1

Introduction

In Portugal, from the mid-2000s, the reality of call centre employment gradually became prominent in the public sphere. Albeit little was known about what tasks the work entailed, or how it was performed, there seemed to be little doubt about who was doing the work in the new factories of communication of late capitalist societies (Fernie and Metcalf 1998; Buscatto 2002). The media began characterising the call centre workforce as those belonging to the '500 euro generation' ('geração 500 euros') – a publicly sanctioned label used to designate highly qualified youngsters engaged in low-paid, precarious, unprotected and socially disqualified forms of service work. Snapshots of call centre work began emerging with a significant regularity in reportage and newspaper columns. The call centre environment has been portrayed as consisting of endless rows of small cubicles, where a human agent endures the drudgery of repetitive and monotonous telephone conversations with angry and abusive clients, under invasive modes of technological surveillance, discipline and control. In 2011, the '500 euro generation' was renamed as the 'generation in trouble' ('geração á rasca'), an expression disseminated in a massive collective mobilisation called by a group of young activists against the intensification of neoliberal labour precarisation caused by austerity policies. Up until the present, with growing intensity, among ordinary people, academics, politicians and social activists, call centre work remains a striking symbol of labour precarity, a condition particularly associated with the neoliberal generational disenchantment that 'each generation does better than its predecessor' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 17).

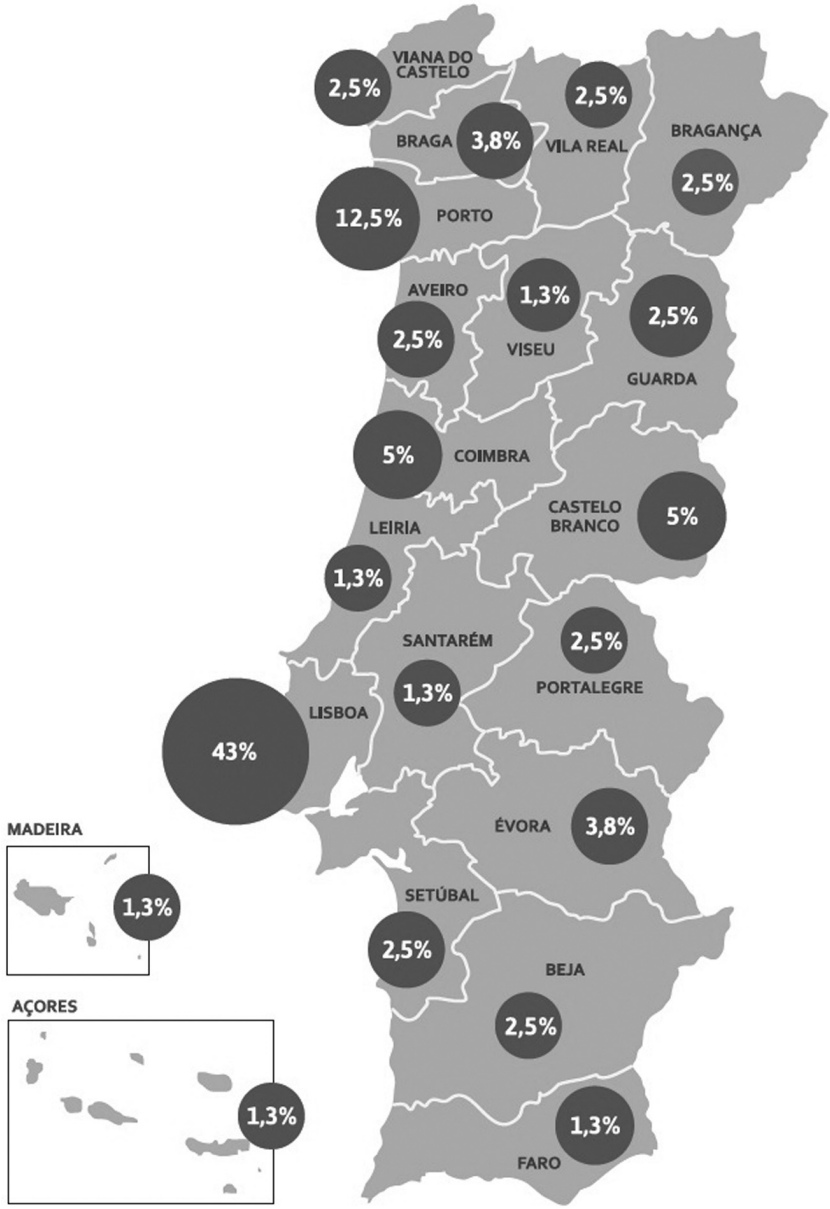
In this book, I explore the historically, relationally and morally embedded dimensions of labour precarity in the Portuguese call centre sector. Although the more abstract and totalising aspects of neoliberal precarity have captured the critical attention of academics, social movement activists and the wider public, there are few case studies available of sites of labour particular to this phase of capitalist economic restructuring. This book, grounded on a fine-grained ethnographic analysis of the call centre labour process, addresses the intricate relationships between global neoliberal restructuring shifts, expressed in the increased 'normalisation' of labour precarity, and the situated and context-bound specificities of the history of capitalist development in Portugal. The call centre sector's architecture of

value-extraction is analysed through relational and moral structures of kin, generation and class, jointly shaping practices of recruitment and training, and the organisation of work. This book describes the emergence of a *regime of disciplined agency* within the Portuguese call centre sector: a regime centred on the disciplining and commodification of human agency, mobilised through the unique human quality of language, which is both a product and the producer of call centre operators' intimate feelings of generational disenchantment and dispossession.

In contrast to the transnational call centre sector, the vast majority of call centres in Portugal provide services to a national public. Nearly all call centre work is outsourced to temporary work agencies: companies that, within the space of ten-to-fifteen years, have specialised in 'call and contact services'.[1] According to the Benchmarking Report of the Associação Portuguesa de Contact Centers (Portuguese Association of Contact Centres; APCC), in 2008, 59 per cent of the companies that responded to the survey had their call centre services outsourced to temporary work agencies (APCC 2009: 97); in 2018 this number had risen to 78 per cent (APCC 2019). Some of the major companies providing call centre services in Portugal are multinationals providing temporary staff, including Adecco, Manpower, Teleperformance, Connecta Group and Kelly Services. Call centres are spread across various business activities, making it challenging to gather centralised statistical data to build up a general characterisation of the sector and its growth in the last decades. This notwithstanding, the growing media attention to the call centre sector, the existence of international reports and the yearly benchmarking reports carried out by APCC, enable us to capture the increasing expansion and main economic sectors of the industry. These data should be taken with caution, but they do highlight relevant tendencies of the sector.[2]

In 2018 it was estimated that between 80,000 and 100,000 people were working in more than 400 call centres in Portugal, corresponding to more than 1 per cent of the active national population.[3] The growth of the sector has been constant from the early 2000s up to the present. It is estimated that the sector grew at a rate of 8 per cent per year from 2003 to 2007 (Cunha *et al.* 2007: 24). In 2014, the European Contact Centre Benchmark indicated that the growth of call centre positions in Portugal had been superior to the European average, with an increase of 9 per cent in comparison with the previous year.[4] The sector's total turnover tripled between 2016 and 2017, estimated to be higher than €1 billion.[5] A significant number of Portuguese call centres provide inbound services in the sectors of telecommunications, banking, insurances and utilities. The majority of call centres are still located in Lisbon and Porto, although the installation of call centres is rapidly decentralising to areas in the country's interior (see Figure 1.1). Furthermore, while the vast majority of call centres provide services to the internal market, recent developments indicate an increase in call centres operating for the external market, whose services are provided in a range of languages.[6]

There is a tension running throughout this book that relates to an emphasis on the contingent historical, relational and moral dimensions of the condition of labour precarity in the Portuguese call centre sector, while insisting on its structural and material determinants. The spread of neoliberal economic doctrine and



1.1 Distribution by region of the call centre sector, Portugal

ideology has contributed to the reshaping of European economies and societies, thereby facilitating the expansion of precarious, insecure and unprotected forms of employment. Broader neoliberal capitalist patterns of economic restructuring and labour deregulation are taken into account. Nonetheless, I do not assume these patterns *a priori* to be endowed with a totalising force and internal logic determining the nature and end-result of neoliberal transitions in specific national contexts, and I do not conflate the driving forces of the global life of neoliberal restructuring processes with the contingent and context-bound factors, historical specificity and moral relational structures of kin, class and generation, which mediate the condition, experience and politics of precarity in the Portuguese call centre sector. In this introduction I map the most relevant theoretical frameworks underpinning the analysis and main arguments developed in the following chapters. In the final two sections, I present an outline of the book and briefly elaborate on the main motivations and methodologies guiding the study upon which the book is based.

Neoliberal precarity as a historically and morally embedded reality

In recent decades, the growth and expansion of precarious, unregulated, insecure and unprotected forms of employment across capitalist societies, in Europe and beyond, have often been analysed as an integral dimension of ongoing neoliberal restructuring processes within the economy and society. Neoliberal precarity is theorised as the outcome of patterns of flexible accumulation and the demise of the Fordist–Keynesian economic and social compact (Harvey 1989, 2005). It is linked to the erosion of the 'wage-earning society' – a mode of social regulation, citizenship integration and belonging in the social body (Castel 2002) – and related to emergent valorisation processes and political collective subjects (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2005; Standing 2011, 2014). Two main bodies of work have significantly contributed to the academic and public diffusion of the precarity terminology: the works of Italian autonomist Marxists (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2000, 2005; Virno 1996; Lazzarato 1996), and those of the economist Guy Standing (2011, 2014).

For Italian autonomist Marxists, neoliberal precarity is both a product and a producer of more profound shifts in the nature of global capitalism, indexing the dislocation of hegemonic sources of value and the emergence of emancipatory and classed-based collective political subjects. The increased precarisation (casualisation) of employment relationships in capitalist societies is tied to a hegemonic shift from industrial labour to immaterial labour, defined as the 'labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity' (Lazzarato 1996: 132) – that is, labour that produces services, intangible goods. Immaterial labour is characterised by greater integration of information and communications technologies in the production process and affective labour (Hardt and Negri 2000: 292). The production of affective labour is not contained by the valorisation process at the level of production; it tends to extend beyond the walls of the workplace,

leading to the creation of communities and networks of human interaction and cooperation. That is: 'cooperation is completely immanent to the labouring activity itself … Immaterial labour thus seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 294). From this, it follows that immaterial labourers (such as the Portuguese precariat working in call centres) have at least an emancipatory potential, given that they are not dependent on capital in order to establish cooperation. Thus, it is argued that the present hegemony of immateriality allows for the 'becoming common of labour' (Hardt and Negri 2005: 115), meaning that, despite the differences in labour regimes, 'this becoming common' will tend 'to reduce the qualitative divisions within labour', which is 'the biopolitical condition of the multitude' (114).[7]

While autonomist Marxists emphasise the 'latent cooperative dimension' of immaterial forms of labour and the 'becoming common of labour', Guy Standing (2011, 2014) emphasises the heterogeneity and lack of collective political agency among the precariat. According to Standing, the precariat emerged primarily as a consequence of neoliberal public policies – particularly those that have increased labour market flexibility. The neoliberal rearrangement of the collective structures that sustain social life (the educational system, family life or the occupational system) has led to class fragmentation (Standing 2011: 7–8) and the emergence of a global precariat. The precariat is defined as a class in the making (not yet a class for itself) because it possesses class and status characteristics. These include, a lack of citizenship rights; a lack of occupational identity; a lack of social memory acquired through a craft as the basis for a narrative of identity in the past, present and future; and a 'truncated status' or a 'status discord', illustrated through the example of individuals with a high level of formal education having to engage in low-paid and non-prestigious jobs. The precariat also lacks the forms of labour security and protection derived from the dominant regime of industrial citizenship as it was implemented after the Second World War in Britain (Labourism) (Standing 2011: 10–11). Finally, the precariat have a pattern of social income different from that of all other social groups: they are much more dependent on money wages and less able to rely on community support, or State or private benefits. Standing also suggests that nowadays the process of precarisation is analogous to the process of proletarianisation in the nineteenth century. The implicit assumption is that if, in the past, capital wanted to normalise full proletarianisation, today it wants to normalise precarious and unstable labour for everyone. Therefore, 'to be precariatised is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle' (Standing 2011: 16).

The work of Italian autonomist Marxists and Guy Standing is representative of a broader tendency in mainstream approaches to neoliberal precarity. These approaches tend to privilege the abstract and totalising properties of capitalist dynamics as engines of social change, with the consequent overestimation of 'global' forces, to the detriment of 'local' and contingent configurations arising from historicised institutions and contingent factors shaping human agency.[8] Such theorisations of neoliberal precarity are underpinned by an overestimation

of the role played by material forces and structural powers in shaping neoliberal developments, often by abstracting and dissociating the former from context, historical specificity and moral relational structures of meaning and action, along with the lines of kin, class and generation.

In this book, I develop a historically and morally embedded enquiry into neoliberal transitions in Portuguese capitalism, by tracing its expression in a particular service labour regime, the call centre sector.[9] My emphasis on the need to pursue a historically and morally embedded enquiry into neoliberal capitalist transitions aims to underline the explanatory relevance of attending to how global capitalist dynamics intersect with national historical realities, shaping the condition and politics of labour precarity within particular service labour regimes.

In the following chapters, neoliberal precarity is explored through the examination of the particular trajectory and development of Portuguese flexible capitalism and how it shapes the condition, experience and politics of precarity in the contemporary call centre sector. I consider specific historical 'critical junctions' (Kalb and Tak 2005) in the recent history of Portuguese capitalist development, relevant because of their enduring influence in shaping the consolidation of flexible patterns of accumulation and emergent intra-generational life goals of upward class mobility towards middle-class distinction. This historical incursion into the recent history of Portugal serves the purpose of making a dual interrelated argument, first, to specify how in Portugal historical contingent processes, as well as global processes of neoliberalisation, facilitated the growth of precarious forms of employment, particularly temporary agency work – the primary recruiter of labour power for the call centre sector. I show how labour precarisation has been deployed by the State as an integral part of national projects of accumulation and development and the accommodation of global capitalist imperatives, even if embedded in distinct moral and ideological frameworks of legitimation. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, an ingrained State-led tradition of labour devaluation shaped the historically bounded context factors that facilitated the emergence and expansion of precarious labour regimes in the sector.

Second, I suggest that the specific shape of Portuguese flexible capitalism, together with the increasing precarity of employment and the deterioration of working conditions attached to the neoliberal turn in the 1980s, contributed to the intensification of a disjuncture in historically bounded generational expectations – to the breakdown and rupture of a relationally and morally embedded intra-generational-livelihood model of 'worthy living' (Naroztky and Besnier 2014). The working-class parental generations of today's precarious call centre workers, enabled by State-led projects of economic freedom, modernity and progress, projected upon their sons and daughters the hopes and aspirations towards middle-class distinction, grounded on the achievement of higher-educational credentials and the pursuit of protected, stable and socially valued white-collar employment. For contemporary call centre workers, integration into a disqualified and socially devalued labour sector, typified and publicly sanctioned as the main icon of precarity, constitutes a 'falling from grace', a realisation of the unfulfilled social expectations of middle-class distinction, which was laid upon them

by the State, the nation and their parental generation. As I show in this book, in the Portuguese setting, with particular incidence from the mid-2000s onwards, and in the austerity conjuncture (2011–14), the relational dimension of unfulfilled expectations across generations actively shaped the ambivalent character of the political status of the precarity terminology, torn between emancipatory possibilities and the threat of moral stigma tied to downward social mobility and social devaluation.

The analysis of precarity that I develop throughout draws inspiration from a rich, growing anthropological literature that has set out to 'provincialize universalizing claims about precarity by pointing to how the contemporary sensorium is culturally and historically mediated – grounded in local vernaculars of labor, family, society, wealth, desire, and loss' (Muehlebach 2013: 298). Anthropological approaches to precarity and precarisation processes productively address the tensions and ambivalences arising from the apparent disjuncture between precarity as a structural and ontological feature of the human condition (Butler 2004) and its historically and contextually bounded characteristics (Han 2018). In doing so, anthropological studies have expanded the theorisation of precarity as a multidimensional phenomenon embedded in particular histories, national trajectories and contingent structures of relationality. Anthropologists have examined the phenomenon of precarity as an affective and embodied condition entrenched in neoliberal State transitions of the economy and public policy (Molé 2011) and as a social and existential condition shaped by disconnection and human detachment, emerging from the cumulative impact of multiple precarities (of work, life, relations and sociality), which in post-industrial Japan is prominently represented by the phenomenon of youngsters who choose to withdraw from social life (Allison 2013). More recently, Millar (2018) explores precarious livelihoods as a 'form of living' grounded on the material pursuit of livelihood resources and as a form of meaning and future-making tied to particular projects and pursuits of the 'good life'. This book contributes to expanding anthropological examinations of precarity by focusing on neoliberal precarity as a historically and morally embedded reality, rendered workable by State-led accumulation and ideologies of development, mediated by contingent, relational structures of feeling, and enacted in a specific service labour regime.

Call centre labour as a regime of disciplined agency

The main activity of any call centre is to receive and/or make phone calls. Call centres are distinguished according to management terminology between those that are 'inbound' (calls initiated by the client) and those that are 'outbound' (calls initiated by the operator). They pervade almost all areas of human activity, from telecommunications, banking, insurance and utilities, to call centres specifically designed for spiritual counselling. Since the mid-1990s, call centres have provided the most dynamic area of growth in white-collar employment internationally (Taylor and Bain 1999). According to Taylor and Bain (1999), call centre work is seen as containing elements that represent a further evolution in the deployment

of Taylorist methods for the organisation of work with the aid of information and communication technologies (ICT). Indeed, the expansion of the call centre environment was made possible with the integration of telephone and computer technologies and put into effect with the creation of one specific technical device, the automatic call distributor (ACD). This device allows the distribution of calls to a specific group of people (terminals), itself part of a large technology that integrates interactions between a telephone and a computer, called 'computer telephony integration' (CTI).

The early literature on call centres was mainly disseminated in the form of research articles, especially among UK-based journals such as *Work and Occupations* and *Work, Employment and Society*. This literature was influenced by *labour process theory* (e.g. Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain and Taylor 2000; Bain *et al.* 2002): a methodological and analytical approach to the nature of labour deskilling and proletarianisation under capitalism inspired by Harry Braverman's reassessment of Marx's theory of the capitalist labour process. In his book *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974), Braverman examines the relationship between management systems of control and capitalism's continuing need to overcome the 'indeterminacy of labour power'. The 'indeterminacy of labour power' encompasses a distinctive feature of the capitalist labour process. Under capitalism, workers sell not themselves or their labour in the market, but rather their labour power, their *capacity to labour*, which is infinite in its potential but limited by the 'subjective state of the worker' (Braverman 1974: 39). According to Braverman, Taylor's theory of scientific management, applied first in manufacturing production processes and later in service industries to tackle the indeterminacy of labour, established a new frontier of capitalist control, alienating workers from product, knowledge and control over the process of work (Taylor 1911).

However, as noted by Ellis and Taylor (2006), the call centre was, for a long time, treated as a 'disembodied entity' – that is, uncritically abstracted from the historical, local, economic and political contexts in which it operates – and dissociated from the moral constitution of the subjectivity and consciousness of workers. More recent sociological and anthropological monographs on call centre work have started to correct this tendency. These works pay attention to the mutual constitution of global systemic capitalist patterns and contextual specificity, while mobilising call centre labour to investigate various themes, including: gendered patterns of social and physical mobility (Basi 2009; Patel 2010); the constitutive relationship between racialised, colonial histories and transnational service work (Mirchandani 2012), and deindustrialisation processes and the reshaping of working-class identities and lifestyles (Lloyd 2013). Much of this work is centred in English-speaking countries.

A large number of studies on call centre labour, in distinct countries and economic sectors, report a fundamental contradiction attached to this kind of work. This fundamental contradiction, present to different degrees in all forms of service labour, refers to the conflicting requirements of singularisation (the focus on the individual needs of the client) and standardisation (bureaucratised speech acts, procedures and quantitative targets) demanded of operators in the course of

work. In call centres, under conditions of intense, technologically mediated forms of surveillance, operators are required to fulfil quantitative targets of work performance (e.g. number of calls answered per hour, maximum average time per call etc.) while also focusing on the qualitative dimension of their interactions with clients over the phone, including following conversation scripts and 'showing a smile in one's voice'. In the course of work, operators are subjected to tensions and ambivalences, resulting from having to build a caring relationship with the client while also being alert to the existence of average call-time limitations.

The dominant tendency in the call centre literature is to consider that the quantitative and qualitative contradictory work-output requirements, together with advanced technologies of control and surveillance, lead to the disembedding, disembodiment, depersonalisation and de-subjectification of human linguistic capabilities (e.g. Lloyd 2013; Aneesh 2015; Brophy 2017; Woodcock 2017). The increased discipline, control, governability and predictability in the uses of language capabilities within call centre work are connected with capitalism's growing dependency for valorisation purposes on workers' communicative capabilities (Brophy 2017). Accordingly, value-extraction in the call centre labour process is governed by the standardisation and measurability of operators' linguistic interactive engagements over the phone. The work emerges as a typical example of 'top-down talk': a form of linguistic interaction within institutional and organisational settings in which the use of language is subject to prescriptions of standardisation and regulation that tend to erase the agentive linguistic capabilities of the participants (Cameron 2008; see also Cameron 2000).

From the outset of my fieldwork, I became aware of the extent to which the quality–quantity conundrum shaped the work process and the workers' performance. Invasive, technologically mediated devices of control, discipline and surveillance are prominent in the workplace environment. Operators have to abide by quantitative work targets, and they also have to follow qualitative prescriptions of rapport and empathy-building with clients. Team-leaders routinely perform evaluations of the operators' calls, which implies listening to their calls live or to any of the many calls recorded and stored in the computer database. However, while I was shadowing operators' telephone interactions with clients, one pattern became ever more apparent: their successful client engagements were often not the result of the applications of the rules and procedures established by the company but rather stemmed from operators' strategies of improvisation, creativity and imagination. Answering an unforeseen client query, fulfilling an unpredictable request, catering to the emotional state of an angry client or understanding a client's description of a technical malfunction: all required that operators be able to anticipate, imagine, conceptualise and evaluate.

The paradox to which I was consistently exposed was that despite the invasive and systematic apparatus of control and surveillance, what ensured that operators could overcome the quality–quantity conundrum and deal effectively with the object of their work (the clients) was precisely what seemed to be expropriated from operators and eroded: their agency. The apparent robotisation of operators, the weakening of their subjectivity and the alienation of their individuality

through computerised means of surveillance and control seemed to be concealing and obscuring the role played by human agency, expressed through the medium of language, in the service of the pursuit of profit.[10]

In this book, I suggest that the call centre labour process represents an advanced system of labour exploitation – not only because of the technologically aided devices of control and forms of scripted Taylorism aimed at directing, measuring, quantifying and standardising workers' linguistic interventions. I theorise that the call centre labour process is a regime of disciplined agency, in which the maintenance of the tension between quantitative and qualitative work-output targets enables the incorporation within the valorisation process of operators' moral, relational and socially embedded agentive linguistic capacities of creative improvisation, decision-making, problem-solving and ethical evaluation.

Throughout, I disclose the institutionalisation of this regime of disciplined agency by highlighting how structural dynamics of the call centre labour process are articulated with specificities of Portuguese neoliberal precarity. The analysis I develop is one in which capitalist value extraction and the commodification of the labouring subject are not dissociated from historically, contextually and morally bound dispositions, connections and relations. That is, the alienable dimensions of labour power are not dissociated from their inalienable historically and morally contingent features.[11]

Mirchandani (2012) suggests that call centre operators in the transnational Indian call centre sector perform a large quantity of invisible labour, designated as 'authenticity work'. This involves the adoption of behaviours and modes of performance with the ultimate aim of enacting a working self over the phone that simultaneously transmits a feeling of familiarity and distance to customers in the UK or the USA. Workers have to act as 'authentic clones'; their performance over the phone has to express the traditionally embedded mode of servitude associated with a legitimate colonial subject, but they also need to convey a sense of professionalism and entrepreneurialism connected with a flexible labour force. Call centre 'phone clones' have to be familiar and distant at the same time. Mirchandani's notion of authenticity work implicitly stresses the role played by operators' agentive capabilities in the reconciliation of contradictory cultural logics and hierarchical historical legacies pervading the interactions between operators and clients.

My theorisation of the call centre labour process as a regime of disciplined agency follows on from Mirchandani's (2012) insightful analysis, with an emphasis on the commodification of human creativity, improvisation capacities and agentive skills. The stress I place on the neglected role of human creativity and linguistic agency in the call centre labour process is not meant to suggest that this form of work is characterised by a diminished degree of exploitation where workers are endowed with a greater sense of autonomy and discretion over the product, process and knowledge of the work. Instead, my aim is the opposite. I suggest that call centres present an advanced system of labour exploitation that is able to appropriate a particularly raw form of human labour power: the relational and moral properties of human agency, expressed through the unique human quality of language.

The ways in which the system of disciplined agency is able to intensify the value market exchange of such inherent human qualities is indirectly proportional to the moral devaluation of labourers in terms of their sense of dignity and worth. The call centre apparatus of value extraction appropriates from workers precisely the dimensions of their livelihoods, within and beyond the workplace, of which they feel dispossessed: their capacity and entitlement to be socially recognised as autonomous, independent, valued and worthy agents, in line with the aspirations and expectations nurtured by themselves, their parents and the nation.

Overview of chapters

The analysis laid out in this book departs from a historical examination of the way the neoliberal economic restructuring of Portuguese capitalism shaped the emergence of the call centre sector. I progress through the ascendancy of call centres as icons of precarity in contemporary Portugal, and the specific features of the call centre labour process that configure a new form of commodification of the labouring subject. Finally, I engage in a discussion of the particular subjectivities and forms of moral dispossession attached to the value-extraction system of 'disciplined agency' deployed in call centre labour, and how they are facilitated by relationally and morally embedded structures of kin, generation and class.

Chapter 2 underlines the historical continuities and transitions of the Portuguese setting that have shaped the emergence of the call centre sector, taking into account broader shifts and tendencies in global capitalism. I situate the trajectories of my interviewees' parents in this historical landscape by addressing how the social aspirations of upward class mobility that they have projected on their children were embedded in national projects of freedom, modernity and economic progress. The aim of the chapter is twofold. First, it shows how the affinity between precarious labour and call centre employment in Portugal is as much an outgrowth of recent Portuguese economic history as it is the result of global processes of neoliberalisation. Second, it emphasises how the increasing precariousness of employment and deterioration of working conditions attached to the neoliberal turn in the 1980s have made it increasingly difficult for contemporary call centre workers to achieve the social expectations of middle-class distinction, based on educational achievement and stable employment, that were placed on them by the State, the nation and their parental generation. This chapter unravels how particular, historically bounded, intra-generational life goals of class mobility become embedded in broader transitions within economic and labour regimes.

Chapter 3 examines further the theme of unfulfilled generational expectations for those working in call centres by exploring how the work came to assume the iconic role of the main symbol of precarity in Portugal. A brief discussion is offered on the emergence of the precarity terminology, and the associated category of the precariat, in the context of European social movements of struggle and activism. This provides the reader with a general view of the phenomenon of precarious work and the particular form of its development in Portugal. In the remainder of the chapter I focus on the contested politics and morality of the call centre sector.

In contrast to perspectives that have emphasised either the novel or the structural character of the condition of precarity, I stress that in Portugal the moral, political and ideological discourses in which the categories of precarity, precarious labour and the precariat are embedded can be a source of both emancipation and stigma.

In Chapters 4 to 6 I concentrate on examining how the specific shape of Portuguese flexible capitalism, the disjuncture in historically bounded generational expectations (addressed in Chapter 2), and the tensions attached to the cultural and social meanings of precarity are expressed in the call centre labour process. I progressively unravel the institutionalisation of a system of labour exploitation that I designate as a regime of disciplined agency. Chapter 4 explores how call centres present their hiring, recruitment, training and job allocation practices to job applicants. The set of organisational processes through which young recruits 'learn to be a call centre operator' are grounded on specific procedures that establish particular modes of conduct and behaviour that organise and discipline subjectivities in the early stages of employee training. The hiring, recruitment, training and job allocation processes, built upon the moral-laden nationally institutionalised employment conditions of uncertainty and powerlessness become fundamental mechanisms through which workers' selves and skills are linguistically and practically constructed as containers of subordination and agency.

In Chapter 5 I consider the manufacture of client sovereignty within call centres, how it shapes the nature of the operator–client relationship and how it contributes to the overall specificity of call centre labour as a regime of disciplined agency. The client, as a figure of authority, shapes the way in which labour as service is mobilised within the sector. Intending to promote the everyday elaboration of client sovereignty, firms engage in extensive marketing operations and ritualised collective gatherings that serve to manufacture what I call the 'transcendent client'. On the shop floor, the morally embedded nature of operator–client interactions mediates the conditions in and against which the ideology of the transcendent client comes to be accommodated or challenged by operators. One particular form of contestation that takes place on the shop floor involves transforming the 'transcendent client' into the 'stupid client', through gossip, humour and rumours.

In Chapter 6 I examine how discipline, quantification and surveillance are enacted within the labour process in order to clarify the main distinguishable characteristic of the nature of value-creation within call centres. The computer-based mechanisms used in the call centre sector for measuring labour output and the informal and formal strategies of labour surveillance contain one central paradox that is indispensable for profit maintenance: workers have to execute their work according to quantitative and qualitative targets of productivity. By following these two prescribed models of work, management attains two goals: making workers accountable for their work performance, and yet inciting them to intervene agentially in the labour process through linguistic engagement. In other words, call centres present the most advanced system for the exploitation of a rarefied form of human labour: linguistic engagement or human communicative competence. The call centre labour process emerges as a regime of disciplined agency, in which the maintenance of the tension between quantitative

and qualitative work outputs targets enables the incorporation within the valorisation process of operators' morally and socially embedded agentive linguistic capacities of decision-making, problem-solving and ethical evaluation.

In Chapter 7 I concentrate mainly on workers' reports about their sense of dispossession, shame and stigma. The chapter is based on semi-biographical interviews with forty call centre workers. I focus on three main aspects: how the uncertainty and vulnerability attached to precarious labour is experienced as dispossession and how this is connected with the experience of downward mobility ('falling from grace'); social isolation in personal relationships and feelings of shame towards the family; and the interpretation of the stigma attached in Portuguese society to call centre operators. I argue that these have an important impact on how agents constitute their subjectivity and consciousness. Workers' accounts of their circumstances reveal a considerable degree of insight into what exactly it is about the workplace and the conditions of work that produces such a profound sense of disenchantment.

Fieldwork, methods and positionality (and a clarification about motivation)

This book is based on fieldwork conducted between August 2007 and January 2009 in a call centre belonging to a private-sector telecommunications company in Lisbon. The company, which I will call EVA, was created in 1994 and is a subholding company for the telecommunications, media and software systems integration areas of a multi-industry company. The call centre in which I conducted fieldwork provides technical support for the corporate segment of clients. Around forty-five operators and three team leaders are contracted through an agency for temporary work, and the coordinators are hired directly through EVA. In addition to the interviews with operators, the fieldwork involved semi-structured interviews with members of trade unions, employers' associations and anti-precarity social movements as well as historical analysis of secondary material and media analysis. The original empirical material upon which this book is grounded was further expanded by research undertaken in Portugal during 2015 and 2016 in the midst of the ongoing effects of the austerity adjustment program sponsored by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and implemented between 2011 and 2014.[12] Doing so enabled me to update the ongoing relevance of my original empirical findings and analytical arguments, particularly regarding the continuing role of call centre work as the main symbol of precarity through shifting political-economic conjunctures (i.e. during the inception of the 2008 financial crisis and the austerity conjuncture).[13]

The specificities of the site shaped my fieldwork. I refer to them because they are instructive with regard to spatiality, trust and social relations in call centres; they are closed workspaces that tend to be 'out of sight'. In most circumstances, the buildings where the call centres operate are not known to the public (neither is access permitted), and operators are not allowed to reveal their location to clients. Security guards monitor and control who enters. Beside the vigilance exerted over

labour through the technical infrastructure of the call centre, its particular geography tends to homogenise movements and condition the relations established among the people inside. If someone is not involved in routine operations, therefore, they are noted, talked about and observed. In short: no-one is invisible inside a call centre (except the clients). And such was also the case with me, although I had some illusions before beginning fieldwork that this would not happen.

My first strategy for getting into a call centre was to contact the temping agencies that recruit such staff. I asked if I could work as a call centre operator for one year for the sole purposes of my research. More than twenty agencies answered that this was not possible given the strict confidentiality of clients' data, as well as their business practices. Furthermore, they all emphasised that the call centre buildings belong not to them but to the user firm (i.e. the company contracting the services of the temping agency), and that I should therefore contact the user firms directly. I then started to do so, first by email, then by letter and finally by phone.

I had an affirmative answer from a private telecommunications company that had been one of my primary 'targets'. They had several technical support units and, for reasons that I explain further below, I was particularly interested in conducting fieldwork in a technical, rather than a commercial, call centre. After receiving this company's response I had an initial meeting with the area coordinator where I explained the main purposes of the research. I was asked about the methods I was going to use, with whom I would need to talk and for how long. A week later I was informed by email that a letter from my university was needed in order to verify the 'truthfulness' of my intentions. I was finally authorised to begin research after this letter arrived, and I started by following a group of recruits.

I had to negotiate and justify my presence constantly while inside, both to management and to workers. The management demanded that I ask their permission to listen to calls between operators and clients and to attend team meetings, training sessions and recruitment interviews. Listening to calls was fully permitted, but I was not allowed to record them. My presence in team meetings, training sessions and interviews was conditionally permitted; that is, I had to ask every time there was some specific situation where I thought I should be present. I had to assure workers that I was not interested in getting a position inside the company, and that my research had not been commissioned by the company with the intent of studying the workers (these were all aspects I was directly asked about).

After around five months one of the operators came to me and told me in private: 'I owe you one', to which I replied 'Why do you say that?'. He said, 'You know, after giving you the interview I began thinking about my life and all the years I have wasted inside this call centre … if it wasn't for you that would not have happened. This year I am going to try entering university again. If it wasn't for you …'. Before this comment, I already had the intuition that neutrality was something I was never going to achieve. After it, I realised it was something I did not *want* to achieve. Many times my presence served to mitigate the demands made of operators by team-leaders, and even the tone of voice used by managers when talking to them. I was completely aware of that, and I used the small parcel of

symbolic capital I had to protect the operators whenever I could, but without putting their position at risk.

I spent eight hours a day inside the call centre, five days a week, on morning, afternoon or evening shifts. I followed operators, team-leaders, the team coordinator and the area coordinator. I could not answer or make phone calls, but I could help with small tasks: taking copies, helping operators while they were on calls, getting them coffee or water, taking minutes from the team-meetings, helping with the preparation of training sessions, receiving and storing equipment sent by clients. Also, and most importantly, I was someone to whom operators and team-leaders could talk in the small intervals between one call and the next while I was following their work, as well as while they were smoking, on a break or having their meals. With time I began to be invited to 'LAN parties',[14] team dinners and other activities outside the workplace, and after a while operators and team-leaders began to make comments such as 'When is Patricia going to answer a phone call? She has to answer a phone call!'. It is common in call centres for recruits to be subjected to a kind of rite of passage. A senior operator is supposed to call the line of a 'freshman' and pretend to be an irate client. After this, the recruit becomes 'one of the guys'. No matter how much I was able to gain the trust from operators and team-leaders I was never 'one of the guys'. Not only because I was not a 'guy', but also because I never answered that or any other phone call.

On the part of management, however, the attitude towards me changed over time in the opposite direction. During the period I was conducting my fieldwork there happened to be an unusually large flow of news from the media drawing attention to call centres where unacceptable practices of labour exploitation were taking place, where workers had to follow a military regime for the sake of the company's profit. It was also noted that user firms were deploying illicit strategies in order to avoid obeying laws relating to temporary labour forces. Taking this into account, in addition to my good relations with the operators and team-leaders, managers began to apply a strategy of indifference towards me, acting as if I were not present, not greeting me and sometimes asking me to leave meeting rooms. By means of several other strategies they also covertly attempted to persuade operators and team-leaders that maybe my presence was not helpful. However, every attempt at this was unsuccessful, and that is the reason why I was not forced to finish my fieldwork earlier than planned.

More importantly, what these episodes reveal is the degree of suspicion among the workforce, particularly among casual and permanent workers – i.e. between operators, team-leaders and management. The dependent/vulnerable employment conditions of all those involved in the work makes trust very hard to achieve. This is common in other call centres I came to know during my personal trajectory before beginning my doctoral research in 2006.

In 2000, I started working part-time in a call centre in Lisbon as an operator on a commercial helpline run by a telecommunications company. Initially, my shift was from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., but while working at the call centre I changed to other shifts: from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. and also from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. After five years working as an operator I was promoted to team-leader, and in 2006 I quit my job to start

my Ph.D. studies in London. When I started working at the call centre my goal was not to conduct any research on the call centre industry: it was merely a job and a way of earning a salary. In 2000, the industry was growing tremendously in Portugal, following what was happening in other countries in Europe, the USA and India. From June 2003 onwards I decided to pursue an informal research project about emotional labour, control and surveillance in the call centre labour process. Such research was supported by the adoption of a previous theoretical and conceptual framework, and later it assumed a more formal shape that became the basis of my Ph.D. proposal. Until September 2006 I continued to collect empirical data about the day-to-day organisation of work in the call centre.

As the project became more clearly formulated, it was still marked by a preoccupation (perhaps familiar to all anthropologists, to a greater or lesser extent) about my simultaneous distance from and closeness to the site of my fieldwork. Having opted to conduct anthropological research in a familiar setting, I knew that awareness of this issue would have to be taken into account. However, at the same time, I could not avoid thinking that I had been in an 'insider position' that might benefit and enrich, from the standpoint of participant-observation, the study of the topics I have delineated. It gave me a social memory that was an important guide for the fieldwork later on. I emphasise social, because it is based on an embodied knowledge that, though autobiographical, is simultaneously interpersonal, and as such finds similarities and contrasts with the experience of 'others' (Okely 1992: 8).

I never told my informants that I had previously worked in a call centre; I was afraid that they would reply 'Well, if you have worked for so many years in a call centre why do you need us?'. Today I am still not sure if this omission was the right decision or not. Nevertheless, I am certain that my omissions are not as important as the ones deployed by the research participants during fieldwork – omissions that I could easily detect given my previous full participation in what was first my work-field and later my fieldwork site. Having said this, it could be deduced that the main motivation for this book had been my previous working experience in a call centre. And this is partly true, but only partly. In his posthumous book, *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*, Pierre Bourdieu (2007) writes an epigraph glossing the sentence Magritte uses in one of his paintings: 'This is not an autobiography'. I would say the same regarding this book, but I would also add that 'to understand is first to understand the field with which and against which one has been formed' (Bourdieu 2007: 4). The search for understanding was my main motivation.

Notes

1 The use of the term 'outsourcing' throughout this book does not involve the externalisation of business services to other countries but only to external providers within the same country.

2 In 2019 the more up-to-date quantitative data of the call centre sector in Portugal are those focusing on the evolution of the sector in 2016, 2017 and 2018 (APCC 2019, 2018).

3 See https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/43c603_77827bf29ad1449c893a6eb3108374c0.pdf (accessed January 2020).
4 See www.callcentermagazine.net/contact-centers/emprego-em-centros-de-contacto-em-portugal-tem-crescido-acima-da-media-europeia/ (accessed January 2020).
5 See www.dn.pt/pais/interior/call-centers-o-faroeste-do-atendimento-vai-enfim-ter-lei-10682403.html (accessed January 2020).
6 These developments are further detailed in Chapter 3.
7 This brief summary on immaterial labour as a register of neoliberal precarity represents a recent development by authors coming from an Italian workerist and autonomist tradition. It is not my aim to suggest that they are representative of the Marxist-based workerist tradition that emerged in Italy in the 1960s. Indeed, workerism – a literal translation of *operaismo* – emerged at a particular 'critical junction' (see Kalb and Tak 2005) of Italian industrialisation following the post-Second World War reconstruction and ensuing 'economic miracle'. One specific aspect distinguishing current post-autonomist theorisations of changes in labour and the labour movement from those that were initially formulated by authors such as Mario Tronti and Romano Alquati resides precisely in how these authors paid attention to the raw and crude empirical materials arising from workers' experiences and viewpoints concerning the work dynamics within industrial workplaces. The latter became known as *co-ricerca* (workers' enquiry), a methodology focused on unravelling workers' understandings and behaviours concerning class struggles at the point of production with the explicit goal of using it for projects of political and social transformation; Wright (2002) provides an interesting historical and contextual analysis of the emergence and development of the workers' enquiry methodology in Italian *operaismo*. There have been a modest number of attempts to replicate, or draw inspiration from, the workers' enquiry methodology in the call centre sector, both from activist collectives (Kolinko 2002) and in academia (Woodcock 2017; Brophy 2017).
8 Some of the critiques of the precarity terminology and the concept of the precariat include Federici (2008), Munck (2013), Breman (2013) and Palmer (2014).
9 The anthropological concept of embeddedness draws inspiration from the work of Karl Polanyi, an author who had a decisive role in the history of economic anthropology (Hann and Hart 2011). Polanyi (2001 [1944]) deploys the notion of embeddedness to articulate a critique of market dominance and utilitarian reason. His historicisation of the rise of the market economy in nineteenth-century England shows that the emergence of the market society was accomplished through the disembeddedness of economic relationships from social, cultural and political spheres not strictly economic (e.g. kinship, customs, values, traditions, institutions, religion; see Polanyi (1968)). The broader insight underpinning the notion of embeddedness – that economies are embedded in history, cultural idioms and moral relational structures of meaning and action (such as kin, class, gender or generation) – has retained a profound influence in critical anthropological substantivist approaches to the economy and economic restructuring processes.
10 Here I am drawing on Michael Burawoy's analytical premise of 'obscuring and securing surplus value' (1979; see also 1978), as the distinctive feature of the dilemma of capitalist control in the labour process. Burawoy examined what he considered to be the main shortcomings of Braverman's (and Marx's) account of the nature of control in the capitalist labour process. He disputed Braverman's focus on Taylor's separation of conception and execution as the fundamental structure of capitalist control, stressing instead that the essential feature of the capitalist labour process is 'obscuring and securing surplus

value': the process by which capital conceals the existence of a surplus, while also investing in maintaining the necessary ideological and regulatory conditions to secure the production of a surplus. Burawoy insisted that the process by which capitalists engage in 'obscuring and securing of surplus value' (Burawoy 1979) cannot be accessed by focusing only on the side of the object (i.e. capital), as did Braverman, but requires addressing the subjective state of the worker, which includes examining the ideological, political and economic dimensions of the work process. Analysing how labour power is translated into actual labour requires, therefore, taking into account the objective and subjective factors that structure the conditions through which capitalist control is operationalised.

11 In a recent examination of the usefulness of the concept of labour for anthropological research, Narotzky (2018) highlights that 'even in a context dominated by capitalist relations, human labour is never fully disembedded. In fact, following commodity chains, we can observe that the alienable aspect of labour, what makes it exploitable in a particular way, always depends on its inalienable ties to the social environment' (5). This perspective destabilises hasty separations between the concrete and abstract dimensions of labour, the incommensurable and commensurable dimensions of value, stressing instead their variable and uneven historically contingent mutual constitution. Narotzky's incisive remark resonates with earlier sociological and anthropological work, focused on capitalist manufacturing and service labour processes, which has sought to critique and problematise the ahistorical, deterministic and totalising properties of Braverman's theorisation of the capitalist labour process. Specifically, since Michael Burawoy's critique, an important body of ethnographically based monographs have detailed how capital's logic of control and value extraction is articulated with historical and relational configurations of kinship, gender, sexuality and class, both on the assembly line and in the service workplace (see, for instance, Ong 1987; Freeman 2000; Salzinger 2003; Sherman 2007). In different ways, these works dispute the premise that Taylorist methods of labour control involve the complete removal of workers' agency and decision-making capabilities, and challenge the premise that Taylorism in practice involves a monopoly of all knowledge necessary to the successful conduct of the labour process and value production. That is, they show that the Taylorist ideological aim of treating human beings as machines is not only a limitation to valorisation purposes; it is also a historical and empirical impossibility.

12 This research was conducted in the context of the ERC-funded project 'Grassroots Economies: Meaning, Project and Practice in the Pursuit of Livelihood', based at the University of Barcelona,under the coordination of Susana Narotzky. See www.ub.edu/grassrootseconomics/ (accessed January 2020).

13 These are aspects explored particularly in Chapter 3 and in the conclusion.

14 A 'LAN party' is a gathering of persons with computers connected in order to establish a 'local area network' (LAN) in which computer games are played.