



Call Center: The Art of Virtual Control

Experimental Chair on the Production of Subjectivity

translated by Nate Holdren

Editor's Prefatory Note¹

The Experimental Chair on the Production of Subjectivity (*Cátedra Experimental sobre Producción de Subjetividad*) is a project developed by a group of militant students, researchers and lecturers in Rosario, Argentina. It is an attempt at producing a constituent form of university militancy that intends to move beyond the critique of the decomposition of the state-funded university and the emergent market university. In this sense, it would prefigure the non-state public university, an alternative model to that of the market.

It is meant as an experiment in constructing a space of continuous self-formation, with weekly meetings and organized in modules of one month each. The general decisions concerning the coordination of the project – global political and institutional relations, funding and publicizing the initiative – are taken by a *management assembly* (*asamblea de gestión*). The format of each module is the responsibility of the *autonomous elaboration teams*, who decide on its contents, bibliography, invited participants and the pedagogical engineering. On top of that, they are responsible for making texts available on the website and in the module readers. A *network of external collaborators* can participate virtually by becoming involved in elaborating the modules and being consulted by participants.

In 2006, the five modules chosen developed a research trajectory across the different mechanisms of the contemporary production of subjectivity: Labor, State, Market, Communication, University. And through them, inside them, against them, beyond them, the Chair looked into the processes of self-organization and the devices of self-alteration of life that produce alternative times and spaces in which we can decide how to live.

1 Information compiled, 'remixed' and translated from Spanish by Rodrigo Nunes from the Catedra Experimental [www.catedrasubjetividad.com.ar] and Apex [www.apex.sykes.com] websites and private communications with Franco Ingrassia.

From this process of constructing an experience of self-organization of university knowledge, we have moved towards a horizon of composition with other processes of self-organization developed by social movements that create new modes of subjective existence and production in community.

The following text is the result of a work developed in the Labor and Subjectivity module, in collaboration with workers/union delegates of Apex, a local call center. Apex has been installed in Rosario since December 2004. It also has offices in Cordoba (Argentina), South Africa, Colombia and Peru. In Rosario there are 800 people working for it. In the course of 2005, when it had 600 employees, it had a turnover of around 1,100 people, almost all of them between 20 and 30 years old, mostly university students with multiple language skills – qualifications that Apex exploits for free and remunerates very badly. The first union delegates at Apex Rosario were elected in March 2006; more than a third of the workers participated.

00. Co-research

We have recently started a long term project with some union delegates at a call center in our city, Rosario, Argentina. This is the first such project that we started in what has developed into an ongoing relationship. It all began with the invitation we made for them to speak to us about their experiences at work during the last meeting of our Module on labor. After a series of exchanges which began with the presentation of a text from the newsletter the union delegates were working on, we found ourselves at the beginning of a collaborative project of militant research. The idea was to make practices – political practices as much as research practices – into problematics, which is to say, to interrogate them in such a way that they produce multiple collisions that simultaneously inhabit multiple strategies for intervention.

01. ‘Next Year: What Next?’

The workers told us a rumor they had heard: ‘We don’t know if the business is going to be here next year, there’s a rumor that they’re going to leave Rosario.’ Without any prior planning, having barely begun the conversation, we found a problem with which to open a dialog: work in conditions of total instability. A question arose, one which is timely for work today: what tools can one use to counteract this permanent instability when not only one’s job is at risk, but the firm itself might close?

In addition to the short time that the workers stay on – ‘If you work a year in the call center then you’re a veteran’ – there is another even greater aspect of uncertainty: doubts over the permanence of the firm itself in Rosario. With the rumor of the firm closing and the chance that it might be true, the effects mount: instability, precarity and firings. The threat of the firm leaving Rosario is a way to pressure the workers. Those who demand better pay and conditions stand in opposition to the supposedly common good that the company represents, and the State which faces thousands of unemployed over a matter of months.

If the rumor has its basis in reality, then this is an example of the most extreme form of an operation typical of neoliberal capitalism: where it can't find the best conditions – that is to say, legal, labor, economic, and natural conditions – optimal for maximizing profit, it leaves for another location which it considers preferable. The fate of the workers at Apex-Rosario is a clear case.

02. A Matter of Speaking

If there is one thing a telephone operator does constantly, it's *speak*. One sits at a stripped-down computer, with a small microphone at one's mouth and a metal panel that separates you from your co-workers. The workers answer the repetitive calls that come in throughout the work day.

At the same time, in an apparent paradox, at every meeting we have, they point out the compulsive need to speak that the workers have. The conversations stretch from the moment we step through the door to the most casual of conversations on the street.

There are two ways to understand speech here. The first, where each word is emitted at high speed, mechanically, during the phone calls, is linked to the economic interests of the firm. They told us how many calls they made per minute, more than they considered the performance of the telephone operators. These are dynamic and uninterrupted flows of calls. Failure to achieve the stated objective will mean firing or immediate sanctions.

The second form of speech, on the other hand, is outside the logic of the firm. This is a subjective operation capable of constructing a terrain of encounter, affect, and common endeavors on the basis of the workplace instability, control, and fragmentation.

The objective operation is the same – speech – but the subjective effects are diametrically opposed: one provokes intense ill-feeling, general isolation, and links to a sinister logic of the firm; the other is a tool for collective construction. Inside Apex, silence is a synonym for health. Outside of this logic, to share with others means to confront the ill-feeling that results from the mechanization of vital processes like speech, communication, and intellect, through the constitution of bonds which are more or less precarious but no less vital.

A similar paradox occurs in the firm. If one does nothing more than talk, at the same time the rules inhibit communication between operators: 'We can't talk with our co-workers'; 'We're constantly listened to and filmed, even at breakfast we can't talk'. The workers respond to this obstacle to communication with the generation of collective spaces: 'In order to humanize work, we hold get-togethers, parties, film screenings. It's all an excuse to be able to talk among ourselves.'

03. Virtual Controls

The testimonies reveal the intensity of the everyday controls: 'We can't go to the

bathroom when we need to unless they say so'; 'We can't use the same computer, we also rotate to another one, and we can't take pictures'; 'Everything is run by the company, even our speech, the breaks, the handouts'; 'They always have to have us feeling like we're being monitored and feel in doubt. If you do 20 they praise you until you produce 23, and so on'; 'They tell the clients to complain to management in order to be able to punish us or accuse us of being inefficient.'

Surveillance is permanent at Apex. The management of control is not only by negation: 'The employee should not ignore the company's metric'; 'No one should participate in any political party that interferes with the functioning of the company'; 'No gum chewing, eating, smoking, drinking, etc'. There are also 'Motivation Actions':

Top Quality Action: Cinema tickets

Top Monitoring Score: Instant entry

Best agent in each team: Gift certificate at Alto Rosario

Good performance recognition (to be raffled among the Agents with Perfect Attendance and no excess breaks): dinner

Performance recognition (for the Best Team of the Month): Gift²

Based on the workers stories we see a school-like quality to the workplace: the type of treatment of the operators, the discursivity, the graphic, etc. There seems to be an air of study: grades, groups, coordinators.

The technologies allow control of a virtual type, which is omnipresent and felt on the body of the operator. Its effectiveness is rooted fully in its primarily silent character. Through the microphones and cameras the workers feel the weight of the demands. Errors result in punishment or firing. Thus methods of control are established by the 'Basic Rules and Ethical Conditions' of the firm:

The dependents of Apex will be audited and monitored as management finds necessary. Apex and its clients will record conversations. Employers will require that all dependents be supervised during the execution of their tasks.

No process of control and management can be efficient without adequate 'Virtual Observation Posts' understood as strategic places from where the regular march of work can be surveilled. This climate of pressure in multiple directions generates a generalized distrust without clear distinctions between workers and hierarchic sectors: 'Anyone can report on you: a co-worker, a supervisor, the client. They misrepresent you as the friend of an enemy. In sum, it's stressful.' This is a structural management that promotes self-control and reciprocal surveillance between co-workers under the name of a competitive co-operativism which is more belligerent than a matter of solidarity, and which causes greater individualism. When a future punishment can depend on a co-worker or the evaluation of a client, the levels of (self-)control become extreme. The grave subjective consequences do not wait in this climate.

2 From the internal manual of Apex.

04. Machinic Subjectivity

During our meetings an idea was repeated by the workers: ‘It’s a job which annuls subjectivity. You can’t put any of yourself into it.’ The difficulty of this testimony makes us reflect on two complementary dimensions of this regime of work: rather than not putting anything into the work, one puts in intellectual, communicative, and affective capacities – which is a lot to put into one’s job – which are appropriated and used in accomplishing the work and carrying out the economic interests of the firm. This does not mean, of course, that subjectivity is annulled, but rather that a specific subjectivity is produced. To the degree that Apex obliges one to behave like a machine, with submission to a strict metric, what is created is what we call a machinic subjectivity: a subjectivity molded by the imposition of exasperating times and surveillance and workload.

This is a subjective production proper to present labor conditions: capital demands excellence in products and constant attention to variable demand; and demands that the workers respond in the best way possible, constantly adapting their mental practice to the mentality of constantly actualized capital.

05. Paradoxical Micro-Resistances

Persistences

In opposition to the logic of the flow and rotation of persons, the delegates pose a logic of persistence. They opt for a persistent picket in the firm for two years, a persistence opposed to a place where everything occurs and transforms rapidly. The delegates, by decelerating the flows of the workplace, create points of conflict. This suggests that politics is possible where the time which is inhabited differs from the velocity imposed by capital (in this case, finance capital). All politics, then, presupposes and requires a dromology, a thought of speed.

Exodus

For Apex, instability, in all of its dimensions, is a fundamental in the design of its strategies of exploitation. But we can also make another interpretation of this instability, as no longer a threat on the part of the boss, but rather as the ground for a worker strategy. The mobility of the workers is still an important political element: it constitutes a mode of refusal of work. Is this a matter of deceleration? Not necessarily. Even less certain is that deceleration is solely a matter of inhabiting one place. If the classical – Fordist – syndicalism was configured on the basis of the stability of workers in their jobs, their jobs also constituted a point central to the political strategy.

Is it possible that today’s syndicalism not only undo its reliance on the stability of the workplace but also of the centrality of the workplace? Perhaps this is a matter of thinking both, detention and the force of displacement, as sites of politicization and not of affirming one in order to draw an immediate antagonism.

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