

# The fortunes and misfortunes of an undercover sociologist working in a call centre

The scene is both comical and pathetic at the same time; young men in suits and ties, some hopping about on the spot and others (visibly less comfortable) barely moving their lips and forcing a smile, are singing along to a pop song by *The Killers* while a portly man of around 50 works himself up into a frenzy of movement and emotion, urging them to sing louder. The man is Neville Wilshire, manager of a call centre in Swansea (Wales) which employs around 700 people, and the main protagonist in the reality TV series *The Call Centre* shown on BBC3 in 2013 and 2014.

'Each new recruit has to sing. I want enthusiasm. Enthusiastic people sell, happy people sell, miserable bastards can't. So, if they can't sing and they can't enjoy it, they might as well leave.'

In another episode, which can still be viewed on YouTube, Wilshire parades a 25 yearold employee who has recently broken up with her boyfriend through the open-plan office, shouting, 'Any single blokes here? I've got a desperate female!'

Although this is a reality TV show, with all the embellishment of truth inherent to the genre, Jamie Woodcock – a research fellow at the prestigious London School of Economics (LSE) – nevertheless believes that *The Call Centre*, with its outrageous hero who cites 'Napoleon... a dictator' as his source of inspiration, is a fairly typical example of the industry's preferred management style.

'This ridiculous statement is not just a performance for the TV programme; it also indicates how much power managers and supervisors have on the call-centre floor,' writes the young sociologist in his book *Working the Phones*.

The book is based not only on research findings from the field of sociology, but also on Woodcock's own observations during a six-month stint of work in a call centre selling insurance while he was writing up his PhD thesis. This allowed him to experience for himself the new management techniques popular in the sector, which he believes have their roots in ideas appropriated from the expanding cult of self-improvement and New Age spirituality: 'What can now be called "liberation management" starts from the

position that no one can exploit workers better than workers themselves.'

In one of the many examples of techniques aimed at infantilising the call centre workers, a small laminated sign is placed on a new recruit's desk mid-call by the quality control team after he has made a certain number of calls. Upon finishing his current call, he must go and sit on a small folding stool next to the team leader's desk, where he is asked to listen to recordings of his calls and rate how well they went. The team leader then tells him what he did right or wrong, and awards raffle tickets for particularly good calls. Raffles are drawn every two months, with prizes including gift vouchers for big London shops or games consoles.

Woodcock uses the term 'bullshit jobs' – borrowed from an LSE colleague, the American anarchist anthropologist David Graeber – to refer to the type of work available in this sector, which employs one million people in the UK.

The author explains that this provocative term was not coined to describe jobs such as waste collection, which are unpopular and often badly paid, but which have to be done by someone to prevent our society descending rapidly into chaos.

It refers instead to occupations which are of dubious benefit to society, and the sociologist found it particularly interesting that call centre workers struggle to explain to others exactly what their job entails. This has obvious implications in terms of social protest.

According to Woodcock, 'If there is an element of work that is socially important, fulfilling or indeed enjoyable, then it is worth staying and fighting (...). When work is stripped of these features almost entirely, then the refusal of work not only becomes a useful strategy, but it is also something that emerges organically from the labour process itself.'

Woodcock describes the many strategies dreamt up by call centre workers to avoid the threat of alienation, which he regards as inherent to the job: asking pointless questions to lengthen the brief team meeting routinely held before each new shift ('buzz session'), offering to trade the aforementioned gift vouchers with their superior in exchange

for permission to leave work early, attempting to drag out cigarette breaks (smokers and non-smokers alike) and so on. The ultimate act of resistance is simply to quit.

Woodcock believes that call centre workers have room for manoeuvre when it comes to improving their working conditions, despite the major obstacles which stand in the way of collective mobilisation in the sector (lack of trade unions, permanent surveillance by line managers, high staff turnover, lack of job security, etc.).

Yet although he makes no secret of the fact that he takes a militant approach to the mobilisation of workers, with frequent references to the Marxist heritage and, in particular, the Italian *operaismo* movement, his own attempts to mobilise workers are unconvincing.

Woodcock succeeds in meeting a number of colleagues in a pub after work with the aim of thrashing out a strategy of collective resistance, but his endeavours run out of steam: 'The difficulties in trying to involve workers in a more formal manner are not surprising. The refusal of work was not limited to a rejection of working at the call centre itself. It also extended outside the workplace: not wanting to talk, read or write about call centres after work ended.'

'The future success of trade unions in call centres will depend in no small measure on their ability to contest and redefine the frontiers of control on terms desired by their members. This requires a break from the conception of unions as service providers for a shrinking base of members, and a move towards the building of combative organisations that are focused on workplace struggle,' he concludes.

– Denis Grégoire

**Working the Phones. Control and Resistance in Call Centres**

Jamie Woodcock, PlutoPress, 2017, 200 p.