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Title: “*Work without future*”: neoliberal precarity, horizons of worthy living and generational dispossession in the Portuguese call center sector¹

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Introduction

Since the mid- 2000s, call center employment has gradually gained prominence in the public sphere in Portugal. While little was known about what the work actually entailed or how it was performed, there seemed to be little doubt regarding who was employed by these new factories of communication characteristic of late capitalist societies (Ferne and Metcalf 1998; Buscatto 2002). The media began characterizing the call center workforce as the '500-euro generation' ('geração 500 euros') – a publicly sanctioned label used to designate highly qualified young adults engaged in low-paid, precarious, unprotected and socially marginalized forms of service work. Snapshots of call center work began emerging regularly in the media, with the call center environment frequently portrayed as endless rows of tiny cubicles in which workers endured the drudgery of repetitive and monotonous telephone conversations with angry and abusive clients, all while subject to invasive technological surveillance, discipline, and control. In 2011, the '500/euro generation' was renamed the 'troubled generation' ('geração á rasca'), an expression coined during a massive collective mobilization called by a group of young activists protesting the intensification of neoliberal labor precarity resulting from austerity measures.² In their manifesto, activists called for participation from

¹ This chapter is based on various ethnographic fieldwork studies undertaken in Portugal. The first was conducted between August 2007 and January 2009 in a call center belonging to a private-sector telecommunications company in Lisbon. In addition to the interviews with operators, the fieldwork involved semi-structured interviews with members of trade unions, employers' associations, and anti-precariety social movements, as well as historical analysis of secondary material and media analysis. This material was further expanded by research undertaken during 2015 and 2016 in Setúbal, a post-industrial city located 50 km south of Portugal's capital city, experiencing the ongoing effects of austerity policies. The arguments developed in this chapter are based on Alves de Matos (2020).

² Following the 2008 financial crisis, Portugal agreed to a four-year structural adjustment program with the 'Troika' (i.e., the IMF, the ECB, and the EU) in May 2011, which resulted in a €78 billion bailout on condition of severe cuts to State

a coalition of the precarious population: the unemployed, "500-Eurists" and other underpaid workers, temporary workers, fraudulently self-employed workers, trainees, scholarship holders, and working students, among others. These groups aired collective grievances regarding their subjection to precarity, while identifying the irony in their position as 'the highest qualified generation in the history of our country.' Even today, for ordinary people, academics, politicians, and social activists, call center work remains a striking symbol of labor precarity, a condition particularly associated with the generational disenchantment in the neoliberal idea that 'each generation does better than its predecessor' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 17).

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which Portuguese call center operators' experience of precarity is informed by the breakdown of an *inter-generational reproductive moral economy of worthy living* central to the country's recent history. I demonstrate how the increasing precarity of employment and associated deterioration of working conditions, stemming from the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, have made it increasingly difficult for contemporary call center workers to form part of a middle class characterized by educational achievement and high employment, an expectation placed on them by the state, the nation, and their parents' generation. Educated young adults working in unprotected, undervalued, and poorly paid service jobs experience neoliberal precarity acutely through its immediate material and social effects: income insecurity, disenfranchisement, inability to achieve financial independence, and employment vulnerability. At the same time, however, they also experience this precarity as a form of moral betrayal, expropriation, and dispossession.

These young people are deprived of a horizon of social value, worth, entitlement, and status as a result of the ruthless and exploitative conditions of their employment contracts and work tasks. The effects of this generation's moral dispossession – expressed through resentment and shame – indicate how capitalist contradictions become integral to the intimate realm of aspirations, expectations, longings and desires. I argue for the relevance of attending to the various forms of moral dispossession experienced by distinctly positioned precarious labor forces, with the aim of formulating a critique of precarity across national contexts, without reducing this to the effects of structural, systemic, or global transformations in labor and employment conditions. Approaching neoliberal precarity through a critical comparative analysis in terms of both its material and moral dimensions broadens our understanding by illuminating the sometimes ambivalent and contradictory effects of the interplay among systemic capitalist shifts; national histories; and the contingent,

expenditure. Under a right-wing coalition Government, sharp tax increases, spending cuts, and reductions to welfare benefits shaped the program's implementation. Similarly to other countries on the indebted periphery of the Eurozone, the core Portuguese austerity policies centered on internal devaluation measures, mainly comprising wage repression, precarious employment, labor devaluation, and mass unemployment (Reis et al. 2013).

relational frameworks of meaning through which people interpret, evaluate, and define precarity and its causes.

Neoliberal precarity as a historically and morally embedded reality

The general characteristics of the call center sector can be seen in both popular and academic accounts of its nature, emergence, and expansion. The stereotypical image of a call center is one in which call center agents work in endless rows of white cubicles situated in unknown locations, to provide information and commercial services to Anglo-American markets. Academics often explain the rise of the call center sector in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries by pointing to various developments, including the neoliberal restructuring of labor and employment relationships; the integration of telephone and computer technologies; the global expansion of the service economy; and, finally, the rise of the rhetoric of *the customer as king* in management theory and practice (Basi 2009; Mirchandani 2012; Aneesh 2015; Woodcock 2017). Jamie Woodcock's 2017 account, based on six months of undercover research in the sales department of a British call center, is illustrative in this regard – he emphasizes the emergence of the Automated Call Distribution System (or ACD)³, the spread of neoliberal ideology, and the relentless capitalist pursuit of new realms of value extraction in addressing the reasons for the growth of call centers (Woodcock 2017, 11– 15).

Intentionally or otherwise, academic literature on call centers tends to portray the emergence of the sector as the result of global, external and disembodied economic and political processes (Ellis and Taylor 2006). Indeed, the role of global processes and structural dynamics in the ascension of the call center sector in various geographic and national contexts should not be underestimated. However, privileging the whole as an explanation for the part neglects how unique national histories, as well as various contextual social characteristics such as gender, class, and generation mediate the experience and meaning of the act of labor within call centers.

This section addresses both historical continuities and transitions that have shaped and facilitated the emergence of the call center sector in Portugal, taking into account broader shifts and tendencies in global capitalism. It focuses on three historical 'critical junctions' (Kalb and Tak 2005) instrumental in shaping both the creation of state-led development projects as well as inter-generational normative models of livelihood: the dictatorship of Estado Novo ('New State', 1933–

³ The ACD, also known as the automated call distribution system, consists of a device that answers and distributes incoming calls to a specific group of terminals or agents within an organization.

74), the Carnation Revolution (25 April 1974) and the accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986. Ultimately, the aim is to situate the trajectories and aspirations of the parents of today's precarious call center workers within this historical landscape. Doing so enables an account of their expectations of upward social mobility, stable employment, educational achievement, and middle-class status for their sons and daughters.

The following analysis highlights that, in the Portuguese context, the emergence and expansion of a precarious call center sector are not only outcomes of global processes of neoliberalization but are equally shaped by contingent historical processes embedded in specific ideological frameworks and national development projects. The precarity experienced by young adults working in call centers is an acute expression of both material and moral generational dispossession, one that is intricately linked to unfulfilled expectations of social mobility, particularly following the intensification of the neoliberal deterioration of working conditions beginning in the 1980s. The current state of the call center labor regime and unfulfilled middle-class aspirations of its workers illustrate how particular, historically grounded and contingent generational expectations become intertwined with broader transitions in economic and labor regimes.

Portugal's integration into the EU is shaped by its unique history, marked by over forty years under Fascist rule. The *Estado Novo* dictatorship, which governed from 1933 to 1974, promoted a protectionist and nationalist economic development strategy. This approach required suppression of labor channels of dissent through a corporatist structure, while simultaneously employing patterns of extreme labor exploitation. The regime thus assumed a paternalistic position towards labor in an attempt to temper the 'excesses' of a free-market economy.

During the period of economic expansion following the Second World War, the *Estado Novo* regime introduced developmental measures enabling the growth of 'pockets of Fordism' in specific economic sectors and geographic areas. These initiatives led to changes in the consumption habits and expectations of upward social mobility in certain segments of the population. In this sense, in the Portuguese context, the golden age of capitalism (Hobsbawm 1994) was significant, but conditioned by several internal vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities included the unsuccessful creation of the 'Portuguese common market'; the prolonged colonial war (1961-1974); an increase in wages and stable employment in coastal cities (partly motivated by high levels of emigration and military mobilization); the structural imbalance resulting from the stagnation of the agricultural sector; and the favoring of traditional exports strongly dependent on cheap labor (Rosas 1998). The corporatist development project enforced a national tradition of labor devaluation that laid the ground for the

emergence of the call center sector decades later, while also informing the aspirations of economic and social freedom of the parents of today's precarious call center workers.

On April 25th, 1974, a left-wing military coup dubbed the 'Carnation Revolution' put an end to the oldest military dictatorship in twentieth-century Western Europe. This foundational moment for contemporary Portuguese democracy enabled the legal codification of emancipatory rights and social provisions such as universal healthcare, public schooling, and more. However, more was needed to put an end to deeply ingrained patterns of social inequality and labor devaluation within the larger context of dynamics of accumulation, regulation and value extraction. Portugal's peripheral economic status and the imperative to align with the global ascendancy of neoliberalism have contributed to its uneven integration into global capitalism in numerous ways. On the one hand, the distance between the socialist-oriented goals of Portugal's revolutionary process and external neoliberal imperatives have intensified endemic economic fragilities. On the other hand, the adoption of free-market policies intended to stabilize these fragilities are characterized by the continuing devaluation of labor, and legitimized through a national project of economic and social freedom mirroring the aspirations of the majority of the population. In this context, freedom serves as the moral and ideological grammar with which contradictions of capitalist accumulation are made coherent and stabilized. It is also the terrain on which ordinary people articulate investment strategies in response to perceived threats and changes affecting inter-generational possibilities for dignified living.

Advances and setbacks shaped the economic and political legacy of the Carnation Revolution from the revolutionary biennium (1974-1975) to Portugal's joining of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986. During the first constitutional Government (1976–78), there was a consensus among political forces around the idea that the country should free itself from the 'economic protectionism' enforced by the dictatorship, particularly regarding the need for flexible labor relations able to accommodate the development of market mechanisms. This idea was materialized through a series of changes in labor law. In 1976–77, firms in both the public and private sectors gained the ability to suspend collective work agreements (*contratos colectivos de trabalhos*) in 'conditions of economic crisis' (*situação de crise económica*). In addition, conditions for short-term work contracts (*contrato de Trabalho a prazo*) were introduced in 1976, creating two classes of workers – permanent and short-term (*casual*) – each with conflicting interests. In response to the recessive effects of the oil crisis, Portugal accepted macroeconomic financial assistance from the IMF beginning the late 1970s and continuing throughout the 1980s. According to Confraria (1999, 281), 'in the end, labor markets

proved to be remarkably flexible, and workers accepted declines in real wages following the macroeconomic stabilization packages agreed with the IMF in the late 1970s and the 1980s'. These trends played a major role in mediating the mutual constitution of capitalist and generational transitions in Portugal, while contributing to a continuation of patterns of labor devaluation.

The changes in Portuguese society and the economy following the Carnation Revolution cannot be overstated. The revolution and its emancipatory achievements granted ordinary people the conditions and means (e.g., legal codification of workers' rights and the residual expansion of stable and protected forms of employment) with which to articulate horizons of possible livelihoods, as well as legal instruments with which to claim rights and entitlements that had been long denied (e.g., health, social security, education). However, for some of the parents of present-day call center workers, navigating the tension between social and economic aspirations and the country's gradual shift to neoliberal patterns of labor mobilization and deployment required making a complex bargain: reconciling the ongoing accommodation of present setbacks (i.e., the gradual neo-liberalization of the economy) with the promise of a modern and improved livelihood in the future, symbolized by joining the EEC. In this sense, freedom was to be replaced by modernity as the moral and ideological grammar bridging projects of accumulation and inter-generational life goals.

Portugal's integration into the EEC in 1986 is conveyed as the realization of collective aspirations of freedom and modernity nurtured since the Carnation revolution. The ideas of social modernity and economic progress served as central *ideological conductors* (Hall *et al.* 1978, vii-viii) legitimizing the gradual emergence of a neoliberal state project of accumulation and development. Alongside the neoliberal reconfiguration of the economy, there was an increase in state investment in welfare provisioning, expansion of social security, and broader access to higher education. In this way, satisfying citizen's needs for security, as well status for themselves and their offspring, constituted the counterpoint able to legitimize growing neoliberalization. While the neoliberal project was disguised as one of modernity, this coexisted with the bolstering of state welfare institutions, addressing ingrained personal and collective memories of deprivation and repression. This served to reinforce the longing for better career opportunities expressed as an inter-generational investment in middle-class belonging and inclusion in the emergent modern Portugal. The neoliberal promise of modernity resulted in the privatization of many key economic sectors, an emphasis on 'free market' rhetoric, and a lasting change in the structure of the Portuguese economy. This change was marked by the parallel growth of the service sector and the rise of 'atypical forms of employment', particularly temporary work, which has become a primary source of labor for the contemporary call center sector.

The generation to which the parents of today's precarious workers belonged was increasingly exposed to the 'middle-class effect' (Estanque 2003, 2005): they bought houses and cars, saved money for their children, took advantage of the emerging public health sector and were able to send their children to university. This 'middle-class effect', promoted by state policies and shaped by the mass expansion of higher education, has served to obscure profound class inequalities while also influencing individual class identifications and expectations for the future. The aspirations of social modernity and economic freedom brought about by Portugal's inclusion in the EEC were the backdrop against which the parents of today's precarious call center workers formed their desires and aspirations. Their expectations concerning their sons and daughters were thus embedded in an expectation of greater social equality, realized through upward social mobility, education and stable employment.

The growth of the call center sector since the late 1990s is linked to growing practices of outsourcing, a shift away from formal employment, and the public acceptance of temporary work as a desirable avenue for young adults seeking to integrate into the labor market. Specific sectors, particularly banking, telecommunications, and insurance, began outsourcing some of their services to other companies. Seeking flexibility, firms focused on core activities while reducing labor costs by outsourcing or subcontracting those considered peripheral, such as customer service. This subcontracting has provided most of the work for call centers and contributed to the growth of the sector. Importantly, call centers did not require significant investment in technological infrastructure and could not be easily relocated to other countries, given that they needed to be designed explicitly for the Portuguese speaking market (as happens, for instance, with the relocation of English-speaking call centers to India). In any case, call centers didn't need to look abroad for cheap labor - continuous devaluation of labor in Portugal throughout the twentieth century proved to be the *sine qua non* for the sector's rapid growth. The emergence and growth of the call center sector is tied to historically contingent processes – a national tradition of labor devaluation, as well as broader shifts in the dynamics of capital accumulation and labor deregulation, particularly following Portugal's joining of the EEC. In the Portuguese context, the emergence and expansion of a precarious call center labor regime reflects how global processes of neoliberalization are embedded in contingent historical processes and particular ideological frameworks and national development projects.

The challenges faced by current young call center workers exemplify the significant impact of generational dispossession on both material and moral levels, a phenomenon that became more

pronounced from the 1980s onwards due to the escalation of neoliberal policies that adversely affected working conditions.

“Work without future”: the hidden harm of neoliberal precarity

In this section, we will focus on workers' narratives of their work trajectories: their entry into call center employment and their understanding of the consequences call center work has for their lives, including feelings of dispossession, shame, and downward social mobility. I show how workers' particular subjectivities and forms of personal dispossession are embedded in historically bounded, inter-generational life goals integral to the capitalist reconfigurations of the Portuguese economy in the twentieth century. Most of my interviewees were originally from Lisbon and born after the April Revolution of 1974, with parents who had worked in clerical, low-skilled, or manual trades with low levels of formal schooling. Many had migrated from Portugal's rural interior to Lisbon during the 1970s in search of better jobs and living conditions for themselves and their children. This generation was expected to take full advantage of the country's integration into Europe, the increased opportunities afforded by a better education, and to be able to secure white-collar jobs befitting their educational qualifications. While these were supposed to be the *doutores* (doctors, those awarded with a diploma, widely seen as a sign of distinction), most were unable to achieve these dreams of social mobility and 'a life of one's own', and today many call center workers carry the burden of these unfulfilled expectations.

Most interviewees had contact with their parents' rural background, particularly during school holidays, which also supplied them their first experiences of unpaid work in the form of agricultural labor. That said, most did not characterize these activities as 'proper work' - they did not count them among their first work experiences, only mentioning them after I pressed them about any experience of 'working with the family.' 'Proper work', for my interviewees, meant socially valued work with a stable wage and structured career path – indeed, the opposite of precarious forms of employment. This definition of 'proper work' is shaped by the social expectations inherited by their generation, as the generation born 'in freedom', unlike that of their parents, forced to live through years of dictatorship. In another contrast, theirs was also an urban and progressive generation with the potential to achieve high levels of education and fulfill the expectations of upward social mobility placed upon them -- more than half of the workers interviewed had studied at university or had already completed their degrees. Most had attended state universities, but a small minority attended private ones, a significant financial investment and, in some cases, sacrifice for parents. Workers were

ambivalent about the university experience. On the one hand, it allowed them to accumulate a certain amount of symbolic and cultural capital. On the other hand, they often avoided their experience at university, as if it were a source of shame and failure. Their inability to obtain a job reflecting their qualifications was sometimes phrased as their responsibility or, more precisely, their lack of ability. Some of the operators commented that perhaps they had chosen the wrong path, or spent too much time at parties and social gatherings rather than trying to achieve the grades that might have allowed them to continue their studies. As a result, the call center operators interviewed often perceived their degrees as 'devalued.'. Moreover, because 'they had had their chance' (Bourdieu 1999, 423), the failure to find a job that fit their qualifications was understood as their responsibility. The devaluation of their qualifications and the feeling of unworthiness experienced by the interviewees has been further reinforced by their experiences working in the call center sector.

Most call center workers entered the field upon learning about it through their circle of college friends. Throughout their careers, workers were exposed to the conflicting rhetoric of middle-class distinction, associated with stable employment and educational achievement, alongside increasingly flexible employment relations, intensifying further after Portugal joined the EU. For my interviewees, these two conflicting discourses are a source of resentment and frustration linked to the social aspirations of upward social mobility placed upon them and the generational frustration resulting from their failure to fulfill these aspirations.

The case of Ana (30) is representative. Born in Alpiarça, a village in the central province of Ribatejo, her father was already retired after working for more than thirty years as an electrician for the Portuguese national railway company. Her mother continued to work as a housekeeper for a family of wealthy landowners in the region. Ana moved at 18 to study social work at a private university in Lisbon, where she lived in a rented room shared with other students. To help her family with the cost of accommodation, food and tuition, she worked full-time (10.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m., five days a week) in a telecommunications call center during her fourth year of study. In total, she worked there for six months, earning around €600 per month, never going for more than a month without paid employment. After leaving the call center because 'the pressure was tremendous', a friend helped her obtain a secretarial job at an insurance company where she earned slightly more (€700). Here however, she had a complicated relationship with her supervisor, whom she considered a womanizer, and left after four months. She then applied to work at the call center of another insurance company, where she provided telephone assistance in the case of car and health accidents. She worked at this company for a year and a half until finishing her degree, earning the same €600 as in the previous

call center. After obtaining her degree in September, she presented her letter of resignation to the call center in October, telling me her main reason for leaving was a lack of structure and rigor for promotions within the company. In November, she began looking for another job and working part-time as a telemarketer for another telecommunications company. While at this call center, one of her colleagues mentioned going to London in search of a better job, something that Ana had always aspired to, not only as a way to get to know a new city, but also because of the possibility it offered for a brighter future. She and her friend decided to move to London, where they found a cheap double room to rent in West Ham. Ana immediately started looking for a job, and after a month was working part-time as a waitress, earning around £600 per month. With insufficient money to pay the bills, she got another job in a call center for Fujitsu- Siemens, where she scheduled sales appointments.

While the call center was located outside London and required a 40-minute commute to the office, the salary, at £250 per week, was quite good, and together with her restaurant pay, was more than enough to 'get by.' Ana worked at the call center by day, followed by four to five hours at the restaurant in the evening. Her friend who had moved to London with her decided to return to Portugal after six months, and Ana moved in with a Portuguese couple she had met while working at the insurance call center back in Portugal. After some time, Ana too returned to Portugal out of loneliness and the lack of a family support network resulting from living so far away. She also hoped that things would be different in Portugal regarding job opportunities. Upon her return from London, she moved back in with her parents, who encouraged her to hunt for a job for which she was qualified – social work – which she did, sending hundreds of CVs to private companies, hospitals, clinics and schools. Because she did not want to depend on her parents, she found a job as a waitress in a local restaurant. During the day, she bought newspapers, checked for job vacancies on the internet, and applied to jobs, while nights were spent working at the restaurant. After three months without receiving a job offer in social work, she felt the need for independence and her own space, and accepted an offer to work at a telecommunications call center.

Ana told me that she had decided to do a part-time apprenticeship in social work as a way of getting experience, which all the advertised vacancies required. She expressed regret that she hadn't done this before going to London, implying that it was her responsibility that she had not found a job in her field. At the same time, she had remained in call center work because she hoped to one day be hired permanently rather than by a temporary work agency, an investment intended to provide her some security and stability and mitigate the 'frustration' that both she and her parents experienced, which she described as follows:

My parents feel frustrated because I have a degree and did not have an opportunity to find a job in my field. Because ... they're right... my parents invested a lot in my course, in economic terms, and they think that ... they're right ... The only possible good thing I could be doing, which would be good for me, would be to have some professional security in the area for which I qualified – for which I studied and in which I invested so much ... When my parents see me working in a call center, earning less than €800, not having a house of my own ... they're right, when by the time they were my age they had three daughters and were already stable in their jobs. I do not even think of having a family beyond my partner and myself because neither of us has any financial stability. Today we have jobs, but tomorrow we may not. Being only two people, we can more or less manage because we are both adults; but with a child, with a life dependent on us ... All my close friends are in the same situation because until now they have lived with their parents, with low-paid and precarious jobs. I think it matters a lot whether or not you are a temporary worker ... I would like to be a mother someday... but in this situation, it isn't possible ... I have moments of incredible frustration. When I came to this call center, it was tough to hear some things from clients. Right now, it goes in one ear and out the other. Because they don't know who they are talking to, I know I'm only a voice from their point of view. They don't know my qualifications; they don't know anything about me. They think they are talking with the insurance company ... but in the last few months, I have been feeling quite frustrated with myself, for not having any opportunities inside the company ... because I know I'm a good worker.

The most pronounced sentiment among all the interviewees was resentment at being unable to escape the feelings of inferiority and impotence linked to the experience of precarious and insecure labor, particularly in the call center sector. Ana also expressed this resentment when remarking on how clients mistreat operators, or when reflecting on her parents' frustration. Like other call center operators interviewed, she sometimes indicated having internalized her frustration as her own responsibility, for example, suggesting that perhaps she hadn't found a job in social work because she went to London after her degree instead of gaining unpaid experience. These feelings of resentment and frustration expressed by my interviewees are potent signifiers of the 'hidden injuries of class' (Sennett and Cobb 1972), disguised as personal faults.

My interviewees consistently characterized call center employment as 'work without a future.' Importantly, this indicates a significant contextual difference between the value and meaning of call center work in Portugal versus in other countries, for example, India. Call center work in India has often been portrayed as a harbinger of high-tech economic modernity, enabling young and college-educated workers to benefit from higher wages than their parents, pursue a path of upward social mobility and access a middle-class, consumerist lifestyle (Krishnamurthy 2004; Patel 2010; Nadeem

2011; Mankekar and Gupta 2017). Mankekar and Gupta (2017) examine how India's transnational call center sector is representative of the intricate relationships among aspirations, technology and upward social mobility in the global south. The authors note that call center workers 'saw their futures in terms of possibility, of crafting for themselves and their families a more comfortable life' (Mankekar and Gupta 2017, 76). Despite the latent contradictions underpinning such desires and aspirations, India's call center sector is associated with a sense of hope for a better future. This is in stark contrast with the reality in Portugal and other European countries, where call center work is perceived as a paradigm of the material and moral dispossession experienced by those labeled the so-called 'lost generation' (in Europe) – or the 'debt generation' (in the USA).⁴ For instance, in his research on call center work in a small post-industrial town in the north-east of England, Lloyd (2013) emphasizes that, unlike their parent's generation, young call center workers do not benefit 'from the predictability of everyday life both at work and outside of work,' and experience a lack of 'faith in incremental progress,' in the idea that 'their children would do a little better than they did' (169). These findings resonate with the Portuguese historical reality: among my informants, articulating the feeling of being trapped in 'work without a future' was a way of expressing and critiquing the material and moral dispossession resulting from precarious employment in the call center sector. The notion of 'work without a future' encompassed the experience of low wages, insecure employment conditions, and perceptions of diminished rights and entitlements. It also points to the social devaluation of service work, symbolizing the breakdown of an inter-generational moral economy of worthy living involving state development projects, class aspirations, and life goals grounded in particular entitlements and rights. The aspirations projected onto them by their parent's generation were not only an investment in the transmission of economic capital and property, but a commitment to a model of living seen as better than the one they had (Sayer 2011). For my interviewees, feelings of resentment and frustration at being employed in 'work without a future' express a sense of the disentanglement of personal value, worth and recognition embedded in the relational and historically bounded disjuncture between subjective expectations and real opportunities (Bourdieu 2000, 216–28).⁵

⁴ In Europe, call center work emerges as a representative example of the interplay between knowledge work and the increased social polarization of class relations – leading to the 'shrinking of the middle classes' (Sassen 1998, 46) as well as to the effects of the economic and political neoliberal project in dismantling protected labor regimes and the spread of precarious employment arrangements (Bourdieu 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Gledhill 2004; Harvey 2005; Ong 2006).

⁵ My reasoning on the relations between the temporal experience of dispossession and class is influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, who analyzed the relations among time, power and domination. According to Bourdieu, dispossession is experienced on two axes: subjective expectations and real opportunities. Alongside these two axes, the sense of dispossession is realized through three main mechanisms: (1) the fear of redundancy; (2) the act of waiting, which detaches the individual from the historical and social context that creates time in itself, and could therefore be designated

Conclusion

In 2014, the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores de Call Centers (Call Center Workers' Trade Union; STCC), independent from the two major trade union confederations, was created. Since then, the STCC has organized and promoted public encounters with activists, workers and researchers, with the aim of denouncing the intense forms of labor precarity, health problems, harassment, undignified working conditions, and low wages experienced by those working in call centers. In 2015, the STCC launched a public petition requesting Parliament to designate call center work a *profissão de desgaste rápido* (a high-risk or high-stress job) under the Standard Classification of Occupations.⁶ The petition also called for a reduction in the time spent by operators on the phone with clients, as well as for more frequent task rotation. In 2016, the STCC turned in the petition, with 5,500 signatures, to Parliament, leading to its debate in 2019. This in turn resulted in the Socialist Party's recommendation to conduct an in-depth analysis of working and employment conditions in the sector. This report found that 'the business volume (of the call center sector) has tripled between 2016 and 2017, having reached €300 million, while the average wage has decreased by €23' (Ribeiro 2019). It also noted 'a high incidence of short-term employment contracts in the sector – more than double those in the rest of the economy'.⁷ The initiatives of the STCC, including the petition, helped keep the theme of working conditions and employment practices in the call center sector – estimated to employ more than 100,000 people in 2021 – on the public agenda.

The increasing number of those working in the call center sector in 'permanently precarious conditions' is another recent development serving to maintain media attention on working conditions in the sector. For a growing number of people, call center employment has lasted longer than initially expected because of the lack of job opportunities suited to their qualifications and professional training. Moreover, while the typical call center operator is young and educated, with either complete

'alienated time'; and (3) the sense of justification in one's existence that comes from the recognition of others, is derived primarily from social relationships – the social fields traversed by individuals over the course of their lives (Bourdieu 2000, 216– 28).

⁶ In Portugal, a range of professional categories are defined as *profissão de desgaste rápido* according to a set of criteria, including pressure and stress, the emotional and physical intensity of the job, and high-risk working conditions. For instance, pilots, air-traffic controllers, miners and dancers are considered *profissões de desgaste rápido* entitled to early-retirement pension schemes.

⁷ See www.publico.pt/2019/03/15/politica/noticia/parlamento-pede-governoregulamente-trabalho-call-centers-1865592 (accessed November 2022).

secondary education or with a university degree,⁸ the sector has become the only job option for many other sectors of the population, including older men and women deemed too old to find a job in their area of expertise and too young to retire. This trend was accentuated following the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing austerity crisis (2011-2015).

For employers' associations and multinational corporations specializing in call centers based in Portugal, one strategy used to overcome the increasing criticism denouncing corrupt working practices in the sector has been to invest in creating massive, multilingual call centers. These outfits aim to attract a young and qualified workforce from other countries (mainly from Northern Europe) by advertising Portugal as a country with 'good food and good weather,' ideally suited for a summer work experience. Generally, workers receive less than they would in their native countries but more than what is paid to those working for the national market. For instance, *Teleperformance* promotes a six-month program called 'Atlantic Experience.'⁹ The firm offers institutional support in assembling the required official documentation and provides an accommodation allowance and wages amounting to about €1000 per month for recent international graduates coming to Portugal (Neves 2018).

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the perception of call centers as *the* main symbol of labor precarity has remained relatively unchanged, despite shifting political and economic dynamics. While the social and political actors involved have expanded, efforts at collective representation and organization have increased, and the workforce demographic has become more varied, many still stigmatize call center work. This stigma has a profound impact on those working in the sector -- it is often portrayed negatively in the media, with phrases alluding to a profound sense of disenchantment and resentment, such as 'O call center deu- me cabo da vida' ('The call center has fucked my life')¹⁰, or 'onde os sonhos vão morrer' ('[The call center is the place] where dreams go to die').¹¹ While it remains to be seen how recent forms of collective organization and mobilization may develop, these movements illustrate how call centers remain a symbol of precarity in Portugal, able to be mobilized and deployed by distinct interests to intervene in and shape the politics of precarity.

⁸ A 2019 benchmarking report by the APCC indicates that 95 percent of operators are between 25 and 40 years of age; 58 percent have completed secondary education, and 37 percent have a university degree (APCC 2019).

⁹ See the video advertisement for the program: <https://youtu.be/39CwBhp7k1w> (accessed March 2020).

¹⁰ See <https://observador.pt/especiais/sindrome-burnout-call-center-deu-me-cabo-da-vida/> (accessed November 2022).

¹¹ See https://online.sapo.pt/artigo/492681/onde-os-sonhos-vaio-morrer-um-m-s-num-call-center?seccao=Portugal_i (accessed November 2022); and Neves (2019).

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that given Portugal's history, precarization has been an integral part of state development projects aiming to facilitate the accommodation to external requirements and incorporate broader capitalist patterns. The state has mobilized collective, commonsense worldviews and grammars of identity (such as freedom and modernity) as ideological instruments of political legitimation while incorporating individual life goals into shifting regimes of accumulation. Inter-generational hopes for middle-class distinction have stabilized exploitative processes tied to the structural continuities of labor precarization through its dislocation across time and structures of feeling (Williams 1977). A deeply ingrained tradition of labor devaluation seen in numerous political regimes has facilitated the emergence and expansion of precarious employment frameworks in the call center sector. In a national context shaped by a strong social memory of inequality and dispossession, an orientation towards the future and subsequent generations constitutes the most realistic way of making the present bearable. In Portugal, this longing for a better life for oneself and the next generation demonstrates the power exerted by hegemonic state projects of accumulation and regulation, and their unfinished and contested character across generations and historical eras.

The ways in which the meanings of precarity in contemporary Portugal are tied to unfulfilled inter-generational aspirations of middle-class distinction indicate how precarious class subjectivities emerge through the dialectics of dominant wage regimes and normative models of living: the ongoing tension between the imperative to make a living and the need to have a life *worth* living (Denning 2010). The breakdown of *an inter-generational reproductive moral economy of worthy living* (Naroztky and Besnier 2014), central to the country's recent history, informs call center operators' experience of precarity. Their narratives regarding what they do and how they feel about what they do are underpinned by moral sentiments shared with other members of their generational cohort engaged in low-paid, casual and undervalued service work. This echoes the phenomenon of the 'lost generation' in various European contexts, as well as the 'debt generation' in the USA. I use the notion of moral sentiments to signify that call center operators' feelings of resentment and shame (in the private realm of the family and the public sphere) are not only an emotional, subjective or affective reaction to frustrating lives and working conditions. Instead, their moral sentiments point to the breakdown of a *lay normativity* (Sayer 2011), linking notions of personal value, moral worth and class status to a particular conception of 'a good life' or 'worthy living' grounded on a trajectory towards middle-class distinction.

The case study analyzed in this chapter shows the necessity of a broader *moral critique of precarity* focused on scrutinizing the links between the historical development of precarious neoliberal service regimes and context-bound processes of moral dispossession. In distinct national contexts, particularly in southern and central Europe, the influx of highly educated young adults into the call center sector is experienced as a 'fall from grace' – a breakdown of the historically embedded expectations of continuous improvement in quality of life across generations. Attending to the various forms of moral dispossession experienced by distinctly positioned precarious workers consists in developing a critique of precarity across national contexts. This critique must not be reduced to the effects of structural, systemic, or global shifts in labor and employment conditions, but rather widened by jointly addressing their material and moral dimensions.

Too often, theoretical and analytical models privilege neoliberal precarity's systemic, structural and transnational features. These models have produced valuable insights into changing global patterns of accumulation, regimes of citizenship and emergent class based collective political subjects (Harvey 1989, 2005; Castel 2002; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2005; Standing 2011, 2014). However, they also tend to conceal how situated histories and moral normative frameworks shape neoliberal developments and emerging subjectivities within particular national contexts and labor regimes. In doing so, abstract explanatory models of neoliberal precarity limit the analytical purchase of the term “precarity”. Addressing neoliberal precarity as a historically and morally embedded reality does not mean downplaying systemic and structural features of capitalist accumulation and global modalities of labor mobilization and deployment (Hann and Parry 2018). Instead, it means asserting that neoliberal precarity does not occur in a vacuum, but is in fact mediated by multiple intertwined factors, including the historical development of state economies, morally-laden subjectivities, and particular labor frameworks.

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