

Re-working the National in Global Capitalism: Freedom and Consumption in the Lives of International Call Centre Workers in Kolkata¹

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Since the 1990s in India the hopes associated with the growth of the high tech economy have been almost as extravagant as they were in Britain in the 1980s (Massey et al, 1992). In 2000 the then Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, congratulated the country on an annual rate of economic growth of over six percent in the following terms:

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Such growth results from unshackling the energy and enterprise of the Indian people. India is a vast market as well as an expanding platform for manufacture and services. ... India is open for business and partnership. India is in the vanguard of the knowledge revolution and information technology and knowledge-intensive industries ... have taken root in the country. They are now moving beyond India to network at the global level. Traditional industry and science also continue to flourish. India today is equally adept in both 'brick' and 'click' economies.²

Despite the fact that India is still an overwhelmingly agriculturally based economy, these hopes for the rise of the Indian nation through the growth of high tech industries are widely held by the Indian middle class whatever their political affiliation. These hopes are freighted with more than expectations of prosperity. It is widely assumed in the English-language media and in middle class households that the growth of these industries is part of a complex of economic shifts that are changing personal liberty and enriching national freedoms. In spite of the ambivalence reported among some of the segments of the middle classes towards consumerism, the high tech economy in India is widely seen as a sign that the old nation of Nehruvian protectionist and state-led development has been overcome by a new nation in which self-realization occurs through unfettered consumption and entrepreneurship. This newly imagined freedom brought about by liberalization of the economy and connections to global economic networks is represented not as a break with the past but as the long delayed liberation of Indian national potential (Rajagopal, 2001a).

What is interesting about the presence of a strong strain of nationalism in these Indian economic dreams is that anthropological and sociological discussions of neo-liberal projects and of the new forms of labor emerging from globalization rarely address such nationalism. National aspirations largely disappear from the sociological analysis of 'global flows,' 'timeless spaces,' and 'non-places' in the work of people like Castells and Scott and Lash. Even the recent masterful analysis offered by Harvey of the political and class project of neo-liberalism does not engage with this important aspect of the shifts that have taken place across the globe since the late 1970s. This omission is theoretically as well as empirically problematic. Tsing has convincingly argued that neo-liberalism and finance capital does not simply roll out as a capitalist monolith across the globe. Instead she shows that financiers link their globalist projects to regional and national scale-making projects which each contribute to the realization of each others dreams. In this article I will be extending this insight to one of the workplaces of global capitalism and exploring the implications of claims about scales for the creation of social and economic inequality. The workplaces that are currently emerging across the globe represent more than simply the rise of private enterprise or the arrival of abstract global capital. Instead they need to be analyzed as a new kind of public space in which the scale of the nation is made relevant to commerce and freedom is associated with specific forms of capitalist activity. Both of these effects have important implications for the realization of inequality within India and across the globe. In this article I shall explore the contradictions of such global workplaces as they are experienced by a group of workers at the vanguard of the knowledge revolution. These are the young men and women who work in international call centers in Kolkata. In their lives the conjuring of an "economy of appearances" and of "divergent claims about scales" meet their limits (Tsing, 57, 58).

International call centers are an important context for examining the fault lines of this new vision of freedom and nationalism enabled by hooking up to global economic networks for a number of reasons. First of all, this is a rapidly growing sector. IT-enabled call centers and other back office operations as a whole currently employ 70,000 people with a projected 50 million jobs to develop by 2009.³ Even more significantly, this expansion is extending access to professional employment connected to global flows beyond the upper middle classes. It offers to lower middle class graduates from second-tier, provincial universities a passport to what is perceived as a prestigious global career. Access to this work sector is achieved on the strength of their ability to speak English. This means that their families do not have to invest in expensive private training in software programming nor do they have to pass difficult professional exams. Via this industry the lower middle classes are drawn into the extravagant hopes and paradoxical realities of liberalization and globalization. Secondly,

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the peculiar nature of the work itself places unusual emphasis on employees making themselves global. The job demands that they invert their lives by working night shifts. They must also transform themselves into 'Americans' by acquiring new names, new accents and new demeanors so that they can build a 'natural' rapport with their international customers. This means that they do not just work according to the fluctuations of a global economy but that they have to reorient their selves and daily routines towards countries thousands of miles away.

Thirdly this is a sector that has an aura of white-collar respectability but is exempted from existing Indian labor laws so that it can satisfy its multinational clients. For example the West Bengal State Government recently agreed that international call centers were the only industry that could run twenty-four hours, seven days a week and 365 days a year and that could employ female workers at night. Similarly the State Government periodically and unofficially agrees to provide police escorts for employees through the *bandhs* or political strikes that affect Kolkata regularly. Usually this is a privilege only accorded to emergency service workers such as doctors. There is no union that protects the rights of call centre employees. So, in short, because of the reach of this industry beyond the upper middle classes, its expansion, the personal transformation it demands and its exemption from labor laws, it provides an important window onto the paradoxes of the new experiences of personal liberty and nationalism that liberalization in India has been associated with.

The specific context of international call centers in India also allows an important engagement with many of the theoretical issues that characterize discussions of changes in the global economy. There has been much large-scale modeling in sociology and geography of the new forms that capitalism has taken since the 1970s. The new period we live in has been labeled as Post-Fordist, informational and networked or as disorganized capitalism. These models have led to important debates about the new experiences of space, time and identity emergent from these technological and social changes. These are variously described as post-modern, as located in the space of flows or places or as representing a progressive disorganization of older political solidarities (Harvey 1989, Castells 1996, Lash and Urry 1987). Anthropological case studies from across the world now provide a rich theoretical and empirical base from which to question these large-scale models. These anthropological studies have largely concentrated on the experience of factory workers and trace, as Kasmir has put it, 'what global capitalism looks like when it "lands".'⁴ They have focused on discussions of the links between production and consumption in the creation of identities (Freeman 1998, 2000). They have also traced the connections between domestic social reproduction and factory labor (Wolf 1992). Workers, especially female workers, experience new freedoms that raise dilemmas for the maintenance of their family networks and gender identities (Mills 1997, 1999). But their negotiations of these dilemmas are far too complex to indicate the simple dissolving of older solidarities as suggested in the large-scale theories. These anthropological studies have therefore begun to unravel some of the broader claims about the changing nature of social experience. They have also indicated the inherent dangers and social power of global models that claim to chart the inevitable direction taken by contemporary capitalism. These models themselves enter into negotiations between workers and employers, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy of the inevitability of the changes they describe (Mathur 1998). Models also tend to obscure the multiple experiences and voices associated with local situations, abstracting them into case studies (Kasmir 1999). These disembedded and partial versions of reality circulate among management professionals and are applied to other contexts. In the process they make the future of capitalism in their own restricted image.

As we shall see, international call centers in India condense all of these theoretical issues in a particularly intense form. First of all as international call centre operatives cross the threshold of their workplace they literally move between the space of places and the space of international flows. The physical space of the international call centre, the work itself and the routines of the workplace are designed to achieve this effect by conjuring a sharp boundary between a local and a global architectural and physical experience. Secondly, the material culture and management style of the call centers collapse together the space of production and the imagery of pleasurable consumption and entertainment. Thirdly, management techniques and workplace training actively encourage workers to separate their selves from social networks of kin and Bengali-ness. Perhaps most importantly, all these specific techniques make real in a material space and in work routines a particular model of the relationships between globalization, national characteristics and productive citizens. This model is that of globalization as a 'neutralization' and then 'Americanization' of Indian qualities. This involves the production of an entrepreneurial self tied in solidarities with other Indians based on emotions of friendship and/or economic transactions. This entrepreneurial self is seen as the only kind of self that will ultimately produce the prosperity of the nation. In this model of globalization the nation is protected and enriched by global universal forces and foreign capital and images of national essences are reinforced. As suggested earlier International call centers and the broader politics of contemporary nationalist hopes in India highlight the centrality of nationalist scale-making to global workplaces.

In the literature on new forms of labor nationalist projects usually provide the framework for understanding the appearance of new factories or as a distant background for the experience of workers. There is much discussion of how workers are used to represent the potentials and dangers of the development of the economy in a new direction. Yet the embedding of

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political and national projects in workplace practices and the subsequent effect on worker's choices and perceptions of themselves remains largely unexamined.⁵ This omission is problematic. It underplays the extent to which practices of consumption or the new forms of flexible or disembedded selves produced in the work process are profoundly political. These new practices and selves are related to projects of governance and nationalism (Foucault 1991; Hibou 2003; Maurer 2001; Miller and Slater 2000). Workers may be remaking themselves through practices of consumption but these new identities are also in a complex dialectic with socio-political visions realized in workplace practices, marketing strategies and state projects (Appelbaum 2000; Christopherson 1994). This means that many discussions of female factory workers across the globe emphasize the liberties and agency they acquire through the new forms of labor and consumption they engage in. However, this leaves the categories of 'liberty' and 'agency' that are being deployed within specific settings unexamined. We do not know how or why these practices and notions might be changing or their entailments for nationalism and politics. Consequently, the sociological models that claim that current work practices produce an absence of politics among the working classes remain unchallenged. Political sensibilities and practices may not be absent. Instead they simply may have taken new forms that are invisible to the analytical framework of sociological models. Such omissions in the discussion of new forms of global capitalism contrast starkly with the way in which neo-liberalism, globalization and consumerism appear in the ethnographies of post-socialist societies. Here they are analyzed as political and national projects associated with specific notions of freedom (Junghans 2001; Hann 1992; Humphrey 1998; Verdery 1996). The case of international call centers in India allows us to bring these two sets of arguments together in important ways. As we shall see the management plans, training and experiences of the workplace explicitly invoke a national project of transformation that is linked to a personal project of liberty.

In the discussion that follows, after giving some details of the Indian context for high tech industries, I shall focus on the management practices and material culture of one international call centre company in Kolkata, Call-Servers. I shall then turn to the ways in which workers in this company describe the fault lines of their experience of globalization and liberalization. This material provides a microcosm within which to examine the specific characteristics of the current Indian national project and its impact on the lower middle classes. It also allows us at a more theoretical level to think again about the kinds of social experiences emerging from current forms of global capitalism.

Expectations of Connection: Liberalization, nationalism and high tech industries in India

In order to understand the particular constellation of expectations around high tech industries in India it is necessary to see their emergence in relation to the wider changes in economic dreams in India. At Independence the state took over centralized control of industrial production. Its role was to steer industrial development in order to correct what was seen as the colonial uneven development of the economy. The state would, the claims went, ensure that economic change would diffuse prosperity throughout India rather than just contributing to the profits of private business enterprises. This was the Nehruvian socialist version of the long-standing *swadeshi* idea of economics that had first taken form in the academic work of economic nationalists and the agitation against the partition of Bengal in the 1890s. In 1916 this political vision had been transformed by Congress Party members into a practical economic policy for India in the Indian Industrial Commission. After Independence this vision was made real by the imposition of strict controls on imports and exports. Five-year plans for the economy were drawn up by the central government. In order to start a business or to import and export products, licenses were required from the state. Overseas firms were not allowed to set up factories or branches within India. It was possible for them to invest money in companies, but the majority ownership of these companies had to be Indian. Although there is much debate about the political and economic implications of these policies that gave authority to experts and the state, they did produce a rapid, if uneven, growth of the industrial economy. By the 1970s India was successfully producing its own products for its own markets. This protectionist, state-controlled economy was first questioned in the late 1980s. One of the first political parties to argue for economic reforms that would take control away from the state and give it to the private sector was the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Their political ideology condensed ideas of the liberation of Hinduness from the Nehruvian secular state and the liberation of the economic potential of India in a distinctive cocktail of neo-liberalism and traditionalism (Rajagopal 2001a). But it was the Congress government in the early 1990s that began a process of economic reform. Licensing of businesses by the Central Government ended. The tight limits on foreign investment were abolished. In spite of current enthusiasm for liberalization across political lines this original alteration in economic policy did not really represent a wholesale conversion to a new model of economic growth. Instead, like many nation-states in the late eighties and nineties the Indian government was forced into this alteration by the lending policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁶ In 1991 there were only enough foreign reserves in the government's coffers to cover two weeks' worth of imports. As a result of this economic instability, the government asked the IMF for a loan. This was given with the proviso that the Indian economy should be opened up and privatized. The impact of this opening up of the economy and privatization of many sectors that had been under government control has been immense. Foreign

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products, which were not available unless they were smuggled into the country, are now widely available. Shopping malls where these products can be sold and displayed are springing up in major cities and smaller towns. Multinational companies have taken over Indian factories and businesses. Licenses to global satellite television stations such as Star TV have been granted. New regional language programming uncontrolled by the state offering dubbed foreign and home grown serials is directed to the non-English speaking middle and working classes. Advertising companies in India have started to try and map the demands of a growing middle class in order to tap into them (W. Mazzarella 2003). New aggressive marketing tactics have spread to rural areas. The most dramatic change of all seems to be a general overlaying of a newly conceived right to consume onto the state-centered ideology that emphasized the value of public institutions, the duties of citizenship and public service. This new right is seen as a route to self-realization and the pursuit of economic desires that, as a by-product, will benefit India as a whole. So, side by side now, Indians possess the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship and the right to the private pleasures of consumption. These pleasures are often marked by a distinctly Hindu symbolism and the project of neo-liberalism in India has a specific nationalist theme (Rajagopal 2001b).

In this context the dramatic growth of the Indian information technology (IT) and offshore business services industries has become an exciting sign for the Indian middle classes of the country taking its rightful place in the knowledge economy through its newly liberated entrepreneurial spirit. The growth of Bangalore as an international hub for software production has attracted much English-language press attention. More recently there has been feverish speculation about the impact of the growth of the international call centre and offshore business services market. Dramatic figures are cited of the numbers of jobs and wealth this will generate. Yet this coverage is also marked by a certain degree of anxiety. Journalists write of the incongruity of lower middle class call centre operatives learning the cosmopolitan accents and demeanor more characteristic of elite groups in society. There is an omnipresent sense that important class distinctions and kinds of cultural capital are in danger of eroding.⁷ This is accompanied by more nationalist concerns about whether global connections will really liberate Indian potential or just produce lower middle class copies of Americans.

The expectations associated with high tech industries, globalization and liberalization have a particular series of resonances in Kolkata. Until 1965 Kolkata and West Bengal in general had a thriving industrial sector based around mining, iron and steel, metal working, engineering, jute and tea industries. Multinational companies such as Dunlop had their headquarters in the city. During the 1970s to 1990s the industrial fortunes of the state and Kolkata itself declined. A number of factors contributed to this. There was a general fall in the fortunes of the industries that had provided the mainstay of the state's economy. The civil disturbances during the Naxalite political movement in the early seventies and their brutal repression by the Congress State Government led to economic problems. Political struggles between the Congress Party at the centre and the Left Front government, which came to power in 1977, led to less central investment in the region. From the late seventies state economic policies focused on land reform and rural development. For the middle and lower middle classes in Kolkata the overall decline in industrial production led to a restricted choice of careers. Work was either in the very large public sector – the civil service and railways or else in education and small-scale private businesses. These groups often describe economic isolation as a new kind of cultural isolation as well. People born around the time of Independence remember the city of their youth and young adulthood as a place of cosmopolitan delights. This is captured in descriptions of jazz musicians playing in the clubs on Park Street and the presence of foreign goods and foreign companies. For these people and their children the city is widely described as having become provincial and stifling over the intervening decades. The more positive version of this is a pride in Bengalinness and a strong regional identity. This serves to demarcate migrant middle and working class groups in the city as different and not Bengali enough. During the period of the decline of the economic fortunes of Kolkata a large number of middle class families have seen their children leave the city for opportunities elsewhere in India or abroad. The lower middle classes aspire to this mobility, but often cannot achieve it. In the context of this economic history and the sense of the regional involution of West Bengal, the expectation of connection to global circuits of capital and information through liberalization and the growth of high tech industries carries a particular charge, offering the hope of a revival of Bengali cosmopolitanism. The jobs that could be created also offer a solution to the 'drain of Bengali youth' from the city that divides families across India and the world.

Since 1994 hopes of connection to global networks have focused on the new industrial policy of the state government and its effects. At first the CPI(M) State Government was reluctant to support the policies of liberalization coming from the centre. This was a source of great frustration to the middle classes of Kolkata.

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However, in 1994 the State Government formulated a new industrial approach. It would now do everything it could to encourage foreign investment and the importing of advanced technology. Rather than being exploitative, the private sector could create accelerated growth. Private-public partnerships to develop infrastructure such as housing, education, healthcare and communication would now be encouraged. The government would make it easy for industrial growth centers to be created by private initiative. A long-term goal would be to speed up indigenous research and development in order to keep the State on track in terms of the old economic nationalist desire for self-reliance – but this would now be achieved by connecting to global networks rather than isolating India from them. West Bengal would now become globally connected through private enterprise and serve as a gateway to the eastern region, which ambitiously, included Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan as well as South East Asia and the Pacific Rim.

This policy shift was followed by a series of publicity events designed to generate investment that fired the imaginations of the middle classes in Kolkata. The first one drew together Indian and foreign investors in January 1999. Advised by McKinsey, the State Government and the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation presented the region as having several fundamental business advantages. It had India's fourth largest market and contains a disproportionately large share of higher income households—one in 10 of India's richest consumers live in the State. It had high quality key resources—a thriving agricultural sector, a well-educated population with an amenable culture and social stability. It had a low competitive intensity, with wages for skilled workers lower than in other regions. Lastly, the State Government had a pro-investor stance. Then, in March the same year an investment and technology market was held jointly by the government of West Bengal and the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, the Government of India and the Confederation of Indian Industry. Here investors from across the world were encouraged to explore collaborations. Next, in December 1999 the symbolism of a new Bengali cosmopolitanism was sealed by the *Udyog Shibir* (enterprise forum) event. Organized by the State Government and the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation, this was intended to encourage Non-resident Indians (NRIs) and local business people, investors and entrepreneurs to interact. In press reports and conversations the return of these NRIs represented to the middle classes of Kolkata the *homecoming* of past and future global success to the city. In a variation on the Hindu symbolism marking neo-liberalism and new forms of consumption, in Kolkata there is an inflection of regionalism that is both a marketing device to global companies to promote the particular value of a specific State and a sentiment. This sentiment was particularly visible in the event that followed the *Udyog Shibir*, the *Banga Sarmelan*. This was designed to mark the millennium and celebrate Bengali culture. Prominent Bengali NRIs from businessmen to academics returned to the city to take part in a series of programs celebrating the great icons and achievements of Bengali culture. The West Bengal Development Corporation made sure that business networking took place as well. In conversations and media coverage this return of NRIs was seen as an important sign of the new future possibilities for Bengali cosmopolitanism. Publicity from the West Bengal Development Corporation and the State Government made it clear that this meant a new high tech future enabled by these kin who had returned from abroad – a version of economic self-reliance that suggested a kind of indigenous globalization and cast Bengali culture as something that could be profitably transnational in a new way. However, this new vision of the flexibility of Bengali culture has not displaced the longstanding idea among Bengalis in Kolkata that *probashi* (outsider) Bengalis, whether located in Delhi or Denver, are inauthentic. The new way of reincorporating *probashi* Bengalis into the city through their economic contributions and a more extended notion of Bengaliness exists alongside this old suspicion. As the local state gave up parts of its control of the regional economy and labor market to international capitalists there was an intensification of regional symbolism. This Bengali inflected nationalism insisted that international capital was a homecoming that would revive the region economically and culturally. Conjuring the scale of the region and nation in this context has a specific, charged ideological effect—a strong assertion of cultural identity in a setting where

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direct regional state control of the economy is declining. As the state government becomes increasingly non-governmental in relation to international investors, the assertions of regional and national identity increase.

By January 2000 the West Bengal Government had formulated a specific IT policy for industrial development in collaboration with business people in the IT sector.⁸ It also set up a separate department for promoting such industries. The overall policy aims to build on 'the high level of education among the youth and the general aptitude for creative thinking in West Bengal.'⁹ Its goals include encouraging the growth of IT enabled services and back office support services. In particular it aims to increase the involvement of women in the IT sector by: promoting telecommuting; training them in virtual institutes in order to equip them for back-office processing jobs and making it easy for them to get bank loans to set up home based offices. All IT-related industries are given special privileges in this policy. They can gain fast-track clearances for their projects from the West Bengal Electronics Development Corporation. They are excluded from labor laws restricting the employment of women and the hours of employment. They can gain special exemption from stamp duty on land purchases.

During the past couple of years, the homecoming of globalization has been made visible in the construction work in Salt Lake along the Eastern Bypass that links the airport to the old city. This area is an unlikely mix of paddy fields and market gardens interspersed with the gleaming new headquarters of firms with overseas links. The state government intends this region to become a satellite township. Their aim is to make a fresh start, constructing a utopian place that will not suffer from the infrastructural problems of the old city. However the township is emerging as a place of privilege, entertainment, privatization, technology and multinational capital. It has for twenty years been home to the Science Park, a theme park that explains science to the public. The upper middle classes have moved into large newly built residences here. It is steadily developing as a place for entertainment spaces, some of which have a distinctly Bengali cast. These materialize the ideology of the homecoming of Bengali-ness enabled by global capital. A luxury ITC group hotel with five restaurants is planned which will, according to the brief, reflect the rich traditions and ethos of the region through its architecture, decorations and artifacts. Already completed is Swabhumi, an ethnic craft village that is packed with people at weekends, who come to buy handicrafts and listen to Bengali music. It is the planned home of the new financial services complex of the Kolkata Stock exchange. High-tech buildings funded by overseas firms that are strikingly absent from the centre of Kolkata are springing up across this area. Already built are the Duncan Gleneagles Hospital funded by a collaboration between Kolkata and Singapore based capital. This is a private hospital specializing in the high tech treatment of the upper middle classes with departments of radiology, cardiology and neurophysiology. Price Waterhouse Cooper have partially completed the construction of a complex to house research and development work on e-commerce and e-governance, intranet and websites. Eventually this will also contain a virtual university project for distance learning. Three software companies with links to Silicon Valley, Astral, CA-TCG Software and Cognizant Technology, have offices here. A vast Hyatt Regency hotel has also been completed to cater for the much anticipated increase in demand for luxury hotels due to the influx of business houses into Kolkata. Most impressive is the first Infinity tower building funded jointly by the government of West Bengal and Globsyn Webel. With its own internal infrastructure for web communications and uninterrupted electricity supply, this structure of mirrored glass has been designed to attract IT companies. But this building is only a small part of a planned 81 hectares self-contained electronic complex. A twin tower is also being built. Eventually this vast area will have a separate techno campus that will provide a software 'finishing school' and development centre. Eight new 'smart towers' and six smaller 'smart centers' designed for large and medium range IT companies are also planned. 'Intelli-homes' will be built here to create a township for infotech professionals. In Salt Lake the dreams of Bengali cosmopolitanism enabled by the touchdown of global capital are becoming materialized. Yet, of course, this area produces the same kinds of problematic

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inequalities between sunrise and sunset industries and newly defined valuable elite labor and deskilled labor as science parks across the globe.¹⁰ Its future is also dependent on the volatile choices of overseas investors. Cities linked to global flows of capital can easily become disconnected, as the frontier of cheap labor shifts or political situations alter (Castells 1998).

It is perhaps a sign of the most likely high tech future of Kolkata that the Infinity building is where Call-Servers has its offices. The offices of Call-Servers take up one floor of the Infinity building. It was set up by two Indian entrepreneurs with United States firms as technical and marketing partners. The founders raised the capital for the project from their well-established financial services business. Call-Servers currently employ 200 people. Most of these, 125, are employed to sell cheap phone services offered by an Australian company to customers in the United States. The location of this firm at the heart of the materialization of the expectations for globalization in Salt Lake is very significant. It opens this space of privilege and technology to a lower middle class workforce. As we shall see in the next section, this point is not lost on the management of the company. In fact it is central to the practices and material culture of the workplace: the company advertises for employees with the following slogan, *Graduates. Talk your way to a GLOBAL CAREER with Call-Servers.*

The Future of the Nation?: The management of emotions, consumption and global identities in call servers

The journey that call centre agents make five times a week to the Infinity building captures the dissonant and transformative context of Call-Servers. The promise of a global career is not just made in advertising slogans. It is made material in the contrasts between the home and work environments of the call centre agents. Workers repeatedly told me stories about this journey in order to encapsulate the difference between themselves and other Kolkatans. From 9:30 p.m. onwards in the humid night, jeeps pick up the agents. They are collected in groups of six from their cramped three room family flats in the crowded narrow streets of outer Kolkata, such as Phoolbagan, or cheaper areas of central Kolkata such as Ripon street. Sixty percent of the agents are unmarried women, 40 percent men, and all of them are between the ages of 21 and 28. Most of them are graduates of provincial universities in commerce or hotel management who have worked in more traditional sales or customer care jobs. Many of them are from provincial towns and cities outside Kolkata and are staying with relatives. They are overwhelmingly from middle ranking castes with a sprinkling of minority communities (Christians and Anglo-Indians) known for their cosmopolitan aspirations. Inside the jeep the agents joke with each other in American-inflected English and Bengali as if they were going to a party together. One agent described this atmosphere as one in which, 'Once I get in the jeep, I leave behind my family and see my friends.' After making the pickups the jeep drives through the tortuous lanes of the slum behind Park Circus, avoiding street dogs but disturbing people sleeping on the pavement who are escaping the heat of the corrugated iron roofs of their huts. Leaving behind the pungent smell of the tanning district it then speeds along the Eastern Bypass, past open spaces and huge advertising hoardings towards the site of the technology park on which the hopes of regeneration of the city are pinned. At the end of a potholed turning off the bypass is the Infinity Building, an edifice of mirrored glass, standing almost alone on the edge of paddy fields. There is no other office building in Kolkata that matches it for glamour and seamless comfort. The agents then step into an air-conditioned lobby with piped music. The lift takes them up to the call centre, a freezing, brightly colored, open space papered with maps of America and filled with circular clusters of desks and monitors. Unlike the national call centers in Kolkata the threshold is not marked by the habit of taking off your shoes nor are any *pujas* such as Saraswati *puja* or the Bengali new year, *Poila Boishak*, celebrated here. National call centers are cramped, filled with long lines of peeling formica desks and air-conditioned by noisy machines. In contrast to this Call-Servers is startlingly luxurious. Agents repeatedly described their place of work as like being in a shopping mall or a five star hotel. They drew attention to the distinctions between this place and the spaces of Kolkata they had left behind for their eight hour shift. One man said, 'We are in America now and we're also on American time.' Another proudly told me that it is a customs bonded area so 'Legally it's not actually Indian soil, its not in India.' As I shall explain, this ambience, with its consumerist and international associations bound together by ties of friendship rather than social obligation, is part of a planned management strategy. The management practices and material culture of Call-Servers create boundaries between here, India, and there, America, which exists inside the call centre. The promise is that the company will help workers to cross the boundaries between these two imaginary essentialized spaces. The material culture of call servers creates a politics of scale in which workers apparently move out of one national space (India) into another one (America). The sense that a dramatic boundary

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is being crossed is created by the technology and architecture of the Infinity building, which separates and links these two spaces with an architectural form that references the limitless scale of the universal global force of capitalist progress.

The central problem for the management of Call Servers is how to acquire, train and retain skilled staff in a job that is repetitive and requires that you work night-shifts. They do not achieve this through financial rewards. Unlike in other cities in India, in Kolkata pay is low for graduates, around 6,000 rupees per month, which is what an unqualified primary school teacher earns. Instead they retain workers through three self-conscious strategies. They practice what the training officer and personnel manager called the management of emotions. They tap into the newly intensifying consumer desires of young people and make the material culture of the workplace refer to spaces of consumption. They emphasize the glamour of exposure to global conversations and to a training that 'globalizes' the identities of employees by Americanizing them. Just in case all of this is not enough to encourage employees to stay, they sign a bond with the company that they will work for it for at least 18 months. These strategies were largely formulated by one of the vice-presidents of the company who describes her career as having been at the origin of sunrise industries in India. She worked as a manager for Amway and a timeshare company before taking up this position.¹¹ For the management, the successful control of the workforce through these practices creates profits but also helps to generate a new kind of Indian and Bengali. For this reason they are remarkably proud of the training and work environment they provide.

The strategy of the management of emotions is to create a community of friendship between workers that draws them to the workplace. This emphasis starts with the training of recruits, which involves game-playing to bond them together as a cohort. The recruits are then attached to a buddy in the call centre who guides them through procedures. Team leaders act as agony aunts to the members of their team. Compared with other work environments in India this produces an atmosphere of startling informality and even of infantilization, especially as some employees have children of their own. It also involves a strange denial of any social bonds or identity apart from that of the flexible voluntary bond of being friends. The notion of a non-coercive freely chosen community is reinforced with discussions of orders as options, of instructions only being followed if they match the 'comfort levels' of agents and of workers as revenue earners who bear equal responsibility to the clients if targets are not met. This strategy is effective, according to the management, because their employees are young people, particularly unmarried women, who are a generation of Indians altered by the experience of liberalization. They are longing for the freedom offered by this space of uncomplicated friendship beyond confining family networks. They are also not content to rely on their parents financially because they want to become active consumers in a different way from previous generations. As the vice-president of the company put it, 'there is a craving for earning for yourself as a result of liberalization and all the products, that is where we are harnessing our people from.' This manufacturing of friendship is intended to extract employees from networks of kin into a conviviality of labor. This process is profoundly different from public sector manufacturing units in India. For example, in the steel plants described by Parry (1999), workers experience a common public sphere in which the work process and ethics of the workplace override some aspects of the attachments of caste and enables workers to form horizontal bonds of association with each other in leisure and personal activities. Here in Call-Servers friendship serves to bind agents vertically to managers. Friendship with colleagues and superiors also rests on an iconography of youth and freedom from responsibilities. It is therefore based less on notions of shared solidarity and public ethics and more on fickle, fragile individual bonds. Equally, the desire to consume is actively played upon in order to tie people to the workplace. It is built into the material practices and ambience of the place of production itself. The training officer mentioned that the call centre design was to be like the air-conditioned shopping centers that are a recent arrival in the city. The bright multicolored desks arranged in circles, plush carpet and general sparkling newness of everything certainly reference such spaces. One of the founders of the company insisted that working here had to be fun. This was achieved in part by playing employees American movies and music during their brush-ups on training. This had the valuable double effect of turning work into entertainment and enabling employees to better their accents and speech habits. In general all the managers emphasized that employees should feel free to play and experience leisure. They are encouraged during their short break from shifts to play tag on the terrace outside or send emails to friends. In the call centre, consumption and entertainment become folded into space of production. As employees work they also acquire tastes and habits of consumption.

Added to these attractions, managers emphasize that working in the call centre and the

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training they provide allows people access to a transforming cosmopolitanism. For example, the founder of the company argued that they offer people with few skills cultural exposure to thousands of conversations with global customers that will make them totally different. The training new recruits receive is designed to change them into agents who will produce something called 'customer delight'. This is achieved by reshaping the agents into Americanized Indians for whom customer care is second nature, so that, as one of the trainees put it, everyone inside and outside work becomes a customer for you. A particular restricted and imaginary form of 'Americanness' must become naturalized. Bengali accents are neutralized through elaborate elocution lessons. Trainees are told not to speak their regional languages at home and to use Americanized English at all times. They can only ever use their new American names at the office. The renaming often provides a powerful imaginative investment of personal aspirations in the workplace. An Anglo-Indian young man renamed himself Rex White. An Indian Christian called himself Trevor Gates after his hero Bill Gates. A Bengali woman named herself Alison Jones after her pen pal in Australia. One man reflected his ambivalence about this renaming by saying that he had called himself Eric Bond because of the coercive bond that he had had to sign with the company. Trainees are also encouraged to adopt American turns of phrase and an informal, gender neutral demeanor learnt from watching video-tapes and hours of role-playing. A team leader described this training as turning them all into a different breed with their own language, who can only communicate with other international call centre workers and customers overseas. Women said that it had made them more confident and attractive. The head of training in the call centre proudly told me that they are creating a new generation of entrepreneurs and global citizens through the transformation they effect.

In Call-Servers globalization and cosmopolitanism thus take a very particular form, involving the neutralization of Bengali and Indian identities. The kind of Bengali cosmopolitanism hoped for in middle class dreams of the future of liberalization made material at Salt Lake is strikingly absent from the call centre. Instead, workers move between a 'space of place' at home to a 'space of flows' at work which, far from being neutral or international, is strongly marked as American and/or foreign. As the founder of the company put it, 'you have to work by the habits, cultures of a foreign land which you don't know.' Call centre workers are intensely embedded in a work place that is 'American'. This image of America is, of course, an essentialized vision learnt from trainers sent from the technological and financial partner company in the States. These trainers regularly visit Call-Servers to check on the quality of the agents' performances of 'being American'. These practices have much in common with those of NGOs in Hungary described by Junghans (1999), where American funded NGOs and the courses that they run aim to convert ex-socialist-bloc subjects into entrepreneurs who can operate with a neutral morality of the market-place learnt from the United States and Western Europe. Junghans points out that these projects represent a kind of Occidentalism that creates a false and restricted self-image of the capitalist West in relation to the inability of 'others' to operate according to the morality of the market. He suggests such endeavors help to create an origin myth of the benevolence of the market systems of Western Europe and America by suggesting that they have their own fair and just rules that need to be learnt. In places like Call-Servers a similar process occurs in which the United States is foregrounded by American and Indian trainers alike as a place of liberty, fraternity and entrepreneurialism. But most strikingly, as with the state project of Bengali-inflected nationalism, this workplace makes the nation and nationalism obdurately real as inescapable cultural forms and traits in a context where the actual practices of national and regional states have little control over the economic fates and work environment of employees. The conjuring of a national scale within the global scale of the Infinity building therefore has a peculiar ideological effect—to make the nation more real as a cultural form where its importance as a regulator of economic relationships is reduced.

It is perhaps not surprising therefore to find that Indian nationalism has a place at Call-Servers. Workers and management were equally insistent that they were making a unique and important contribution to their country. For example the founder of the company made speeches to new employees in which he suggested that they would be turned into outperforming entrepreneurs. He went on to add that when they

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eventually leave his employment they will, by their individual efforts, carry out the social service of stimulating the Indian nation into a thriving global economic giant. This statement is part of his more general vision of the new consumer future for the nation. According to him liberalization is a revolution based on satisfying the needs of the consumer that will bring social and economic benefits to the whole population. The training manager said she was proud of her work because she was helping to create a new generation of Indians who can compete equally in world markets. This view is reflected in the comments made by agents who recurrently said that they joined Call-Servers so that they could interact with people all over the world and contribute their intelligence to building the Indian economy. They were particularly proud that they contributed human resources to the economy rather than sheer physical labor.¹² In this vision of the nation culture is reduced to a one-dimensional quality that has a utility in attracting global capital: all members of the management suggested that, in addition to high levels of education and good spoken English, India offered people uniquely suited by their culture for customer service. History appears as something that needs to be erased altogether. In discussions with management all aspects of Indian history – from ‘*zemindari* mentalities’ (a code for the hierarchies of caste) to public sector industries – were seen as impediments to the realization of national prosperity.

Overall the work practices and management style of Call-Servers rest on the idea that labor there involves a process of self-actualization. This is a freedom to be your own self that is achieved through friendship, consumption, and becoming other to your Bengali self. This kind of freedom involves a process of progressive disconnection from other kinds of social ties and identities. This disconnection happens at the abstract level of neutralizing culture and history and at the very personal level of separation from your own social networks. The nature of the work itself – having to work night-shifts and the absence of time off for national holidays or festivals – contributes to this separation. The bonds that remain are the individualized, emotional ones of friendship and economic relationships with customers and employers. This self-actualization occurs in a space that is strongly marked for everyone involved as ‘American’. Ultimately, to have a global career, the lower middle class employees have to radically transform themselves into non-Bengalis, while still living and working in Kolkata. Yet managers and employees alike are clear that the process of gaining individual freedom through working in the call centre is part of a project of liberalization that will make their nation strong. The ideal future nation is imagined as similar to the call centre writ large. It is a place of full of economic potential and human resources bound together by relationships of service, consumption and entrepreneurship. It is connected through economic and technological networks to a wider competitive world. In this nation the aspects of culture that are valuable are those that have an economic utility. Day-to-day work in the International Call centre therefore invokes once again the transcendent scale of the nation, when in fact employees are subject to economic and workplace relations that are dependent on the decisions of American companies and customers. A recurrent theme emerges from Bengali dreams of the homecoming of globalization and from this workplace, the nation is materialized and politicized, while economic relations of structural dependency are depoliticized and placed outside the authority of the local regional state. This leaves the important question of whether the work process and experiences of workers more generally contain any contradictions that undercut the politics of scale of these global workplaces.¹³ In the next section I shall discuss the narratives of contradiction told by the call centre agents at Call Servers. These highlight the complexity of their daily negotiations of, as one of them put it, ‘living here in India, but working there in America’.

Narratives of Contradiction: Embedded spaces, meaningless time, hard labor and broken communication

Workers at Call-Servers largely share with their managers an enthusiasm for their work environment as a place of self-actualization. Their high tech glamorous workplace allows them to create a distance between themselves and other lower middle class Bengalis. It also enables them to acquire status in relation to other middle-ranked caste families, marking themselves as slightly more polished, with more cosmopolitanism than these other families. They also see themselves as

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different from their parents, who worked for Indian firms or in the public sector. They feel distinct as well from their peers who are stuck in sales jobs touring small towns in the provinces or are on short contracts working in the Gulf States in shops and offices. Most of the people I interviewed also felt this work had already led to important transformations in character that would make them successful in life. Most commonly mentioned changes were an increased sense of confidence, the acquisition of the skill of being able to speak to anybody, improvements in their English and becoming more attractive. According to a couple of workers their job had made them, 'the next generation'. Young people from similar backgrounds to the call centre agents who work outside this sector share this sense of the distinctive nature of international call centre work. They suggested they felt inferior to international call centre workers because their American accents made them glamorous and they felt at home in the new coffee bars and shopping malls of the city. Yet these stories of the liberating cultural capital and new sense of self achieved through this labor are not the only stories call centre workers tell.

How then do call centre workers narrate the contradictory aspects of the promises of a global career and Americanized self made by their managers? One way they do this is by relating the unavoidable dangers of their night-time journey to work. This is generally described as a smooth passage that gradually lifts them out from Kolkata. But the illusory nature of this movement returns as stories of the hazards that face workers in their *paras* (neighborhoods) because they have to make this journey. A man explained to me that *paralok* (neighborhood people) sometimes stop the jeeps to ask what *goondaism* (gloss) they are up to going out so late. A woman in her mid-twenties said that the neighbors gossip when they see her, a young unmarried girl, all dressed up, getting into a car and going out all night. She added that everyone in the *para* now suspected her of being immoral. Another man told me that he was terrified when he had to go out during a CPI(M) *bandh* called to protest against the riots in Gujarat last year. His wife and family refused to let him go, fearing he would be stopped and beaten up. They had a huge argument but he had to go to work. The management promises that people can, as free individuals, voluntarily lift themselves out of the political and district life of Kolkata and become part of a community of global, American workers. But these stories point to the impossibility of such a dream. Workers never belong entirely to Indian space or the space of flows or space of America, but live their lives in a disturbing nexus of these zones that are linked by their movement between them.

The connection to international rhythms and a free community of friendship is presented to workers as something enticing. In the majority of conversations they reflected this, saying enthusiastically things like, 'We are staying here but actually we are in America' or, 'We don't sweat it out in the sun. We go and come at night. We have a comfort zone, don't get exposed to Indian heat.' But the same people spoke of the possession of their life by meaningless time and incongruous skills that distance them from their families and communities. They complained that their holidays were only American ones, Thanksgiving and Christmas, which were empty for them. This meant that it was difficult to maintain connections with their extended family during religious festivals. Similarly working nightshifts lifted them out from immediate intimate relationships with partners and children. One worker said that, 'Everyday I have to choose between sleep, my friendship and work here and my wife and child. This is not a job like any other job, but you have to pretend it is. We lose track of dates. We refer to today as yesterday. Yesterday as the day before. It has no meaning.' Another told of how he was taken over unawares by his training in inappropriate settings, 'Now whenever I read in church my American accent keeps coming, takes over. My friends get angry and say you've never been to America.' In these stories it is clear that connections to global circuits and self-actualization at work come at the cost of a disconnection from other more local social networks and rhythms. People at Call-Servers experience the 'timeless time' that uses technology to escape the limiting contexts of clock time and bio-social time in order to produce profits as painful, disorienting and meaningless.¹⁴ It is also important to note that they never experience the technological temporality of the call centre as 'timelessness', it is instead strongly marked as American time. Their experience of this time certainly does not live up to the promises of the management about the benefits of the connection to global circuits that takes place at Call-Servers. Nor does it support the

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conjuring of nations as mutually beneficial cultural entities that occurs in workplace training and is evoked by the material culture of Call-servers. Instead, workers feel in their temporal experience an awareness of their dependency on their American customers and investors and the sacrifices of family and community relationships that this dependency entails.

It is the experience of the work process itself that produces the most dissonant narratives from employees. In contrast to the promises of self-actualization, the work ties people to the rhythm of a machine which automatically dials numbers on a pre-set pattern. It takes 20 seconds for a number to be dialed and agents are not encouraged to spend more than 10 minutes speaking to a customer. On the floor it is rarely possible for people to chat and the air is filled with the beeps announcing calls connected and one-way conversations. Workers are encouraged by the sight of other agents pacing up and down on the cusp of making a sale. The shifts run from eleven thirty p.m. to seven-thirty a.m. with two breaks of 20 minutes and one of 10 minutes.

Calls are recorded automatically and are also monitored by team leaders. Agents must be polite at all times whatever the consumer is saying at the other end. They are not allowed to admit that they are calling from India, even if the person on the other end asks them about it. If the customer has call recognition then the call shows up as a New York number. Agents describe themselves as being reduced by the work simply to a voice that must be as fresh, enthusiastic and polite at the beginning of the shift as at the end. Any other aspect of their body must be suppressed to the rhythm of the dialer and controlled, persuasive and transparent communication. As the machine dials for them they literally feel their body becoming part of it and its time-discipline. The technology may link them up to timeless sequences of simultaneity but this is experienced in their bodies as physically bound labor. As a result, in contrast to the claims they make in other contexts about international call centers as places of high-tech work, agents emphasize the hardship of the job. They often suggested that the most important quality for an international call centre employee was physical endurance to work through the night-shifts. The technological self of the worker is profoundly at odds with the proffered expectations of Call-Servers as a place of luxurious consumer liberty and instant global flows enabled by seamless technology. The accounts that most fully reveal disappointment with the hallucinatory nature of the call centre environment are those which express shock about the nature of the interaction with customers. Workers expect to be connected to global circuits as equals who have Americanized themselves in order to produce customer delight. Yet instead they experience broken, repetitive and unequal communication. They talk with intense disappointment and pain of how customers in the majority of cases hang up, block calls, give excuses, lie and abuse them. Team leaders describe one of their main tasks as comforting workers upset by these interactions. The expectation of an equalized relationship through global connections between nations is the central illusion at the heart of this industry and the current project of globalization in India. Even though call centre workers have reshaped their selves and inverted their lives for this dream, in their stories of broken communication they confront the disorientating fact that globalization is about unequal economic relationships and making sales to a reluctant, distant public.

Overall these narratives emphasize the re-emergence of elements that are supposed to have been banished from the high-tech global workplace of international call centers and from the liberalized entrepreneurial future of India. The obligations of place resurface. In the call centre workers find it impossible to distance themselves from the places that they live in and to become independent free agents. They remain accountable to networks of community and local politics. Personal relationships of kin and community do not disappear. Self-actualization as an individual in the workplace leads to tremendous costs in terms of personal relationships. Bio-social rhythms resurface in a high tech work environment that denies time. Workers' bodies tire through shifts. Physical labor appears in context of a high-tech knowledge economy. Workers are tied to the rhythm of a machine. Inequality returns in the space of

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equalizing global flows between nations. Communication with American customers, who workers are supposed to have become the same as through their training, is truncated and one-sided. International call centers such as Call-Servers are a microcosm of one vision of

the future of liberalization and globalization in India but they contain all the fault-lines of this vision as well. Workers in these places experience all the hopes associated with liberalization and globalization, but they are also disappointed in their hopes. These workers therefore offer subdued critical commentaries on the illusions of the current national economic project in India. Perhaps companies such as Call-Servers will, as they intend, produce the next generation of Indians. Yet this generation, in spite of their training, may no longer share the nationalist and economic dreams of their employers. It is too soon to tell what the political entailments of this disillusionment will be. Although the recent defeat of the BJP in the 2004 elections after a campaign which stressed the high-tech future of the Indian economy perhaps suggests gradual signs of its emergence.

Conclusion: Rethinking the place of politics and nationalism in contemporary global capitalism

The contradictory work practices of Call-Servers and these accounts by workers have important implications for our understanding of the kinds of social experiences emerging from current forms of global capitalism. They point to the necessity of rethinking the place of the political in the contemporary world. Despite the claims of neo-liberal discourse, we have not moved from a situation in which the nation-state was involved in the management of populations and economies to one in which private enterprise has free rein. Instead the place of politics has partly shifted from the public sector to the private sector. It is this devolving of political projects of liberty and nationalism to the realm of enterprise that we can see at work in Call-Servers. This process has remained largely uncharted in sociological models of globalization simply because these emphasize international flows of capital and information assuming that these retain their neutral abstract qualities as they become embedded in particular places. These flows, however, do not remain abstract. Instead they arrive marked with particular national associations and become caught up in specific political projects of transformation. We can see this process at work in three important ways in international call centers in India that suggest new directions for our research on global capitalism.

The case of international call centers reveals, first of all, that the space of abstract flows is not segregated from the space of places nor are these two kinds of places occupied by distinct and politically divergent constituencies. Large-scale sociological models often suggest that a particular political future will emerge from global flows of information and capital. Overall the argument of writers such as Castells argues that this future will reduce the possibility of political solidarities as the social experience of elites and the wider population diverge. These discussions assume that it is elites alone who are becoming increasingly cosmopolitan, who work under individualized, flexible work regimes and who are oriented to global flows. They imagine, in opposition to this, the emergence of a larger group of people who are increasingly isolated, fixed and segmented into disunited groups defined by identification with places. In India from the perspective of what might be called the new proletariat of the knowledge economy this model can be called into question. The workplace of the international call centre fuses together elite political dreams and experiences in a space of lower-middle class hard labor. New forms of nationalism in India argue that everyone is becoming a consumer, that work turns people into entrepreneurs and that the politics of the public sphere will become irrelevant in the new individualized pursuit of freedom. However workers at Call-Servers are not so sure about the liberties offered by globalization and liberalization. Overall this suggests that we may have missed many other contexts in which the space of flows and the space of places intermingle with political projects in people's lives in ways that will have unexpected consequences for the imagining of political futures. The predictions of a disorganization or subduing of political solidarities in the network society therefore are profoundly overplayed. Instead these will take new forms linked to the new experiences people have of working in globally linked workplaces that embed the national in private enterprise.

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Secondly, contrary to models of the current forms of network society such as the highly influential work of Castells, it is clear from the example of Call-Servers that the space of flows is never experienced as a disembedded location that exists solely under the sway of 'timeless time'. Instead, the material culture and management practices of the international call centre create elaborate boundaries between an imagined 'here'/India and 'there'/America. Young lower middle class Indians are attracted to this work precisely because it allows them to feel that they are crossing this spatial and class boundary. The experience of workers is always therefore marked as belonging to a particular place in the globe. They feel this embedding in a distinct place as a process in their bodies from: the sensations of hot and cold as they move from outside into the place of work; the rhythms of the machines dialing customers in the United States tiring their bodies; and in the shift in Americanized habitus between work and home. The timeless time of the workplace is also mixed with a kind of older disciplinary time through the imperative of the dialing machine. It is caught up with a sense of place too because it is always described by workers as American time. All of this suggests that models such as that of Castells of a distinct space of flows and timeless time that operate at the heart of networked capitalism are closer to elite discourses of globalization than to experiences of it in India. Despite middle class dreams that they can simply divert neutral global networks of capital towards Bengal and produce a Bengali economic and cultural cosmopolitanism again, in the international call centers these global connections carry embedded notions of Americanness. In the international call centre, particular forms of America and India are both imagined and created in relation to each other. This suggests that there may be many other kinds of workplaces across the globe that are not non-places or open sites for the creation of new identities of class and consumption free from older constraints. Instead they are sites for the production of distinct notions of placeness and identity that tie the desires of workers to particular imagined locations and scales of action.¹⁵ As this example shows, by becoming workers in globally connected companies, people also learn particular nationalist visions embedded in ideas of 'American' work culture. It is therefore important that when we analyze the contexts in which multinational enterprise 'lands' we pay attention to the ways in which it is marked as having a different series of qualities from that of local enterprise. Otherwise we will miss an important contemporary arena for the creation of the political idea of nations within the global ecumene.

This brings us to the third important way in which international flows of capital across national borders become embedded in specific political projects. The workplace of the international call centre is clearly suffused with current nationalist visions in India. Far from just being a place of production that enables workers to create new identities based around consumption and/or class, the international call centre trains people in practices of consuming and is suffused with a political project. Call-Servers helps to bring into being the reimagining of India as a place of consumption, entrepreneurship and self-actualization. All of this suggests that we need to pay much closer attention to the national projects embedded in other private workplaces funded by international capital. As state projects take new forms we need to expand our notions of the contexts for nationalism and regionalism beyond those of the public sector or public sphere. International call centers in India show dramatically that as capital embeds itself in various contexts it does not just create a private sphere of enterprise. It also entangles itself in the production of regions, nations, consumer-citizens and unpredictable political futures. The practices of Call servers and the imaginings of a Bengali cosmopolitanism among the middle classes and Marxist government in West Bengal both illustrate this process. Our models and ethnographies of global capitalism have been surprisingly slow to recognize this important movement of ideas of the nation into the realm of private enterprise. We need to radically readjust our ideas about the contexts in which nations and freedom are imagined in order to catch up with contemporary realities. Sociologists have argued that the imaginative and real power of the nation is dissolving in current forms of global capitalism that make the fiction of national economies and identities visible.¹⁶ It is quite clear from the example of Call-servers that such prophecies of the end of the placeness, integrity and political project of the nation are premature. What has shifted is the significance of the vertical integration of the state in this process of making the places and politics of the nation. Instead globally linked companies, such as that I have described here can be seen as central to this place-making.¹⁷ In call servers American trainers and Bengali workers encounter each other in a space of entrepreneurship and mutually, if unequally, imagine and embody their national differences. The distinct placeness of America and India are also made in the transition from work to home by call centre workers. In this respect such companies are equivalent to the neo-liberal NGO's described by Gupta and Ferguson in their effects on the reconfiguring of the spatial authority of the state.¹⁸ They reorient the processes of verticalization and scale of encompassment of people's lives. International call-centre workers now become national and regional subjects and imagine their freedoms according to the encounters created by global capitalism.

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This great emphasis on the scale of the nation in these global workplaces is ultimately important for our understanding of how economic inequalities are currently reproduced. Speculative financiers make profits from imagining and then building links on a global scale, but the actual construction and operation of the workplaces associated with global capitalism depends heavily on nationalist dreams and the materialization of the nation. As national and regional states across the globe become increasingly non-governmental and pull back on their regulation of economic and labor relations within their territory, national cultures and essences become more central to the negotiation and operation of international investment. In both the politics of the West Bengal state and in Call servers asymmetrical economic relationships were presented as equal, beneficial relations between national and regional cultures. At the same time the politics of regions and nations was reduced to a right to take part freely in enterprise. These forms of nation and culture serve to depoliticize structural inequality, distract from the declining regulatory role of regional and national states and to make politics into a matter of defending culture.¹⁹ Reworking the national in this context means making it into a vehicle for the spread of inequality and neo-liberalism. The experiences of workers at Call-Servers are important because they short-circuit this process and its "economy of appearances," revealing in their tired bodies and disappointments the hollowness of these forms of nationalism.

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¹This paper is based on fieldwork in Kolkata with call centre workers begun in April 2002 and funded by the staff research fund at the London School of Economics. I am grateful for the input of conversations with Chris Fuller, Jonathan Parry and Mukulika Banerjee. It does not explore the family and outside workplace life of workers, which will be part of a later phase of research.

² Atal Behari Vajpayee quoted in *The Hindu* (9/23/00).

³ Figures from the National Association of Software and Services Companies quoted in ‘G.E. emerges big shot of IT-enabled services,’ *The Economic Times*, New Delhi (31/12/01).

⁴ See Kasmir, 382.

⁵ This absence of discussion of the embedding of political projects in contemporary workplaces is particularly strange since this has been traced in the literature on current development projects. For example see Woost (1997).

⁶ The political origins of contemporary forms of global capitalism are often underplayed in anthropological and sociological discussions. Here my emphasis on the role of the IMF follows the important insights of Castells (1996) that neo-liberalism was created by political decisions not by a juggernaut of uncontrollable economic changes. For this kind of perspective also see Harvey’s recent discussion of the historical emergence of neo-liberalism (2006).

⁷ See C.Fuller and N. discussion of the role of the cosmopolitan quality of “exposure” in promoting continuity in class privilege in the software industry in Chennai. The cosmopolitanism of lower middle class call centre operatives threatens this sense of upper middle class (and often brahminical) distinction.

⁸ Including the Vice-President of NIIT, Country Manager of Oracle Software India Ltd, Director Cognizant Technology Solutions, CMD Globsyn, Vice President of Computer Associates (India).

⁹ (2000) Information Technology Policy West Bengal, p. 1, available on www.westbengal.govt.org.

¹⁰ As Massey et al (1992) have revealed in their study of science parks in Britain the designation of one part of industry as a sunrise sector with high prestige has problematic effects. This sector can only be the domain of an elite labelled as skilled in contrast to others who are paid less, labelled as unskilled and seen as part of an ‘old economy.’ There cannot be a gradual diffusion of the utopian imagined future of work to the whole country. They also point out that science parks have not, contrary to claims made by their political and business founders, become income generators for the regions they are placed in. They have few connections to local businesses, they send property-prices sky-rocketing and have only generated a few service sector jobs and have generally increased social polarisation. In summary science parks increase inequality by reinforcing distinctions symbolically and materially between a world of sunrise high tech industries where intellectuals create new technological ideas unfettered by unions and a world of sunset manufacturing industries where the unimaginative masses perform manual labour. As a result they have helped a neo-liberal dream of privatisation, de-unionisation and deskilling to become real. This is just as true of Kolkata as of Britain.

¹¹ For an interesting discussion of the place of Amway in neo-liberal dreams in Thailand see Wilson (1999).

¹² This pride is similar to that of the data-entry workers described by Freeman (2000) in Barbados. In her case this is a way of distinguishing their labour and identities from that of factory workers. In the case of the call centres this is also important but, as I discuss later on, this distinction also charts call centre workers’ difference from public sector workers.

¹³ This phrase “politics of scale” is from Law’s provocative article. He suggests that politics is in part a fight about the significance of actions—their marking as gigantic, large-scale and global or as small, insignificant and parochial. For example the global architecture and name of the Infinity building are claims that it is a sign of a large-scale irresistible force. Within this claim to scale are then enclosed the framing of American and Indian national scales that occurs in Call Servers.

¹⁴ ‘Timeless time’ is of course Castells’ phrase. He suggests that this sense of time exists in tandem with the new space of flows and that it is progressively replacing disciplinary and bio-social time. The call centre workers’ experience as “new proletariats” of the knowledge economy working in the space of flows contradicts this claim.

¹⁵ For an older, colonial version of this process in the Indian railway colony that has a different kind of cultural and racial dynamic and has led to the creation of a kind of authoritarian democracy in some public sector industries in India see Bear (1994, 2007).

¹⁶ See for example S.Lash and J.Urry's argument (1994).

¹⁷ Place-making is a reference to A.Gupta and J.Ferguson's coining of this phrase (1997) in the following terms, "we must...turn toward a focus on social and political processes of place-making, conceived less as a matter of "ideas" than of embodied practices that shape identities and enable resistances" (6). This notion along with the insights provided by Lefebvre (1991) inform the approach of this chapter. In particular I take from Lefebvre his critique of the capitalist illusion that space is a transparent, readable, empty thing and his restoration of the sensual experience of as well as examination of the political economy of space. The capitalist illusion seems to be replaying itself in Castell's visions of global workplaces as places of timeless time and placeless places.

¹⁸ See J.Ferguson and A.Gupta (2002).

¹⁹ See Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neo-Liberal World Order* from whom I have borrowed the critique of the idea of a national economy as a bounded entity (characteristic of developmental states of the post-war period onwards), but I have turned this critique against a different contemporary neo-liberal form of nationalism and economy from that Ferguson describes in his chapter, "Paradoxes of Sovereignty and Independence: 'Real' and 'Pseudo' Nation-States and the Depoliticization of Poverty" (50-68). In the current moment in India we need to worry more about the failures of nation-states and regional bodies to assert control over labor and economics than about their claims to be in central command of these.