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Life-Making on the Line: Capitalist Value, Social Reproduction, and the Politics of Call Centre Labour in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how value is generated in the Portuguese call centre sector by examining its reliance on the commodification of socially and historically rooted reproductive capacities. Previous research on call centres has often focused on the disembedding, disembodiment, depersonalisation, and desubjectification of human linguistic agency, frequently neglecting the familial, educational, and moral infrastructures that make labour power both viable and exploitable. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, I argue that the extraction of value in this sector relies not only on linguistic output or emotional labour but also on historically embedded reproductive capacities, such as empathy, ethical judgment, and communicative skills. These capacities are shaped by intergenerational efforts aimed at social mobility and national modernisation. These reproductive investments, which are developed outside the wage relationship, are appropriated by capital through a labour regime that requires personalisation while enforcing standardisation. By integrating social reproduction theory with call centre studies, this article reframes call centres as critical sites where the tensions between production and reproduction become evident, contested, and productive of surplus value.

1 | Introduction

The global proliferation of the call centre sector—iconically rendered in popular imaginaries as rows of anonymous cubicles staffed by distant, disembodied voices—has been extensively analyzed as emblematic of the neoliberal transformation of labour in the 20th and 21st centuries. Its rise is linked to a range of structural processes: the deregulation and flexibilisation of labour markets, the integration of computer and telecommunication technologies, the expansion of the global service economy, and shifts in management logics that increasingly privilege customer service as a central site of value production (Basi 2009; Mirchandani 2012; Aneesh 2015; Woodcock 2017). With approximately 17 million workers worldwide—including nearly three million in the United States and over 800,000 in the United Kingdom (Elmhirst 2024)—the call centre is often seen as a paradigmatic space for globalised service labour.

This article draws on an extensive case study of the Portuguese call centre sector (de Matos 2020) to explore how labour processes within this industry are embedded in specific historical, political, and ideological contexts. The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between August 2007 and January 2009 in a corporate technical support call centre operated by a private-sector telecommunications company in Lisbon, referred to here as EVA. This research involved shadowing

operators, attending recruitment and training sessions, conducting interviews with workers, managers, union members, and anti-precarity activists, as well as analyzing historical and media sources. Further research was conducted between 2016 and 2019, following the aftermath of Portugal's austerity programme, providing a longitudinal perspective on the enduring symbolic and material role of call centre labour in the politics of precarity. In this article, rather than treating call centres as abstract, placeless manifestations of global neoliberalism, I approach them as concrete sites where national trajectories of capitalist accumulation intersect with struggles over intergenerational social reproduction. This perspective enables a critical reassessment of a central theme in call centre scholarship: the tendency to overlook the embedded nature of value-generating processes in favour of analyses that emphasise the disembedding, disembodiment, depersonalisation, and desubjectification of human linguistic agency (Aneesh 2015; Brophy 2017; Woodcock 2017). By focusing on call centres as expressions of the neoliberal service economy, I examine how global economic processes intersect with local histories and moral economies to shape the dynamics of value creation at both macro and micro levels.

As previously noted, the call centre has emerged as a key site for analysing transformations in contemporary labour within global capitalism. Researchers have examined how transnational call centres serve not only as economic structures but also as cultural and political arenas where issues of nationhood, identity, and postcolonial realities are negotiated (Mirchandani 2012; Mirchandani and Poster 2016; Padios 2018; Sallaz 2019). A prominent focus in the literature discusses labour control, surveillance, and resistance in call centres (Woodcock 2017; Brophy 2017). Woodcock (2017), through the lens of labour process theory, characterizes call centres as "digital factories" where workers face constant monitoring, scripting, and evaluation of their performance. Building on this, Brophy (2017) illustrates that language serves not simply as a communication tool but as a direct site of value creation—what he terms "language put to work." Gender dynamics also emerge as a recurrent theme, especially concerning intimacy, bodily management, and emotional fatigue (Basi 2009; Patel 2010; Awal 2021). Patel (2010) observes that women working night shifts in Indian call centres experience newfound freedoms alongside increased risks, as they navigate both modernity and traditional gender expectations, while Basi (2009) studies how Indian women embrace consumer identities influenced by their interactions with Western clients. These studies highlight the feminisation of communicative labour and its connections to emotional discipline and identity development.

While most of these works focus on the transnational call centre sector serving English-speaking countries, they often overlook the historical and ideological dynamics—and the intergenerational reproductive struggles—that shape value production in the call centre labour process. This is particularly relevant in the call centre sector where, as will be argued, profitability is sustained through the commodification of human agency. Mobilising insights from Marxist feminist and social reproduction theories, this article contributes to call centre scholarship by demonstrating that human agency is a source of value, not despite, but because of, its embeddedness in the historical realities of kin, class, generation, and national economic transition.

The key theoretical contribution of social reproduction theory lies in shifting our analytic lens from how labour is mobilized for production to the generative conditions under which labour power itself is produced, maintained, and renewed. Beginning with the domestic labour debates of the 1970s (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Hartmann 1979; Fortunati 1995; Federici 2012), Marxist feminists have argued that unpaid, mostly female labour within the household is not external to capitalism but foundational to its functioning. This body of work transcends the productive/unproductive labour dichotomy by insisting that caregiving, emotional labour, community support, and the maintenance of social ties are crucial to reproducing the workforce and ensuring the continuity of capitalist relations (Edholm et al. 1978; Narotzky 1997; Katz 2001; Bhattacharya 2017; Gimenez 2018). Unlike mainstream Marxist frameworks, which tend to treat labour power as a given, social reproduction theorists interrogate how labour power is reproduced, particularly across generations, and how this process is shaped by gendered, racialised, and colonial hierarchies. Nancy Fraser (2016, 2022) foregrounds the systemic tension between capital's demand for "cheap" labour and its reliance on costly, often invisible, reproductive infrastructures. Ferguson (2020) and Bhattacharya (2017) similarly contend that capitalism's crises are also reproductive crises—manifest in childcare, healthcare, housing, and kinship. This lens expands our understanding of value, locating it not solely in the production of commodities but also in life-making: the labour of maintaining bodies, relations, subjectivities, and futures. This reconceptualisation is crucial for understanding contemporary service-sector work, such as call centres, where emotional management, affective engagement, ethical judgment, and moral agency are central to value production.

Marxist feminism further shows how non-capitalist forms are not only absorbed by capitalism but also actively sustain its daily and generational reproduction. As Federici (2004, 63–64) argues, capital accumulation depends not only on surplus extraction but also on the accumulation of difference and division along gendered, racialized, and generational lines that shape working-class composition and conditions of exploitation. Similarly, Mies (1986, 1988) reminds us that the emergence of the "free" wage labourer presupposed the ongoing exploitation of women, colonized subjects, and slaves—those historically deemed "unproductive" but indispensable to capital. Thus, social reproduction theory offers a more expansive and relational view of capitalism—one that includes not only what it produces but how it sustains itself across time and space, and through whom.

Mirchandani (2012) suggests that call centre operators in India perform invisible "authenticity work": behaviors and performances that reconcile the expectations of customers in the UK and USA by enacting a working self that is simultaneously familiar and distant. These operators act as "authentic clones," embodying both colonial servitude and neoliberal professionalism. This concept highlights the agentive capacity of operators to reconcile contradictory cultural logics. This article broadens that insight by integrating social reproduction theory, emphasising the classed, generational, and moral dimensions of labour

that sustain the reproduction of labour power—dimensions often overlooked in production-centric accounts. As Kathi Weeks (2011) argues, mainstream Marxist frameworks privilege waged production as the locus of value and political agency. Feminist theories of reproduction challenge this, showing how unwaged and affective forms of life-making are central to capitalist accumulation. Weeks reframes the issue—not only asking what kinds of labour capitalism values, but what kinds of life it demands, disciplines, and exploits. The social reproduction lens adopted in this article is applied to one of the fastest-growing sectors of the neoliberal service economy: the call centre.

The article begins with a socio-historical account of Portugal's political-economic trajectory, tracing how state-led development, EU integration, and labor devaluation contributed to the rise of the call center sector. Precarious service work emerged through global neoliberalism and nationally specific ideological frameworks such as post-revolutionary modernisation and the "middle-class effect." These intergenerational mobility projects shaped labor power and the moral economy within which precarity is contested. I argue that Portuguese call center labour arises from the interaction of capitalist accumulation and reproductive struggles, shaping both the supply of labour and subjective expectations around value and status. Focusing on the 2011–2014 austerity period, I show how political discourse reframed precarity as a moral necessity. The "generational justice" narrative justified youth unemployment and labour flexibilisation by vilifying older workers' protections. In response, new collective actions—including protests and the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores de Call Centers (STCC)—emerged. Austerity exposed capitalism's reproductive contradictions, revealing how value is extracted from social dispossession and legitimated through ideologies of responsibility and sacrifice. Resistance emerged as class struggle, reproductive crisis, and moral critique. The ethnographic section examines the shop floor, where operators must navigate the contradictory demands of speed and empathy. Through vignettes, I argue that what makes their work effective is not surveillance or scripting but socially embedded linguistic capacities cultivated through reproduction. Management seeks to commodify these capacities but cannot fully subsume them. Value is generated because of, not in spite of, workers' socially and morally cultivated agency. The conclusion argues that capitalist value creation must be understood through the reproductive dimensions of labour—its historical formation, moral evaluation, and subjective expectations. The contradictory unity of capitalism spans the productive-reproductive continuum. In this light, the call centre emerges as a paradigmatic site where this contradiction is enacted and made visible, reaffirming the need for frameworks that foreground contingency, concreteness, and historically situated agency.

1.1 | Capitalist Transitions and Reproductive Struggles of Hope

Unlike many transnational call centre operations, most call centres in Portugal primarily serve the domestic public. Much of this work is outsourced to temporary employment agencies that, over the past 20 years, have specialized in 'call and contact services.' According to the most recent Benchmarking Report by the Portuguese Association of Contact Centres (APCC 2024), by 2023, 73% of surveyed companies had outsourced their call centre operations to such agencies (APCC 2024, 77). Major multinational staffing corporations, such as Adecco, Manpower, Teleperformance, Connecta Group, and Kelly Services, often provide these services. Although comprehensive statistics remain elusive due to the sector's fragmentation, national media and industry reports confirm its rapid expansion and economic significance. By 2024, over 115,000 workers were employed across more than 400 call centres, exceeding 1% of Portugal's active workforce. The sector grew steadily from the early 2000s onward, expanding by 8% annually between 2003 and 2007 (Cunha 2007, 24), with a 9% year-on-year increase reported in 2014. Turnover in the industry tripled between 2016 and 2017, reaching €1 billion. These centres primarily deliver inbound services in telecommunications, banking, insurance, and utilities. While Lisbon and Porto remain key hubs, operations have increasingly expanded into Portugal's interior. Although domestic clients still dominate, a growing share of services is now delivered to international customers in multiple languages.

Yet this rapid expansion has unfolded alongside a persistent symbolic and material crisis. Since the early 2000s, call centre work has become publicly emblematic of a new form of precarity. Media narratives coalesced around the figure of the *geração 500 euros* (500 euros generation)—educated youth condemned to low-wage, temporary, and socially disqualified forms of labour. By 2011, amidst post-crisis mobilisations against austerity, this cohort was rebranded as the *geração à rasca* (generation in trouble), marking a broader political reckoning with neoliberal labor flexibilisation. Since then, call centre work has served as a potent cultural shorthand for the unraveling of generational life paths and the erosion of middle-class expectations. In this context, the notion of "precarity" denotes not only employment insecurity but also a generational rupture in the interlinked processes of social mobility and reproduction.

These dynamics reveal how the call centre industry draws on historically embedded infrastructures of social reproduction, often overlooked in mainstream accounts of neoliberal service work. In Portugal, the industry relies on an educated, multilingual, and emotionally disciplined workforce whose skills reflect intergenerational investments in social advancement. These embodied capacities are systematically mobilised and commodified by employers, transforming the promise of upward mobility into a resource for profit extraction.

The dominant literature on call centre labour has primarily focused on scripting, surveillance, and emotional labour as central mechanisms through which globalised service work is standardised, monitored, and ultimately alienated (Poster 2007; Woodcock 2017; Brophy 2017; Woydack 2019). These accounts have illuminated the bureaucratic and affective control systems that render workers legible and replaceable, as well as the ways cultural and linguistic performances are calibrated to meet client expectations. However, these frameworks often privilege the labour process at the point of production, paying less attention to how labour power itself is made viable and valorisable over time. In contrast, social reproduction theory—particularly in its Marxist feminist iterations (Federici 2012; Fraser 2016, 2022; Ferguson 2020)—foregrounds the generational, ideological, and moral infrastructures that produce not only compliant workers

but also hopeful ones. My analysis contributes to call centre scholarship by showing that value is extracted not merely from linguistic standardisation or emotional labour, but from workers' socially embedded aspirations, cultivated through reproductive investments across class, family, and national development imaginaries.

In Portugal, these reproductive dynamics were forged through a complex national history. The Estado Novo dictatorship (1933–1974) suppressed labour organising and promoted a protectionist economy under a corporatist, nationalist model. During the post-World War II period, some sectors experienced limited Fordist development, resulting in a fragile consumer culture and constrained forms of class mobility. However, this growth was undermined by the regime's colonial war (1961–1974), agricultural stagnation, and over-reliance on traditional exports that were heavily dependent on cheap labour, entrenching a longstanding structural pattern of labour devaluation. The Carnation Revolution in 1974 ushered in a new era of political reform and expanded citizenship. However, social inequality and labour precarity remained structural features of the post-authoritarian state. Portugal's integration into the European Economic Community in 1986 was framed as the culmination of a national "modernisation" project fusing freedom, development, and future-oriented prosperity. This project relied heavily on investments in welfare, social security, and notably higher education, helping to cultivate a generation of highly qualified workers—and with it, a reproductive imaginary centered on stable employment, middle-class distinction, and upward social mobility.

It is precisely this historically contingent reproductive strategy that call centres draw on and commodify. The so-called "middle-class effect" (Estanque 2003)—driven by expanded access to education and symbolic class uplift—generated a population of workers overqualified for their labour conditions. While dominant accounts might frame this as a rational repurposing of surplus educated labour, social reproduction theory allows us to see how these structures—especially education, aspiration, and family investment—are not simply preconditions, but active sources of capitalist value. These are not residues of prior modes, but conduits of surplus capture in neoliberal capitalism. As Portugal restructured its economy through privatisation and liberalisation, new forms of service labour proliferated. With minimal capital investment, the call centre became a cost-effective entry point into the labour market for youth. Its operations were underpinned not only by Portugal's low wages but by the moral and affective labour of a generation raised on the promise of European modernity. Their willingness to comply, perform, and remain hopeful—even within degraded employment—was not simply a reflection of economic necessity, but the outcome of a reproductive project decades in the making, one intimately shaped by the state and legitimized through the ideology of integration and progress. Thus, what we witness in the Portuguese call centre sector is not merely the intensification of precarious service work, but the valorisation of historically embedded reproductive infrastructures. The symbolic and material investments that enabled intergenerational advancement—schooling, caregiving, cultural capital, and moral orientation—are now being harvested by capital. This process becomes especially visible during moments of crisis, such as the post-2008 austerity period, when the contradiction between capital's accumulation imperative and social reproduction's systemic fragility (Fraser 2016) deepens.

Call centres, then, are more than economic institutions: they are contested terrains of intergenerational value extraction, where the breakdown of previous reproductive bargains is both materialised and moralised. They dramatize the failure of a modernisation project promised through EU membership and express the contradictions of a peripheral economy whose development trajectory has been shaped by layered histories of labour devaluation and reproductive struggles of hope. While prior call centre scholarship has charted the "*how*" *of labour process control, a social reproduction perspective highlights the* "*why*": it reveals how the social and moral labour of life-making becomes central to accumulation. These insights are crucial to understanding contemporary capitalism—not only in terms of what kinds of labour are exploited, but what kinds of life are rendered productive.

1.2 | Austerity Struggles: The Crisis of Social Reproduction and the Politics of Precarity

In March 2011, amidst intensifying economic hardship, a group of young precarious workers and activists launched a mass protest known as the *Geração à Rasca* (Generation in Trouble), later institutionalised as the *Movimento 12 de Março* (12 March Movement), in response to the worsening effects of austerity. In their manifesto, they summoned "the unemployed, '500-euro' and other underpaid workers, disguised slaves, sub- and short-term hired, fake independent workers, intermittent workers, trainees, scholarship holders, working students, students, mothers, fathers and sons of Portugal" to take part in reclaiming their futures. They identified themselves as "the highest-qualified generation in the history of our country." The movement culminated in unprecedented demonstrations across Lisbon and Porto, drawing over 300,000 participants. These mobilisations were not merely reactions to deteriorating labour conditions, but expressions of a deeper rupture: the collapse of the intergenerational promise of social reproduction, materially expressed through stable employment, middle-class integration, and dignified life trajectories for the educated youth. The protests articulated a crisis not only of employment but of reproduction itself—a core concern in Marxist feminist and social reproduction theory. Protesters resisted the redefinition of their life-making capacities as surplus labour under degraded conditions, symbolized most starkly in the proliferation of call centres as destinations for downwardly mobile aspiration.

The call centre is often examined within post-Fordist and neoliberal discussions of precarity, characterized by instability, fragmentation, and emotional distress (Lloyd 2013; Krishnamurthy 2018). Lloyd (2013) situates call centre work alongside other post-industrial jobs that feature high turnover and psychological issues. In 1-800-Worlds, Krishnamurthy (2018) offers an ethnographic perspective on Indian agents whose identities are shaped by shifting time zones, rotating schedules, and scripted forms of intimacy. These accounts have provided critical insights into how call centres standardise and commodify communication, often framing them as archetypes of post-Fordist affective labour. However, they frequently centre

on the labour process itself, overlooking how the labour force is reproduced and rendered available in the first place. In contrast, social reproduction theory sheds light on how the very foundations of life-making—education, kinship, moral orientation, and intergenerational expectations—become objects of crisis and exploitation.

The Portuguese austerity period offers a vital contribution to this scholarship by showing how call centres emerge not only as sites of degraded employment but as mechanisms that actively capitalise on reproductive collapse. What is commodified is not merely speech or emotional engagement, but the remains of broken reproductive infrastructures and failed modernisation promises. As Mankekar and Gupta (2016) argue in their study of Indian call centres, affective labour involves not just routinized care but emotionally fraught encounters that entangle workers' personal and professional selves—making intimacy itself a site of value extraction under neoliberal regimes. This analytical shift highlights how value is extracted from generational dispossession, revealing a dimension of capitalist accumulation that is largely absent from existing frameworks.

The critique of austerity reached a sharp turning point in May 2011, when the Portuguese government signed the Memorandum of Understanding with the so-called Troika, comprising the European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the European Central Bank (ECB). As in other Southern European countries, the terms of the structural adjustment programme were predicated on internal devaluation—wage suppression, employment flexibilisation, and the erosion of labour protections. The policy architecture of austerity reframed Portugal's economic crisis as one of "labour's rigidity," requiring new forms of flexibility and devaluation. This restructuring effected a massive transfer of value from labour to capital, largely by targeting the temporal and material infrastructures of reproduction, such as work time extensions, wage compression, and erosion of dismissal protections (Lima 2015).

Crucially, austerity was not justified solely as an economic imperative, but framed as a moral rectification. Political discourse recast labour market restructuring as a generational duty. The insecurity of younger workers was blamed on the entitlements of older generations, positioning austerity as an ethical rebalancing rather than a redistribution of risk. Within this narrative, precarity was valorised as a civic virtue—an expected sacrifice for access to a "flexible" future. This generational framing concealed the structural breakdown of the very reproductive infrastructures that had historically underpinned working-class life across generations. Within this context, call centres emerged as a central mechanism of capitalist reordering, offering a "solution" to a generation systematically dispossessed of the conditions necessary for sustainable life-making. By 2012, precarious employment had reached 30% of the workforce, with nearly 50% of the 15–34 age group affected (Estanque and Costa 2012). With youth unemployment above 38%, companies like Teleperformance capitalised on this dispossession. In 2013, it opened its sixth Portuguese call centre in Lisbon, creating 1400 new jobs—a move celebrated by the Ministry of the Economy as a symbol of recovery.

However, what these new jobs represented was not upward mobility but the institutionalisation of permanent precarity. This labour model captured not only the economic surplus of dispossessed youth but also their affective, moral, and reproductive investments. This is where social reproduction theory provides a necessary expansion of dominant call centre scholarship. The Portuguese case shows that capitalist accumulation increasingly rests on the commodification of *reproductive breakdown*. What call centers exploit is not simply a surplus of labour, but a surplus of *failed expectations*: the exhaustion of parental hopes, the disintegration of educational promises, and the transformation of moral and affective capacities into inputs for customer service. These capacities were never intended for commodification; they were cultivated through intergenerational reproductive projects—now rendered vulnerable to capital's adaptive logic.

This dynamic sparked organised responses. In 2014, the *Sindicato dos Trabalhadores de Call Centers* (STCC) was formed, independent of the traditional trade union confederations. Its founding was a direct response to the lived realities of degradation in the sector: stress, low wages, harassment, and poor health. In 2015, STCC launched a petition demanding the official classification of call centre work as a high-stress job, known as *profissão de desgaste rápido*, calling for shorter shifts, increased task variation, and formal recognition of the job's physical and mental toll. The petition, with 5500 signatures, was debated in Parliament in 2019. Though it resulted in limited legislative change, it compelled the Socialist Party to release a report noting a threefold increase in sectoral revenue between 2016 and 2017, accompanied by a simultaneous drop in average wages and high levels of short-term employment. Despite limited union penetration, the STCC's work has kept the material conditions of call centre labor and its broader symbolic meaning at the forefront of national debates. The political and media narratives have slowly shifted, recognizing call centres as both economic mainstays and zones of ongoing reproductive breakdown, where long-term employment becomes a misnomer and educational credentials lose their social traction.

What was once imagined as a temporary phase of underemployment has become a permanent condition, emblematic of the legacy of austerity. Call centre employment now increasingly includes not only young graduates but also older workers displaced from their sectors, caught in the interstices of age-based redundancy and delayed retirement. These workers bring with them another layer of reproductive disruption: the erosion of work-life balance for those who were once integrated into relatively stable employment regimes. Over the last two decades, call centres have remained enduring icons of Portuguese precarity, even as the broader political and economic terrain has shifted. Their status as the epicentre of employment struggles reveals how capitalist valorisation draws not only from production, but also from reproductive contradictions. In Portugal, the promise of education, modernity, and upward mobility has been retrofitted to serve a service economy model built on flexible, affective, and *housewifised* labor (Mies 1986; Von Werlhof 1988). This is where the extension of earlier insights becomes crucial: while traditional call center scholarship has demonstrated how capital absorbs diverse communicative and affective labour forms, the Portuguese case reveals how capital increasingly absorbs *reproductive failure* itself—extracting surplus not simply through the

incorporation of life into labour, but through the dispossession and disorientation of life-making itself. Austerity was not just an economic correction; it was a strategic reorganization of reproduction. Call centres stand as both a product and an instrument of that reorganisation, marking the contemporary frontier where capital captures not only what people produce, but the very capacities through which they attempt to live.

2 | Humans Disguised as Robots: The Contradiction at the Heart of Call Centre Valorisation

Across multiple contexts, researchers have identified a persistent contradiction at the heart of call centre work: the simultaneous demand for personalised, emotionally attuned client interactions and strict adherence to standardised, time-bound performance metrics. This dual imperative—providing high-quality, affective care while maximising speed and efficiency—defines the everyday experience of call centre labour. Operators are monitored in real time and retrospectively through technologies that track metrics such as call volume, duration, and adherence to scripts, even as they are expected to display emotional intelligence, empathy, and improvisational skills in navigating clients' frustrations and needs. This quantity–quality contradiction is not incidental; it is central to how value is generated within the call centre labour regime. Throughout my fieldwork at EVA, I observed that the most effective client engagements rarely resulted from strict compliance with scripts or protocols. Rather, they relied on operators' agentive use of language—their ability to interpret, anticipate, improvise, and ethically evaluate situations that exceeded the boundaries of standardised procedures. These skills—exercised by workers like Sérgio and Maria—manifested not merely as cognitive reflexes but as historically sedimented forms of human capacity, shaped by social expectations, educational training, and moral orientation. In other words, these were not merely "skills"; they were reproductive investments.

At EVA, operators were not required to manually accept incoming calls, as these were automatically distributed among available staff. Before answering, the operator would hear a tone and introduce themselves. During one particularly high-pressure moment, I shadowed Sérgio, who was fielding a backlog of calls caused by regional telephone exchange issues. In his first call, although the issue fell outside the regional problem, Sérgio took the initiative and ran tests with the client, ending a 20-minute call with a successful resolution. The next call, however, involved a client already frustrated from a prior failed interaction. Sérgio, unable to offer concrete reparations, issued a sincere apology and attempted to restore trust. In the most notable call, which lasted over 90 minutes, the client had lost their internet credentials—information operators were not authorised to provide them by phone due to data protection rules. Having exhausted every alternative, Sérgio eventually chose to disclose the information, prioritising the client's well-being and experience over bureaucratic compliance. Although this constituted a policy violation, he later described the decision as morally justified and emotionally rewarding, stating that he felt "adequately compensated by the client's satisfaction." This vignette exemplifies how operators rely on capacities that exceed what metrics can measure. These include ethical judgment, emotional calibration, and the anticipation of human needs—all of which are rooted in social and educational backgrounds shaped by intergenerational aspirations for respectability, competence, and meaningful work. On another occasion, I shadowed Maria, a long-serving operator who her peers highly regard. She received a call from a corporate client experiencing a multi-day internet outage. Although the client had already performed standard troubleshooting, Maria was required by protocol to request that he repeat the tests. The client grew increasingly angry, and the conversation stretched beyond 20 minutes. Maria recognised that this call would negatively impact her performance metrics but chose to prioritise calming the client and managing his expectations. She remained on the line while the client attempted the tests, enduring long stretches of silence. Later, Maria explained that clients "call with emotions overriding their rationality," and that maintaining composure—even at personal performance cost—was often the most effective strategy.

What both these cases reveal is that the contradiction between quantity and quality creates conditions under which operators must use judgment, improvisation, and moral agency—capacities that are not merely personal traits but the outcome of social reproduction. Winiecki (2007) similarly highlights how call centre workers are subjectified through layered disciplinary processes that simultaneously constrain and produce agentive action. His ethnography demonstrates how workers occupy subject positions that are both imposed and actively negotiated, a dynamic that resonates with the improvisational and moral decision-making I observed at EVA. The call centre worker's ability to sustain these performances under constant surveillance emerges from capacities historically fostered through processes of social reproduction, including access to higher education, intergenerational aspirations for middle-class mobility, and the cultivation of affective and communicative self-discipline. These are the very capacities that are now appropriated and commodified. The paradox is that what ensures productive output—operators' agentive intervention—is also what the labour regime attempts to discipline and control.

This tension prompts us to reconsider the fundamental nature of value production. Both earlier and more recent studies on call centre work have explored the significance of unwritten rules, informal procedures, and going beyond the script in the efficient execution of the operator's work (Poster 2007; Mirchandani 2012; Woodcock 2017). Kiran Mirchandani notes that in the early and mid-2000s, call centre work in India was significantly influenced by scripted Taylorism, with operators required to interact with clients according to ready-made conversation scripts displayed on their computer screens. From the mid-2000s onwards, in response to overseas customer dissatisfaction and backlash, an emerging managerial inclination downplayed the importance of scripts in favor of operators who engaged in "smart work" practices—such as deviating from scripts when deemed necessary—and who sounded "natural" and were "innovative" in their linguistic interactions (Mirchandani 2012, 87–88). In his undercover research in a high-volume sales call centre in Britain, Jamie Woodcock recalls being told during training that "we need people to make the sales; otherwise we would just use an automated system"

(Woodcock 2017, 41), and being informed during a motivational session that "there is no better call centre worker than the one who can improvise around the script!" (74).

Although call centre studies stress the significance of both scripted and unscripted interactions for effective performance and value creation, the labour regime is often predicated on the disembedding, disembodiment, depersonalisation, and desubjectification of human linguistic agency (Lloyd 2013; Aneesh 2015; Brophy 2017; Woodcock 2017). A. Aneesh, for instance, suggests that global interactions in Indian transnational call centres exemplify an emerging system of governance he terms *algocracy*: the rule of the algorithm. This form of governance consists of "programming schemes embedded in software platforms that structure possible forms of work governance," effectively organizing labour through the design of the work process itself (Aneesh 2015, 87). The algorithm thus becomes a technical device of decision-making that limits and governs human action.

More recently, Enda Brophy defines call centre work as the most accomplished example of "language put to work," a concept intended to capture how the proletarianisation and deskilling of a global informational underclass reflect "capital's valorisation of the human capacity to communicate through language" (Brophy 2017, 5). Brophy argues that call centres produce what he calls "abstract communication": communication that is instrumental, homogeneous, measurable, and thereby divorced from the concrete knowledge, abilities, or experiences of those who enact it. He contends that "the human capacity for relationality is reduced to a limited set of allowable utterances, statements, and responses, all of them tailored towards the maximisation of communicative productivity" (Brophy 2017, 17). "Abstract communication" thus describes how linguistic interactions in call centres are rendered quantifiable and undifferentiated by erasing the personalized engagement of the worker with the client. Similarly, sociolinguists such as Deborah Cameron (2008, 2000) see also 2000) have suggested that in call centres, "top-down talk" reduces language to controlled output. But while these accounts are incisive, they often portray standardisation as totalising and desubjectifying. In contrast, I argue that the contradiction between quality and quantity is not a limitation to value extraction, but rather its enabler. The call centre not only attempts to suppress subjectivity; it appropriates, privatises, and profits from the very qualities of linguistic agency that are formed through socially differentiated reproduction.

In doing so, the call centre becomes a critical site for observing how capital valorises reproductive histories. It captures and transforms intergenerational investments in education, upward mobility, and moral cultivation into measurable, exploitable work outputs. As Diane Elson (1979 [2015]) argued, Marx's value theory should not be reduced to a labour theory of value in the classical sense, but instead understood as a theory of the social forms of labour, attentive to how labour's value-bearing capacities are historically constituted. In this vein, scholars of social reproduction (Mies 1982; Fortunati 1995; Vogel 1983 [2013]; Mezzadri 2017; Lazar 2023) have demonstrated that the dual character of labour power—as both commodity and living subject—must be traced through the reproductive processes that render it both available and governable.

As Mezzadri (2019) notes, value is not just made in the factory or the call centre, but across a productive–reproductive continuum. The labour power found in call centres today is shaped by decades of reproductive struggle—Portugal's national projects of modernisation, parental investments in education, and aspirations of middle-class belonging. These investments have produced a workforce whose "overqualification" is not a surplus, but the raw material of a new form of capitalist accumulation—one based on the contradiction between agentive capacity and degraded conditions. The call centre represents a labour regime in which valorisation depends on the tension between the measurable (quantity) and the immeasurable (quality), a tension that can only be managed through workers' capacity to think, feel, interpret, and act. The quantity–quality conundrum is not a dysfunction; it is the engine of surplus extraction, because it enables capital to appropriate the most historically situated and socially embedded aspects of human subjectivity. Thus, call centre labour is not an anomaly from the classical capitalist mode—it is its contemporary frontier, where productive and reproductive temporalities, practices, and moralities are integrated, exploited, and commodified.

In this sense, the operators' labour power is defined not only by their current work conditions but also by the historical residue of reproductive struggle and value investment, passed down through family, state, and educational institutions. It is this historically constituted, socially embedded surplus—the ethical, cognitive, and emotional capacities cultivated outside of the wage—that is being turned into profit. Social reproduction theory reveals how life-making itself becomes labour-making, and how value is generated through the contradiction between what capital demands from workers and what history has made them capable of.

2.1 | Conclusion: Reproducing Contradiction, Reframing Value

At the outset of this article, I identified a core pattern in dominant call centre scholarship: a tendency to overlook the situated and embedded nature of value creation in favor of interpretations that emphasize the disembedded, disembodied, depersonalized, and desubjectified dimensions of human linguistic labour (Aneesh 2015; Brophy 2017; Woodcock 2017). While the transnational call centre literature has made important contributions to our understanding of scripting, surveillance, and affective control, it has paid comparatively less attention to the reproductive infrastructures—familial, educational, and moral—that render labour power both viable and exploitable. In contrast, I have argued that social reproduction theory foregrounds how capitalism valorises and appropriates historically and socially situated life-making processes, generating emergent regimes of valuation and devaluation (Murphy 2017). These dynamics help explain how particular labour forces become suited to specific labour regimes through historically embedded reproductive projects, while also contributing to the creation of surplus value.

This article has examined how the emergence and consolidation of the Portuguese call centre sector were shaped by a specific trajectory of neoliberal precarisation, driven by the intersection of global accumulation logics and national development

continuities. These continuities include state-led projects that absorbed the reproductive struggles of the parental generation, rooted in normative aspirations toward middle-class distinction, into legitimising ideological grammars of freedom, progress, and modernity. Across authoritarian, developmentalist, and democratic regimes, labour devaluation has remained a key mechanism of capital accumulation, enabling the rise of a flexible, precarious labour system that would come to define the call centre sector. Its expansion during the austerity conjuncture revealed how broader neoliberal restructuring was refracted through historically grounded generational expectations. The growing disjuncture between the upwardly mobile aspirations of an educated workforce and the degraded labour conditions they encountered intensified this contradiction, turning the call centre into a site of symbolic and political contestation over the meaning of precarity, whether as moral failure or as a space for critique and transformation.

Within the workplace itself, I argued that the core value-generating mechanism of call centre labor resides in the tension between quantitative control and qualitative engagement. This contradiction is only resolved through the socially and morally embedded agentive linguistic capacities of operators. These capacities—empathy, improvisation, problem-solving, ethical discernment—cannot be codified or automated, yet they are precisely what capital depends on to extract value from linguistic service work. The workforce's ability to perform this labor is not incidental; it is the historical outcome of intergenerational reproductive investments, particularly in education and social aspiration. This analysis shows that value is generated not merely through labour time or standardisation, but through the appropriation of historically reproduced human faculties. The call centre thus emerges as a paradigmatic site of productive–reproductive convergence, where value creation is inseparable from processes of subject formation, socialisation, and expectation shaped by prior reproductive struggles. As Melissa Wright (2007) has argued in her analysis of global assembly work, capitalist regimes of value depend on myths of worker disposability that obscure the indispensable reproductive and relational labour on which they rely. This article similarly demonstrates how the Portuguese call centre labour regime commodifies operators' agentive linguistic capacities—capacities rooted in historical, moral, and reproductive contexts—even as it constructs them as flexible and replaceable.

Extending beyond earlier call centre scholarship, this case demonstrates that the contradictory unity of capitalism's uneven development must be analyzed through its entanglement with the reproductive temporalities and moral economies of kinship, class, and generation. The articulation of capital to specific labour regimes does not occur solely through the reorganisation of production but also through the appropriation of socially differentiated reproductive infrastructures. The contradiction between these infrastructures and accumulation logics is both a source of value and a site of instability. What emerges is a productive–reproductive continuum that mediates how capitalism differentiates in time and space, producing variegated forms of labour valorisation and emergent contradictions at the level of lived experience. To foreground the causal role of social reproduction in shaping the concrete manifestations of capitalism's heterogeneous expansion is to trace how the formal operations of capital are actualized through contradictory interactions with the reproductive realm. These interactions involve extra-market activities, intimate relations, and moral hierarchies—categories that have long been central to feminist Marxist theory—and both enable and resist the ongoing, uneven, and contested expansion of capitalist social formations. It is in these grounded contradictions—between what capital requires and what reproduction produces—that the analytic horizon of call centre scholarship can be deepened and the dynamics of contemporary service labour regimes more fully understood.

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