therefore rather than contemplating working to find ways of improving conditions for everyone which, quite frankly, requires sustained hard work and sacrifice, we focus on our own life, identity and material conditions. The language of class and collective action has faded in the face of neoliberal ideology and the supremacy of the individual. At a time when class consciousness is needed more than ever, when collective solidarity can serve to relieve some of the difficulties and inequalities facing many in contemporary society, these ideas are antithetical to the prevailing ideology which has successfully shattered any notion of solidarity and collective thinking. My respondents did not think in terms of solidarity, mutuality or collective action; class consciousness played little or no part in their identity, even those who recognised the potential benefit of collective action would not consider giving their time, effort or money to bring about any kind of change.

Is there any hope of reversing this trend away from class consciousness and a belief in the power of collective action? The financial crisis was widely held to be an indicator that contemporary capitalism was broken, however the power of capital has seemingly overcome this crisis. Economic growth, however, is unsustainable given the finite resources of the planet (Jackson, 2009), consequently alternatives to unrestrained growth have to emerge. The threat of global warming has to force an evaluation of the present system of governance and could be a sight of potential collective action (Zizek, 2009). Awakening an individualised, apathetic public to rally around a particular cause will be difficult – we appear to have resigned ourselves to the ‘naturalness’ of our current situation, despite the instability and insecurity we are forced to contend with on a daily basis in our work, social and psychical lives. Many of my respondents seemed to accept the normality of moving between

equally low paying jobs, they privately railed against unfair treatment by management yet chose to do nothing about it, adopting a 'what good would it do?' attitude.

We still use class as a measure of inequality but it lacks the potency of political power as the subject no longer 'feels' class, however I would not write off class as Beck (2007) argues we should. The kind of progressive politics we need to force a shift in governance away from unrestrained market capitalism and neoliberalism requires the collectivity formerly at the heart of class consciousness. Given the attitude many of my respondents displayed, awakening that sense of collective solidarity or class consciousness seems like a distant proposition. Without an alternative, utopian vision of a different future we succumb to neoliberal market capitalism; fatalism and apathy only benefit the current system. The better future many of my co-workers wished for themselves will only become a reality if we continue to highlight the inhuman nature of the current system and offer new ideas; otherwise there is no hope for a place such as Middlesbrough who stumbles from one recession to the next barely managing to offer opportunities for its residents. There is no hope for these young men and women who deserve a better future than spending their lives jumping from one poorly paid service sector job to another. Can we look to the future with any optimism? If history has taught us anything it is that the smallest event can have a seismic impact on the social or political landscape; as Fisher (2010) suggests, 'the tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility' therefore even in the darkest depths of despair the light at the end of the tunnel could well be just around the corner.

## APPENDIX 1

Call Monitoring Standards		Task			Behaviour				Comments
		N/A	Yes	No	N/A	Competent	Developing	Unacceptable	
<b>Overall</b>									
1	Represented the [redacted] Brand				5	(5)	3	0	
2	Correctly Resolved the issue	5	(5)	0					
Sub Total:									
<b>Begin</b>									
3	Used standard greeting in appropriate manner	4	(4)	0					
4	Listened to the customer				5	5	(3)	0	
5	Acknowledged customer emotion/take ownership				4	(4)	2	0	
6	Summarised understanding				3	(3)	1	0	
7	Introduced themselves	3	(3)	0					
8	Appropriately conducted DPA check/account verifying information	4	(4)	0					
Sub Total									
<b>Explore</b>									
9	Asked if there were any additional issues	5	(5)	0					
10	Used appropriate question techniques to identify needs				4	4	(2)	0	
11	Linked information where appropriate				4	(4)	2	0	
12	Confirmed their understanding of the situation	5	(5)	0					
Sub Total									
<b>Solve</b>									
13	Identified the correct solution(s)	5	(5)	0					
14	Offered/explored alternatives	4	(4)	0					
15	Matched solution to customer's needs				3	(3)	1	0	
16	Explained actions taken, flagging stages				3	(3)	1	0	
17	Managed the outcome of actions taken / affirmed success				3	(3)	1	0	
18	Made positive links to third parties	(3)	3	0					
Sub Total									
<b>Tie-Up</b>									
19	Confirmed actions	4	(4)	0					
20	Asked if query fully satisfied/comfortable with actions required				5	(5)	3	0	
21	Used standard close	3	(3)	0					
22	Updated systems accurately	(5)	5	0					
23	Completed all actions relating to the call accurately	5	(5)	0					
Sub Total									
<b>Call Management</b>									
24	Escalated / transferred / managed hold appropriately				3	3	1	0	
25	Used hold or mute only when appropriate	(3)	3	0					
Sub Total									
		58			42				
<b>Summary</b>		Total	%		Total	%			
Task (total available 58)		58	100						
Behavioural (total available 42)					38				
Total/Percentage					%	98			

- A copy of the call monitoring standards sheet used by Call Direct to grade CSRs performance on monitored calls. These scores were awarded by me to a taped call we listened to during our training period. Note at the top; correctly resolving the issue for the customer was only worth 5% of the overall mark.



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