

# **PRECARIAT ON THE LINE: MAPPING CLASS IDENTITY IN BELGRADE'S CALL CENTERS**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how call center agents in Belgrade, Serbia's ICT sector understand their class identities. Due to their relatively well paid jobs, the stability of their work, as well as their consumptive activities, call center agents embody some aspects of the middle class; however, their work is neither fulfilling nor is their pay sufficient to be completely financially independent. In addition, agents' jobs require them to engage in a negotiation of class politics with their international customers, while they position themselves against call center agents in other countries. I employ a form of class analysis that utilizes biographical interviews, eschewing the use of concrete class positions in favor of interpreting class as a paradoxical set of relations that undergird the work that agents perform. I show that, rather than exemplifying an emerging global middle class or embodying qualities of the precariat as predicted by new capitalist theorists, Serbian call center agents form a complex and contradictory middle class identity emerging through the objective conditions of their work and the particularities of Serbian neoliberalism.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

With a shift in preponderance from manufacturing to services in the economies of developed countries comes predictions of widespread change. Facilitated by the advancement of information technologies, and occurring alongside the globalization of capital and trade, accounts of these changes have emphasized a transformation of social and working life. This includes increased fluidity and individualization (Bauman 2001); new networks of connectivity and information flow which compress space and time (Castells 2009); and the dissolution of old bureaucratic structures, forcing workers to embrace flexibility and uncertainty (Sennett 1998). Scholars have theorized that these changes compose a new phase in the capitalist mode of production, aptly termed ‘new capitalism’ (Sennett 2006).

Most recently, social scientists have linked the above phenomena with the emergence of precarity and precarious labor. A rise in precarity implies that changes in state regulation as well as capital outflow from core economies in the capitalist world system—globalization and neoliberalism—have resulted since the 1970s in decreased labor-related security for workers (Standing 2011). Central to precarity is the creation of new lines of work, which exceed the boundaries of nation states, are highly transitory due to international capital mobility and free trade agreements, and both exploitative of the minds as well as bodies of laborers (Brophy 2011).

A ubiquitous example of this kind of labor is the call center. Using a long-distance connection and computer, call center workers—referred to as ‘agents’—connect consumers and businesses across continents from locations spread the world over. Despite the fact that call centers internationally evidence myriad working arrangements and conditions (Holman, Batt, and Holtgrewe 2007), their facilitation by globalization has associated them with precarious labor.

Guy Standing (2011), for example, whose text *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* has launched the term into popular parlance, dubbed call centers “ubiquitous, a sinister symbol of globalisation, electronic life and alienated labour” (16).

Standing (2011) emphasizes that neoliberal economic policies and globalization have resulted in a fragmentation of the global class structure, fostering significant growth in one class position in particular—the ‘precariat’ (7). In contrast with the industrial working and middle classes, the precariat lacks particular labor securities; has an income entirely restricted to money wages; is without the same set of rights as the middle class; and is plagued with trauma at the lack of an occupational identity (Standing 2014:16–21). Yet, as scholars have shown, new globalized industries do not exhibit the same unilateral precarious effects on all parts of the working population, and have resulted in contingent manifestations of precarity and class fragmentation depending largely on the national historical legacies of neoliberalism in which these industries embed themselves (cf. Matos 2012; Mikuš 2015a, 2015b).

In this thesis, I examine how class identity and precarity are illustrated via the outsourced call centers of Belgrade, Serbia’s information and communication technology (ICT) sector through an ethnographic investigation of agents’ lives. How do agents in Belgrade’s ICT sector understand their own class identity vis-à-vis their line of work? In what ways has this sector, in tandem with Serbia’s neoliberal economic policies after the 2000 revolution, altered the class structure of Serbian society as well as the lifestyles of its workforce?

Entering the field, I expected to find that outsourced call centers produced unstable work arrangements, employing flexible contracts, and providing low wages, as can be common within call centers in other parts of Europe (Frade, Darmon, and Laparra 2012:12). What I show, however, is that the working relationships of Serbia’s call center workforce stand in stark contrast

to the precarious conditions theorized by Standing (2011). Instead of the bolstering the growth of the precariat, I argue that Serbian call centers produce a contradictory manifestation of an emerging global middle class (cf. Kalb 2014; Murphy 2011).

Rather than insecure poorly paid work, the Serbian ICT sector provides stable employment with a relatively high wage placing agents, in terms of income and consumption practices, into the Serbian middle class. Call centers attempt to recruit skilled personnel that speak proficient English, and who hope to obtain jobs in Serbia's creative industries. What becomes contradictory, however, is that while their wages are above average, the high costs of living in Belgrade make financial independence difficult. Additionally, agents hoping to move into employment in creative industries quickly become disillusioned as deskilled call center work lacks the fulfilment they expect. Thus agents ambivalently identify with a middle class status.

Yet, simultaneously, the transnational character of their work engages agents in a process of class negotiation with a plurality of relations: their coworkers, their workplace as the embodiment of globalized capitalism, their customers, and the representations they form of other agents often located in India. Thus, Serbian agents form a complex class identity within a "shifting field of forces" (Kalb 2015:15). Rather than simply falling into a class position—precariat or middle class—agents embody the paradoxes of a supposedly global middle class emerging within neoliberal Serbian society.

I define class as a series of social relationships emerging from the act of work, "the social and cultural crux around which whole ways of life become organized and maintained" (Thompson 1966:3). Despite the exacerbation of structural economic inequalities in late capitalist societies, contemporary scholars of class analysis have noted that working populations experience a dis-identification with traditional class structure-defined social groupings (Bottero

2004; Reay 1998). In the case of Serbia, class dis-identification must also be understood within the social and historical context of post-socialism. Industrial working class identifications are difficult to reconcile in post-Yugoslav nations, where class was continually deconstructed to classlessness (Tomić-Koludrović and Petrić 2014:206), while in Serbia political elites in the 1990s employed a “peculiar melding of nation and class” (Meszmann 2015:673) to solidify power.

Given these complications, I examine the way that economic inequalities are intertwined with social and cultural factors, as agents “continue to define their own individual identities in ways which inevitably involve relational comparisons” (Savage 2000:xii) along a hierarchy. Avoiding an individualist and positivist approach to class, unduly centering on attributes of inequality to the detriment of their causes (Carrier 2015:37–38), I eschew the notion of class positions, choosing instead to focus on how global capitalism produces a diversity of contradictory class identities composed of “shifting, interconnected, and antagonistic” (Kalb 2015:14) social relationships reverberating with uneven effects across the domains of work and social reproduction. Nevertheless, I focus here on work as the relationship that determines income and access to economic capital, “generat[ing] significant differentials of power” and revealing the wage-earner’s “embedded[ness] in institutional relations of control” (Flemmen 2013:337) As the character of agents’ work is transnational, I show how these relational class identities form at a crux of local histories and global processes of accumulation (Kalb 1997).

### *1.1 Methodology and Thesis Structure*

This thesis is divided structurally into three sections: The first begins with a sketch of the global proliferation of call center industries, in which I historically contextualize the emergence of the Serbian ICT sector. I then proceed with a discussion of ethnographic literature on the



global service sector in order to position this study within analyses of class in call center work. Last, I review how class is employed by new capitalism theorists, situating my contribution within the confluence of these three streams.

In the second section, I provide my ethnographic account of the lives of Serbian call center agents. My focus is on the city of Belgrade, the center of Serbia's ICT sector where in 2013 it employed nearly 7,280 people and contained 1,088 companies, more than Serbia's other two largest cities, Novi Sad and Niš, combined (Radosavljević 2015:10). The locus of Serbia's growing ICT industry, Belgrade is the center of Serbia's economic transition from a manufacturing-oriented economy focused on the generation of domestic consumption, toward one oriented toward services and exports, which in 2015, composed 51.1% of Serbia's gross domestic product (GDP) (Central Intelligence Agency 2016).

The data this thesis utilizes is derived from nine interviews with 10 agents, all of whom are either currently employed in a call center in Belgrade, or were employed in a call center in the last five months. The interviews I conducted were semi-structured, and were all held outside of agents' places of work. In exploring how the class identity of agents is both relational and formed through a mixture of social, cultural, and economic forces, I employ a biographical approach methodology to reveal how agents develop their life strategies (Mrozowicki and Van Hootehem 2008:203).

The agents with whom I spoke ranged in age from as young as 21 to as old as 34, and all but two were born in Belgrade. Seven out of the ten agents I spoke with are male, which is unrepresentative of the call center workforce on a global scale where 69% of workers are female (Holman, Batt, and Holtgrewe 2007:9). Six of the agents work in a large outsourced call center for an American company, which I refer to as Computer Central, while the other four are

employed in different call centers. Two of the four agents work in other outsourced call centers, interacting with American and Scandinavian customers, respectively. Of the remaining two agents one works in a partially privatized state-owned company where she interacts with French customers, and the other in a state-owned Serbian bank that serves domestic clientele. I supplement my data with interviews from these two agents to show the unequal effects of Serbian neoliberalism on call center work in the public and private sectors, as I contrast the experiences of agents in outsourced and state-owned industries.

My positioning as an American student, despite my closeness in age to the majority of my sample, created a distance between my respondents and myself. My time in Belgrade was short, which made the establishment of substantive trusting relationships difficult. In making contact with agents with whom I could interview, I relied on referrals to coworkers and friends employed in the sector. This yielded a minimal amount of success, as most who promised to introduce me to their colleagues often failed to do so. Agents were at times nervous about revealing too much information, as those who worked in Computer Central are required to sign a confidentiality agreement to keep company information private. Being an American yielded a modicum of suspicion from some respondents, inciting questions, often jokingly, as to whether or not I was a spy.

In the concluding section of this thesis, I deliver a synopsis of my analysis as well as discuss its theoretical and political implications. I focus on how my findings complicate a unilateral view of precarity and flexibilization, with particular reference to the viability of Standing's (2011) theory of a globally fractured class structure as well as a unitary convergence toward precarity under capitalism.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I present a brief sketch of existing scholarship on call centers and position this thesis within research on the identities of call center agents. I begin by contextualizing the emergence of the Serbian ICT sector within the proliferation of call centers internationally, before moving into an overview of ethnographic call center scholarship, paying particular attention to the way it and new capitalist theorists portray class in globalized forms of work. I emphasize that in addition to a dearth of ethnographic literature on call centers in Central and Eastern Europe, there also exists a paucity of research that thoroughly treats the complexity of class identities in call center labor. I argue for a dynamic relational approach to the study of call center class identity instead of one that makes use of static class positions.

### *2.1 Call Center Studies*

Although associated with outsourcing white-collar labor from the United States and Western Europe to South Asia, the mobility of call centers is far from unidirectional. While Indian call centers have experienced explosive growth since the 1990s, Central and Eastern European countries have increasingly become their competitors (Fiscutean 2016). In 2016, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary all assumed positions within the Tholons Top 100 Outsourcing Destinations list (2), advertising competitive wages, workers with developed skill sets speaking numerous languages, and locations nearer to Western Europe (Hall 2011). Despite exhibiting comparably higher labor costs, Central and Eastern European states boast a greater geocultural closeness with a Western customer base, as well as a wealth of European Union funding for innovation initiatives and a tradition of importance placed on technical subjects in their educational systems (MacDowell 2016). One such example is the Republic of Serbia, which in 2014 boasted an information technology (IT) market valued at nearly €433 million and a 1.0%

annual growth rate (Matijević and Šolaja 2015:28). Computer Central in particular reportedly employs close to 600 workers, with intentions to expand in the coming years. While modest in comparison with some of its post-socialist neighbors, Serbian call centers in the ICT sector have had a significant impact on the nation's economy.

The conditions under which the ICT sectors of Serbia and Central and Eastern Europe are growing are not unique to the region, and are in fact derived from similar global economic circumstances that have bolstered growth in call centers the world over. As Rosemary Batt, David Holman, and Ursula Holtgrewe (2009) note, advances in digital technology and services deregulation facilitated by the World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade in Services signed in 1995 have precipitated the proliferation of call center outsourcing (453), after which call centers have grown explosively worldwide. Prior to 2008, India experienced a 20% annual increase in its business process outsourcing industry (Crabtree 2012), and still registers a robust growth rate, reaching nearly 13% in 2015 (Government of India, Department of Electronics and Information Technology 2016).

Of all lines of work in the ICT sector, call center jobs tend to be particularly mobile, susceptible to restructuring through outsourcing and subcontracting, as well as employ non-standard precarious working arrangements; in this way, call centers have come to bear most starkly the marks of globalization (Doellgast, Batt, and Sørensen 2009:349–351; Huws 2009:3). Nevertheless, a considerable amount of variation exists in the way that call centers are structured and managed depending on the nation they are situated within. For example, The Global Call Center Report, a study of 2,500 call centers across 17 countries, found that while 40% of call centers workers were covered by collective bargaining arrangements, nation states with coordinated market economies tended to more often contain call centers with union

representation when compared with liberal market economies (Holman, Batt, and Holtgrewe 2007:21). The authors of the Report thus conclude that despite the globalization of service work, “call center activities have a remarkably national face” (Holman, Batt, and Holtgrewe 2007:v).

Despite its increasing relevance in the global market, little social scientific scholarship has focused on IT outsourcing to Central and Eastern Europe. One notable exception is Vassil Kirov and Kapka Mircheva’s (2009) research on employment conditions in Bulgaria’s outsourced client services call center industry. Their findings conclude that while similarities exist between employee selection practices in Bulgarian call centers and others across Europe, considerable differences in terms of union representation and managerial organization are present (Kirov and Mircheva 2009:155-156). Kirov and Mircheva’s (2009) work underscores the need for further research into the national idiosyncrasies of globalized service work; however, their industrial relations approach exposes the importance of investigating more closely the lived experiences of agents ethnographically.

## *2.2 Identity in Call Center Ethnographies*

To date, anthropological and sociological scholarship utilizing ethnography, historical comparative methods, and political economy have primarily attempted to explore the "subjective dimensions of the call centre workforce" (Brophy 2015:213), articulating worker experiences while investigating questions of identity formation (cf. Huws 2009; Lloyd 2013; Matos 2012; Stevens 2014). While, a wealth of literature on call center work focuses on the way that transnational labor shapes hybrid ethnic and cultural identities (cf. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Pérez 2013) little has attempted to explicitly address how it shapes contradictory experiences of class as I do in this thesis.

An exception to this trend is Kiran Mirchandani (2004, 2012), who emphasizes that transnational work positions Indian agents within a “complex set of class politics” (16), where workers, located between East and West, blue-collar and white-collar, professionalism and routinization, engage in a continuous negotiation of their class identities (24). Nevertheless, Mirchandani (2012) recognizes that call center labor often fosters one of two kinds of class identities, generally dependent upon where the work is situated (24). The first is common of ethnographic portrayals of Indian call center agents, where educated workers reproduce urban middle class identities, occupying relatively high-paying jobs while assuming consumptive lifestyles (cf. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Pérez 2013; Mirchandani 2012; Nadeem 2011). As Shehzad Nadeem (2011) notes, call centers recruit from “privileged castes and classes” (3) and workers often spend their wages at “exurban malls, cafes, and nightclubs” (3).

In regards to agents’ middle class identity, Jonathan Murphy (2011) has made an even bolder claim, arguing that Indian agents embody an emerging global middle class, as their class habitus, conditioned by identity management and a high income, more strongly relates them to the middle classes of Western countries in terms of values and consumption patterns rather than the older professional middle class of India (430). Agents identify with international brands, support globalization, sport liberal social values, and have a strong sense of pride toward their work, viewing it as a professionalized career despite their lack of geographical mobility and knowledge that call center capital is highly transitory (Murphy 2011:429). Murphy (2011) thus claims that the impact of the global economy through call center work in India has disrupted the nation’s class structure, immersing its local institutions within a set of global flows (430). Rather than breeding contradictory class relations, as Mirchandani (2012) suggests, Murphy (2011) sees in Indian call center agents a convergence toward a global middle class habitus.

The second form of class identity is common of call centers located in places like the United Kingdom, where work is often low-paid, situated in deindustrialized communities, provided on a part-time or temporary basis, and fosters a disillusioned and frustrated sub-set of the working class (cf. Lloyd 2013). For example, Anthony Lloyd's (2013) investigation of the Middlesbrough, UK call center Call Direct shows how deindustrialization has created fertile ground for the proliferation of work in the low-wage service industry (1). While the call center business in Middlesbrough flourishes, it simultaneously creates insecure jobs, where turnover is rampant and agents feel little pride associated with their work (Lloyd 2013:143). Lloyd (2013) concludes that agents' feelings toward this dead-end work, their lack of interest in labor organization, or "desire for collective betterment" (151) is indicative of a post-modern identity part and parcel with post-industrialism in a "liquid society" (152). Lloyd (2013) explicitly contrasts his coworkers at Call Direct and the working class of 18th and 19th century England depicted by E.P. Thompson (1966), concluding that because Call Direct agents do not exemplify the attitudes of an archetypical factory worker organized into trade unions, voting along traditional industrial working class lines, social class ceases to be a relevant analytic category in this form of work (156).

### *2.3 New Capitalism and Class*

Despite his conclusions in regards to the relevance of class, many of the workers Lloyd (2013) describes could be classified as the precariat. While new capitalism proponents argue for a connection between deindustrialization, globalization, neoliberalism, and new forms of employment, Standing (2011) adds to the picture a claim in regards to class identity and positioning: the ills of new capitalism give way to a nascent global precariat, a "class-in-the-making" (7). Standing (2011) defines the precariat negatively, as lacking seven forms of what he

defines as labor security under industrial citizenship (10). This includes a lack of employment opportunities, protection against arbitrary firings, the possibility for advancement and protection against deskilling, work safety regulations, a stable livable income, and access to union representation (Standing 2011:10). Instead of social class disappearing, Standing (2011) argues that the class structures that defined industrial capitalist societies have fractured, giving way to a new seven tier class framework (7). This process, which Standing (2011) attributes to a “flexible open labour market” in the “globalisation era” (7) has produced the precariat as a class-in-the-making and not a class-for-itself, due to its lack of consciousness and heterogeneous composition, including interns, temporary workers or those working flexible schedules, the non-unionized, contractors, and labor migrants (13-14).

Standing’s (2011) formulations echo the diagnoses of new capitalist theorists, in particular Richard Sennett (1998, 2006). For Sennett (1998), corporations in new capitalism shed their formerly iron-cage bureaucratic structures in order to become “flatter and more flexible organizations” (23) and more network like to accommodate a new global reach. Sennett (2006) postulates that this produces a form of insecurity for workers, who in turn must become more flexible, adapting their skills, working locations, and social lives to the whims of their employers, in order to avoid what Sennett calls the “specter of uselessness” (83).

Both Standing (2011) and Sennett (1998, 2006) are concerned with what they identify as labor flexibility, which for Standing (2011) is presaged by the global integration of the world economy after the 1970s (27). The commodification of firms as well as the integration of an international labor market, with workers from India, China, and the ex-Soviet countries entering the global economy, have pushed employment conditions toward an international convergence of precarity, where all working relations are becoming increasingly precarious (Standing 2011:28-



30). Standing (2011) sees this as the cause of labor market flexibility, through the increased use of temporary contracts, offshoring, and the decline of welfare state benefits (31-41). This coincides for Standing (2011) in the increase of state subsidies for large corporations, indicative of neo-liberal economic restructuring, and the growth of informal economies (54-56).

If the labor securities that Standing (2011) identifies have provided the means by which workers can ascend into the position of the middle class, a lack of these securities then imply that the precariat is to be defined as the middle class' antithesis. Precarious employment in new capitalism, for Standing (2011), fosters the precariat as an "emerging dangerous class" (25) to stand in juxtaposition with the secure middle class. Thus, the two are demarcated into distinct positions, locked in a zero-sum game with one another.

Criticisms of Standing (2011) have focused primarily on his inattention to how precarity is manifested in culturally specific "differentially constitutive histories" (Matos 2012:240). Theorizing the precariat as the inevitable product of a universal ahistorical precariatization risks a transnational centrism (Grewal and Kaplan 1994), which views global capitalism, precarity, and flexibilization as all-encompassing and homogenizing. Additionally, Standing's (2011) reliance on class positions risks simplifying precarity, theorizing it as "sanitized, measurable, reified and reduced to a mere [a] category of income, education and occupational status" (Kalb 2015:2). The volatility of globalized capitalism, which has unhinged the industrial class structure that Standing (2011) identifies, has also destabilized any system of class borders, blurring separations between the middle and working classes (Kalb 2015:15). One such example is the supposed global trend of the growing international middle class as declared by the National Intelligence Council (NIC) in 2012. The NIC (2012) argues that by 2030 the world's population will see vast reductions in poverty thanks to an ascending global middle class, evidenced by the number of people steadily

moving above \$1.25 a day in purchasing power parity internationally (8). Middle class is determined by the NIC according to an individual's purchasing power of between \$10-50 a day (National Intelligence Council 2012:9), which in addition to being of little utility due to its low margin for inclusion, pays little attention to workers' labor market security. Rather than a solidifying an international middle class, or damning workers to precarity, globalized capitalism blends middle class, working class, and the precariat paradoxically together (Kalb 2014:159).

Thus, both call center studies and new capitalism theorists miss the contradictory components of class relations in global capitalism by focusing on either a universalized understanding of inevitable flexibilization, or by employing a concrete system of class positions, grouping agents into the middle class or precarious working class. What I contribute to this discussion is a class analysis that eschews locations and universalizing processes, and instead examines class as a paradoxical set of relations that undergird this form of work. The ideal tool for this analysis is the ethnographic investigation, in which I capture the dynamism of class identity instead of placing agents into class categories (Kalb 2015:15). While I examine class as structured by capitalism, I view it as a volatile system producing dynamic and unequal sets of relations as opposed to universalized precarious or middle classes.

### 3. CALL CENTER LABOR AND THE CONTRADICTION SERBIAN MIDDLE CLASS

On one sunny Wednesday mid-afternoon during my 20-day stay in Belgrade, I walked up the path leading to the house in which I had rented a room for my fieldwork sojourn. On the front porch sat Branko, a call center agent in his early twenties. A close friend of the family from whom I was renting, Branko lived in a room upstairs, which he shared with the family's son and the occasional houseguest. The midday sun beat down on the patio as Branko sat outside squinting over a grease-soaked paper bag containing the burek he had bought for lunch.

I greeted Branko, asking him how he was feeling. He responded that he had recently awoken, and had managed only to take a short walk to Vojvode Stepe to buy his food. Branko had worked an additional hour longer than his normal eight-hour night shift at Computer Central and was completely exhausted. He and his colleagues had been required to stay and perform mandatory overtime, as a technical problem with the computer software they support caused their call queues to be especially busy the previous evening with upset customers. Branko was also getting used to a new schedule: on a biweekly basis, he is scheduled for alternate night and day shifts so that every two weeks his sleep patterns are required to change. Branko retains a sardonic sense of humor despite his fatigue, and we sit and discuss the most outrageous customer calls he received the previous evening.

Despite the fact that he describes his work as easy, Branko's job demands a considerable amount of emotional and mental flexibility. In exchange, Branko is paid considerably more than the average Serbian worker. Branko is ambivalent about the prospects of climbing the Computer Central corporate ladder, unsurprising granted that his job in Serbia's blossoming ICT sector vividly illustrates the routinized underside of its creative industries. In this chapter, I explore how

my respondents view their work within outsourced call centers. I show how their work has produced a complex class identity, exposing a contradictory manifestation of the middle class.

### *3.1 Belgrade's Call Center Labor Force*

When asked about the benefits of call center work, respondents' answers were unanimous: a higher wage and steady employment is the industry's most significant advantage. Despite lacking a pension and health insurance contributions, salaries at Computer Central begin at €500, a figure close to which all respondents employed in large and medium sized companies reported being paid. This is a sum considerably higher than Serbia's national minimum wage, which from 2012 until the present has stagnated around €235 (EuroStat 2016), while from 2000 onward the national average wage stood at €374 (Trading Economics 2016).

A boon to agents' livelihoods, wages in Serbia's outsourced call centers are lower than those paid in other European countries, comprising one of the factors that make the nation a competitive outsourcing locale. A 2011 press release from the Sitel Corporation, one of the world's leading providers of outsourced customer support services, announcing the company would be expanding into the Serbian market states: "a well-educated workforce, high national literacy levels and lower costs mean that Serbia is an attractive proposition for organisations new to the region" (Business Wire 2011). Sitel general manager Tim Schuh enthusiastically described Serbia's labor market as "a large untapped Balkans talent pool," claiming that "Serbia is the perfect choice for our latest location" (Business Wire 2011). The Serbia Investment and Export Promotion Agency (SIEPA) boasts that Serbian software developers with zero to two years' experience net salaries between only €400 and €800 a month (Radosavljević 2015:18), while another piece of documentation advertises savings of €650 a month in wages on international

customer care operators, making Serbia the most affordable location among Central and Eastern European states (SIEPA 2015:7).

“Serbia Smart Solution – ICT Sector,” a report distributed by SIEPA to advertise the Serbian ICT industry to foreign investors, reports that Serbia’s “educated talent pool” is composed of anywhere between 11,000 to 50,000 “ICT specialists” (Radosavljević 2015:15), and emphasizes the increasing number of college graduates with degrees in subjects related to the field (Radosavljević 2015:16). Vojvodina ICT Cluster’s “ICT in Serbia – At A Glance” argues that the number of new individuals enrolled in ICT-related studies increases by 500 students annually, many of whom will search for work at home in Serbia provided continual growth in the sector (Matijević and Šolaja 2015:48–49). SIEPA literature also highlights Serbia’s higher than average English language proficiency rates, emphasizing the early age that second languages are taught in public school systems, as well as Serbia’s rank of fourth in a 2012 Business English Index survey of 76 assessed countries (Radosavljević 2015:16–17).

In addition to language proficiency, education, and low wages, corporate enticement programs are another important factor in Serbia’s outsourcing eligibility profile. Serbia offers foreign investors a set of incentives in order to “make business ventures in Serbia even more profitable” (Radosavljević 2015:18). This includes a subsidy totaling in 50% of employees’ gross salaries over two years so long as companies spend €0.3 million in investments and create at least 20 new jobs. Serbia also hosts one of Europe’s lowest corporate profit tax rates at 15%, as well as a salary tax of 10% (Radosavljević 2015:18).

The emergence of outsourced call centers within the ICT sector is part of a three-part economic revitalization plan pursued by subsequent Serbian governments after 2000 to privatize state-owned industries, appeal to international financial institutions for additional loans in

exchange for reforms, as well as solicit foreign direct investment (FDI) from Western capital (Upchurch and Marinković 2011:322). While FDI solicitation is relatively new in Serbia given its delayed capitalist transformation (Ivanovska 2013:196), economic reforms implemented to access additional International Monetary Fund (IMF) borrowing began as early as the late 1970s. Capital and technology imports provided the economic foundation of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's (SFRY) post-war growth; however, in response to growing interest rates for United States dollars following the twin international fuel crises of 1973 and 1979, the state turned to the IMF for assistance—a strategy that necessitated structural adjustment programs of austerity (Woodward 1995:48–49). Austerity entailed cuts to social welfare, wage freezes, and the selling-off of worker owned industries, as well as lay-offs and rising food prices (Upchurch and Marinkovic 2013:52). In 1983, the SFRY fell into economic depression, as average incomes decreased and a quarter of the population slipped under the poverty line (Woodward 1995:52). As the last remaining republic of the SFRY, Serbia inherited nearly \$20 billion in debt to international financial institutions that had fueled Yugoslavian growth in the years after World War II (Woodward 1995:48; Upchurch and Marinković 2013:51). At the time of Slobodan Milošević's removal from power in October 2000, the combined costs of the Yugoslav Wars, the NATO bombing campaigns, and the aftermath of international economic sanctions left Serbia's economy devastated, nearly €14 billion in debt comprising more than 200% of the nation's GDP (Upchurch and Marinković 2013:53).

To alleviate this debt, consecutive Serbian governments have embraced neoliberalism in an attempt to re-engineer state practices toward privatization, to boost private sector competition, and extend markets (Mikuš 2015b:212). Investment in the ICT sector is part and parcel with this scheme, where a shift toward services exports proscribed by the IMF after the economic crisis of

2008 has coincided with large reductions in public sector funding and employment (Mikuš 2015b:215). A report by the World Bank Group (2014) entitled “Rebalancing Serbia’s Economy” has recommended a transition to services in the nation’s economy to enhance Serbia’s international competitiveness, as well as reductions in public sector spending. In 2016, The United States Central Intelligence Agency estimated that services now surpass industry in terms of Serbia’s GDP, which stands at only 38.5%.

While debt remains an estimated 75% of GDP (Central Intelligence Agency 2016), the Serbian government continues to arrange additional loans with the IMF in exchange for reforms. In 2014 public sector wages over €210 a month were reduced by 25,000 dinars, while an additional agreement reached in 2015 agreed to an incremental reduction of the public sector by 5% a year until 2017 (Mikuš 2015b:215). As employment in the public sector is increasingly liquidated, Serbia’s unemployment rate stands at 18.4% for workers aged 15-64, and 11.4% for workers above the age of 15 with a secondary school education (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2016b).

Marek Mikuš (2015b) notes that the Serbian public sector has traditionally provided workers with what Standing (2011) would define as labor security: while salaries are low, workers are provided with a pension, as well as health insurance assistance, which are both uncommon in the private sector and grey economy (220). This stability once provided by the public sector appears to be increasingly less associated with it, however. Mihailo, a 33-year-old agent employed in a call center operated by a state-owned bank, explains to me that while he too considers his job stable, as a state employee his income security is threatened by austerity. Like Computer Central workers, Mihailo enjoys a salary of close to €500 a month; however, a cut in state workers’ pay and pensions announced in 2014, in accordance with neoliberal structural

adjustment has made Mihailo skeptical about the future lucrativeness of his work (Sekularac 2014).

On the other hand, Computer Central agents report that they do not fear a reduction in wages, often citing the rate with which the industry is growing. In addition to consistency and higher pay, work in call centers also provides agents with a salary that is predictable, which can be hard to come by for those working informally or in smaller Serbian companies more vulnerable to economic volatility. Agents portray call center work in large foreign companies like Computer Central as secure overall, providing a consistent source of income at a higher rate than they would receive elsewhere. “Our probability of getting paid is getting higher” Rade, a 34-year-old agent, argues, “because there's a lot of big companies in Serbia which crashed during the 1990s and they were good companies ... Some big companies tend to be more stable than smaller ones.” Ivan, a 26-year-old agent, also cited his work for Computer Central as valuable for being “steady,” especially in comparison to his prior jobs, which included short-term design work for online magazines as well as working at the front desk of a hostel.

Rather than propagating insecurity, the ICT sector has instead been established within already precarious societal conditions, embedding itself in a neoliberalized Serbian labor market. Despite lacking some forms of security common to public sector employment, call centers provide a wage that elevates agents into an economic bracket associated with the middle class. Nevertheless, with the promise of middle class making comes an expectation for advancement and fulfilling work, which for many of my respondents lies in creative industries associated with the Serbian ICT sector. Call center careers, as I show, unfortunately lack this.



### *3.2 The Structure and Practices of Call Center Work*

Emerging triumphantly upward from the Sava River's left bank, the Computer Central campus, as well as other late-modernist commercial structures that surround it, serves as a physical metaphor for the recent history of Novi Beograd, the district of Belgrade in which the building stands. Novi Beograd was once dominated by Yugoslavia's state-owned heavy industrial firms; however, now a bustling business district, many new commercial and residential buildings like Computer Central's have been erected in the rubble of the district's manufacturing infrastructure.

Computer Central's<sup>1</sup> Serbian call center is in charge of technical support for software applications and hardware used by stores the world over. While the majority of my respondents are or were employed in a Computer Central department providing technical support for devices utilized in a United States retail chain, one is employed in a department in charge of customer support for a grocery store in the United Kingdom, and the other in a department supporting a Scandinavian elevator company. Computer Central's English-speaking services are organized into departments according to the sort of task they carry out. One group provides proactive support for ATMs and self-checkout equipment; another takes incoming calls from retail workers; and another handles what they described as the back office, where agents interact with managers who ask questions about scanners, copiers, and computers.

Within and across each Computer Central department, agents are further divided into teams, with each in charge of a different client company, and each overseen by one or more team

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<sup>1</sup> This section details the structure and practices of call center work by focusing primarily on Computer Central. While differences exist between the various call centers that employ my respondents, the majority of my data comes from Computer Central agents which allows to me to present a clearer picture of one workplace in particular, corroborated across multiple interviews.

leaders. Teams are then further broken into different levels. Respondents informed me that team structures vary from department to department depending on the customers' needs; however, the most common demarcation that I observed in my research was a distinction between level one and level two agents.

Work schedules on Branko's team, who is a level one agent, are divided among 17 different shifts covering an entire 24-hour day, in order to account for the Continental United States and Hawaii's seven different time zones. Agents are provided with a schedule several months in advance; however, respondents informed me that the schedule is subject to change and frequently does, negating its predictability. Branko's team, and any other with a contract to provide 24-hour support, does not contain dedicated night shift workers. Instead, agents take turns working the night shift for often two weeks at a time, before receiving at least 12 hours of rest between their two working days. Rest periods granted to workers accord with Serbian labor law, providing agents 45 minutes in total out of the queue with 30 minutes designed for workers to take lunch and an additional 15 minutes for breaks (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs 2005).

In addition to calls, agents interact with customers using a live chat program. Branko shared with me that until recently, level one agents on his team across all shifts were required to take calls and receive chats from customers at the same time. This put intense stress on level one agents, as what Branko describes as sweet-talking, or the use of emotional labor to assuage irritated customers' concerns, was difficult to perform while multi-tasking between calls and chats. Management ostensibly noticed a decrease in case resolution and changed the policy, creating a position for a dedicated chatter during the hours of peak contact volume.

Communication between the two levels is performed via what is called a ticket, or the digital record of the customer interaction stored in the company computer database. When a ticket is escalated by a level one agent, it comes to the attention of agents in level two who then process the requests by contacting a field technician. Agents are rarely hired directly into a level two position, often beginning at level one and working their way up. Level two agents rarely deal with customers directly, and instead take escalated requests from level one agents whose customers have requested in-person support for equipment, and communicate this to repair technicians in the United States. This thus creates a hierarchy among workers, where level two agents often handle fewer requests and are put under less pressure to be constantly answering calls.

In terms of hiring practices, Computer Central was the only firm reported to use outsourced temporary contracts prior to offering agents a full position. Agents explained to me that when applying for work at Computer Central, one is first employed on a temporary contract through an outsourcing firm. Contracts are fixed term, and if and when Computer Central chooses to hire the agent as a full employee, the agent will be transferred into Computer Central's ranks. Branko has been employed with Computer Central for seven months on continuous fixed-term contracts after first being hired as a temporary employee during peak season. Branko's fixed-term contract ends late in 2016, yet he is confident that Computer Central will renew it, citing his high level of performance. Despite providing stable work for my respondents, Computer Central's use of fixed-term contracts does exhibit a form of labor flexibilization consistent with neoliberal principles, allowing it to keep its costs low at the expense of workers' security (Huxley 2015:143).

### *3.3 Work and Life Inside and Outside the Call Center*

What SIEPA promotional material on ICT in Serbia emphasizes most prominently is the sector's creative industries. In a section entitled "Success Stories," SIEPA's 2015 report mentioned above provides four exposés on successful business outsourcing ventures, including Microsoft software programming, a video game company, and digital communications development (Radosavljević 2015:27-29). Five out of six correspondents from Computer Central report that they are learning to program computer or cell phone applications while not at work, mostly in an attempt to better equip themselves with skills that are more employable in the industry. Incidentally, Vojvodina ICT Cluster reports a more than 6% growth in Serbian software development in 2015 (Matijević and Šolaja 2015:24), while software development comprised 68% of all unfilled Serbian ICT job positions in 2014 (Radosavljević 2015:17). The majority of my respondents identify as either artists or musicians and aspire toward careers in Serbia's creative industries, actively attempting to reskill on their off hours in order to one day ascend to a job that is fulfilling. In the meantime, however, they bide their time in Belgrade's call centers, awaiting their opportunity, spending days and nights on a so-called digital assembly line (Brophy 2015).

#### *3.3.1 Routinization and discipline*

Antithetical to the autonomy associated with creative industries is the routinization, surveillance, and, time management characteristic of call center work. When asked about a typical day at Computer Central, Rade replied "basically you have one 45 minutes break and the rest is just sitting. It's a desk job so it's in front of a computer. And, like clicking Control C Control V, like, millions of times a day." Control C and V referring to the Windows keyboard commands for copy and paste respectively, Rade summarizes his work as a curious mix of banal

repetition and intense pressure not to make mistakes. All respondents reported independently that a three-month period is all that is required to learn the basics of working at Computer Central. After this point, much of what is preformed daily is rote. “It's not very creative. It's not stimulating” Rade remarks, “and there's a lot of pressure. I don't need it.”

Work on Branko's team is more fast-paced, as he remarks to me that the difference between night and day shifts has largely to do with variations in intensity. “The day shift is the hell shift” he states, “you lose the whole day and there are phone calls constantly. ... You would answer, okay type everything, finish. The next one, finish. You don't have the time to do anything when it's rush hour.” During moments of fervor, agents are closely monitored to make sure their call times are kept low. At Computer Central, agents have their interactions recorded and are strongly encouraged keep calls to less than 25 minutes. “Our queues are maximum of eight minutes,” Branko explains, meaning that customers cannot be kept on hold for longer than eight minutes. “If they're past eight minutes they're casualties. Money casualties.” Branko's metaphoric conflation of death and finance affirms the level of seriousness with which his duties are treated; holding times longer than eight minutes are a fatality for a firm balancing high call volumes and low labor costs.

Breaks and time spent out of the queue are also kept under close watch. Branko explains to me that lateness is not an option: “if you work from 1pm to 9pm you start at 1:00 ... If you're late one minute they have it in their computer. Late one minute ‘you're violating whatever you signed to’ yadda.” “The biggest pressure that I have” Rade remarks “is that we have this software that monitors how much time we spend on our workplace and every break is counted to seconds.” “We're changing offices now,” he continues, detailing recent increases in surveillance to record agents, “we're going to have to cameras, we didn't have cameras 'til now.”

Computer Central agents reported that average call volumes per day per worker can be as high as 70. Branko informs me that within his team, agents are required to resolve 60% of issues that they are assigned, meaning that they verify with the customer that their problem is fixed. Even Atanasija, a 24-year-old telesales agent of health supplements to Scandinavian customers, who reports that her workplace is both friendly and relaxed, is expected by her company to make approximately 150 calls each day.

Rade mentions that he is afraid of being put on probation for making mistakes. “I didn't react in time and it got escalated by our client to the owner, to the top brass. So I think I'm going to get a slap on the wrist for that.” Rade explains that Computer Central's disciplinary policy stipulates that mistakes worthy of probation incur a 50-day period of increased supervision, in which agents are closely watched and are more vulnerable to firing. Nevertheless, agents explicitly mentioned that large American companies like Computer Central afford them greater security than smaller private Serbian companies. “You have a lot of bosses above you,” Mladen, a 26-year-old Computer Central agent, explains. “It's not your team leader; it's not just your supervisor ... If you're having any kind of trouble with your supervisor you go to the guy above him.” “There's so many layers of protection,” Rade reiterates. “In my previous jobs ... I was working directly in some small private businesses ... You can get fired on a whim. Here that's not so easy to, that's not so likely to happen.”

In terms of exposure to surveillance, discipline, and time-management, all of my respondents reported varying degrees of these practices across their different workplaces. Reports of heavy surveillance invoke Sue Fernie and David Metcalf's (1998) image of an electronic sweatshop or digital Panopticon. Computer Central utilizes what has been described by other scholars as a Taylorized method of performance tracking in white-collar labor, where efficiency

is measured both quantitatively, in terms of minutes on the phone and the number of cases closed each shift, and qualitatively in terms of agents' ability to successfully steer customers towards case resolution through troubleshooting (Bain et al. 2002:183).

### 3.3.2 *Beyond the call center – agents' future aspirations*

Contrary to the picture presented by Nadeem (2011) of the Indian call center workforce as “young, well-educated, and urban” (35), my respondents claim there is no one typical Serbian call center employee. Computer Central's employment qualifications stipulate that one must only hold a secondary school degree and exhibit English language proficiency, which shows selection policies that are dissimilar from the Bulgarian call centers examined by Kirov and Mircheva (2009) which, they report, rely mainly on university graduates (155). This diverges, however, from international trends as only 22% of call centers globally rely on university-educated workers (Holman, Batt, and Holtgrewe 2007:12).

Two exceptions among my respondents were Ilija, age 25, who holds a degree in audiovisual technology, and Jovan, age 27, who holds a bachelor of arts in computer science. Both migrated to Belgrade from provincial towns outside the city in order to go to university. Both Ilija and Jovan, complain to me that job prospects for career driven workers in Serbia are poor, and that employment in their chosen professions is “impossible” without either professional references or assistance from a friend or family member in the industry. “You can't get that job that you want unless you're my buddy” Jovan summarizes, expressing his discontent with what he perceives as nepotism pervasive in the Serbian job market. Computer Central is different, they claim. Unlike other jobs, Computer Central is continually hiring staff and will often give job seekers a call back for an interview. “You get a job at Computer Central because you can't get a job somewhere else. People work there because there is nothing else.”

Both Ilija and Jovan are now employed in television production and programming respectively, and emphasize that some of the largest reasons why young people work in outsourced call centers is to gain the requisite experience or references to move forward in their careers. Jovan claims that one can separate Computer Central workers into two different categories: those who have an interest in attaining work references and experience in the information technology industry, and those who only are working at Computer Central because of the high wage. Rade, however, offers different typology:

Well they're a [couple] types of persons which stand out the most. One is more like me, which are people who are just got there because they're good with English or whichever language they work in ... and they just do the job, they work their work day and then go home. Then there's a second type which is trying to succeed in this corporate environment and who are really motivated and they like to control people and call people assets which like make the hair on the back of my neck stand up

While Jovan and Rade's categorizations may be uncomprehensive, they both underscore the lack of diversified career potential Computer Central embodies for many of Serbia's disillusioned job seekers. Even those with aspirations to be IT professionals, like Jovan, view Computer Central with disdain as the most deskilled form of work in the sector.

Jovan is the only one of my correspondents who viewed Computer Central as in some way prefigurative of future employment. Unlike many of my respondents, Jovan has a desire to emigrate out of Serbia. His potential destinations include Qatar, the United Kingdom, or Norway, all places that pay higher wages for computer programmers than in Belgrade. "Computer Central provided me with a brain challenging experience," Jovan argues, claiming that it helped him to learn how to work as a team with others. Nevertheless, he is cognizant of how little Computer



Central pays Serbians for their work relative to wages he can receive in other countries and consequently wishes to leave.

Despite the increasingly larger role technology now plays in the creative industries that my respondents hope to one day be employed, none of my correspondents saw Computer Central as better preparing them for their futures. Ivan reports to me that he feels that his ongoing two-year tenure as an agent continues to be a waste of time, which could be better-spent gaining skills to help him in a more interesting future career. He is currently taking a year-long online course in Java programming to better equip himself for future employment despite a professed interest in graphic design. Atanasija, whose job allows her to practice her Norwegian language skills, did see her work as an opportunity to improve her future prospects; however, this had more to do with her aspirations to eventually leave Belgrade and move to Scandinavia than with her future career as a music instructor.

In their study of Bulgarian outsourced call centers, Kirov and Mircheva (2009) conclude that jobs produced by the industry have both positive and negative effects (156). “There is trade-off,” they claim, “between the acceptance of routine work with little or no intrinsic interest on the one hand and good salaries and working time flexibility on the other” (Kirov and Mircheva 2009). The routinized underside of Belgrade’s ICT sector has produced similar conditions, as call center work appears to only provide a stopgap between the present and future for most agents. Higher than average wages, employment, and job security afford my respondents elements of a comfortable life in Belgrade while contemplating a sometimes uncertain future. Nevertheless, their aspirations of a more fulfilling life are not animated by call center work, while for some employment in call centers has even confounded a trajectory toward imagined future success.

### *3.4 Transnational Call Center Identities and the Emerging Global Middle Class*

Contrary to my initial expectations, my respondents' work in call centers afford them mixed degrees of what Standing (2011) defines as labor security (10). Relative to other Serbian workers, agents possess a reasonable degree of income security and employment security, as their work yields high pay and is stable. On the other hand, they lack "skill reproduction security" and "work security" (Standing 2011:10), for their jobs are routinized, subject to sudden variation in schedule, and lack the means for satisfying a desire to work in the ICT sector's creative industries. I show that call center agents therefore occupy a sort of quasi-middle class, straddling the boundary between blue-collar routinized and dead-end work, and well paid white collar middle class career paths (Mirchandani 2012:23). Agents' transnational work also requires them to navigate within a hierarchical global class framework as they are positioned against their American customers as well as their impressions of other agents in the international call center industry, most notably Indian workers.

#### *3.4.1 India, Serbia, and exploitation*

"Belgrade is basically becoming India," Mladen says soberly as our conversation drifts toward the subject of job outsourcing. "For one American working in Computer Central, there is eight Serbians working for one man ... salaries of eight Serbians is like one, so they figured why not send the whole Computer Central, and that's exactly what they're doing." My respondents frequently distinguished themselves from Indian call center agents, often to position themselves as more competent. "It's hard with India," Ivan explains "we recently started chatting a lot with Indians over the phone and when they don't speak perfect English, it's impossible to understand them." Part of Ivan's reasoning in why call center work has moved from places in South Asia to Belgrade is his perception of a lack of English language skills among Indian agents. This feeling

among respondents mirrors SIEPA literature on the ICT industry, which advertises that the “people of Serbia have a strong understanding of Western culture and values ... [enabling] constructive and gratifying communication, both written and oral” (Radosavljević 2015:12).

Agents’ adroitness in navigating customer interactions is a prized asset at Computer Central and is a means by which supervisors distinguish workers from one another. “[Managers] prioritize people [with] ... sweet-talking skills,” explains Branko. As mentioned above, sweet-talking is the ability to use emotional and linguistic finesse to work with and be complacent to customers regardless of how upset they may be; what Philip Taylor and Peter Bain (1999) describe as “smiling down the phone” (103).

Mladen argues that communication skills are more important to Computer Central than even English proficiency or computer knowledge. “Here's the thing,” he says to me in a suddenly serious tone, “we're talking about €500 and that's big here ... if you're talking about that kind of money they need to figure out what kind of person you are, if you're going to have the communication skills necessary.” “You have to know how to handle the situation. If they're angry, you have to calm them down,” Mladen explains, “you ... have to be calm first of all. You have to know what you're talking about.” According to Mladen and Branko, communication skills determine to which team one is assigned. “They actually aim to get the people who do speak English really good for the store managers,” Mladen claims, whose team handles back office equipment and consequently rarely speaks with anyone who is not a retail manager. Those without as developed communication skills are placed on a team that receives calls from cash register clerks, and at volumes much higher than Mladen’s team.

Of all my respondents, Branko is the most perturbed by interacting with foreigners on the phone, as his primary complaints about his job gravitate around frustrating customer interactions.

“We’re slaves to them,” he remarks gravely. When I ask him about his impressions of his customers, he claims to regard Americans as stupid and unwilling to follow instructions, although he appears not to express the full degree of his contempt so as not to offend me. He complains that his customers “call you on the basis that you’re their slave and you have to do what they tell you and if they say it’s not working ... even if you see it’s working, you technically have to listen to them.” Branko’s customers are often poor and working class, employed in large department stores and paid low wages. His wealth of anecdotes about his customers often reflect stereotypes, including offensive impressions of African-American women unwilling to cooperate, to stories of store clerks being robbed by imposter Computer Central repair technicians.

What frustrates Branko most about his customers is their lack of willingness to attempt troubleshooting measures that would help to fix their technical problems. “If you have to argue with them about a software issue,” he explains, “and you don’t really do it and ... transfer them [to another department instead], [they go] ape-shit.” Branko’s expressions of frustration are, however, often mixed with tinges of solidarity with his customers. As a consumer of modern technology himself, Branko has also made use of call center services and is familiar with the annoying qualities for which they can be well known. “The most uncomfortable argument,” Branko recalls, “is when someone else transfers [a customer] to you but you’re not the correct department.” Branko’s sympathy extends particularly to those customers caught in the web of Computer Central’s automated phone menu system, a disorienting metonymy for the corporation’s structure, and simultaneous gateway to the network of departments that make up the call center. Branko’s statements reveal the complex character of affective labor demanded of call center workers. At once both exploitative and intimate, agents form contradictory bonds with

their customers that complicate the simple commodification of relationships which call centers exploit (Mankekar and Gupta 2016:39).

My respondents' location within a global hierarchy positions them between two poles: Indian call center agents, which they see themselves as below, and their American customers, to whom they are ambivalently attached. Framing Americans as stupid is thus a response to this hierarchical system, revealing agents' attempts to preserve their dignity in the face of a system that imposes a nation-based order of subservience despite agents' feelings of relative intelligence in comparison to their customers (Mirchandani 2004:363; Ong 1991:296).

### *3.4.2 Identifying as outsourced*

Many of my respondents are aware of the fact that, as an outsourced labor force, they are situated within a system that is exploitative to both Serbians and other workers. “[Computer Central] is actually getting money from the low and medium class,” Mladen argues, “now they don't want to pay ... they can continually pay to us because it's going to be much less money.” Some respondents even expressed a moral indignation toward outsourcing; however, much of their disdain is directed at the Serbian state as opposed to the multinational corporations for which they work. “I don't know if they have told you this information” Rade confides in me, referring to my other respondents, “but all the work, all the employees [at Computer Central] are ... subsidized ... So I don't get paid by the company I get paid by the [state].” “My mom, she pays taxes and she is actually paying for me to have a job. Which sucks big time,” he argues. Rade continues,

it's not fair. My mother shouldn't pay for me to have a job. ... In capitalism, the way it works is you make something you provide a service and then your work adds value to that service. ... And this way money doesn't come from [my friends]

Rade is referring to the corporate subsidies mentioned above that the Serbian state provides to multinationals to solicit foreign direct investment, and interprets these subsidies as an improper use of tax-payer money. He feels that the state is engaging in an improper form of capitalism, which is exploitative to the citizenry instead of simply allowing workers to exchange their labor power for a wage. The suspicion and outrage that Rade feels is echoed by Mladen, who frequently contextualized Computer Central's low wages by putting them in a global perspective:

I guess it's good for the country and some people in the government. But, not for us.

Because if someone else out there deserves 8 times [more than what is paid in Serbia], it really doesn't matter if it is America, it's India, it's Poland ... But if they work the same and get 8 times more, that's uh in my opinion that's ridiculous.

Atanasija, on the other hand, is optimistic about outsourcing, arguing that capital flowing into Serbia from abroad will make conditions better for all. "It's logical," she explains, "if you have a lot of firms that pay taxes ... if everybody pays their taxes not just the foreigner firms, [but] our firms, we would be better off. [It is] our people who do our stuff in the grey zone." Atanasija contrasts what she interprets as Serbian practices of doing business, which she associates with the informal or grey economy, and the practices of multinational corporations, who she perceives pay taxes and operate in a non-Serbian and legal way. Informal employment is defined by work which lacks formal contracts, where workers subsequently fail to pay into social insurance, or where managers neglect to pay the appropriate taxes (Arandarenko 2011:27). According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2016a), the informal employment

rate for 2015 averaged at 20.4% which while down from 2007, when it accounted for 35% of employment, still presents a challenge for the Serbian economy going forward (Krstić and Sanfey 2011:182).

What is common among all of my respondents, however, is a reference to corruption. While often utilized moralistically by Serbian Progressive Party politicians to legitimize neoliberal public sector atrophy (Mikuš 2015b:222), respondents often invert this corruption discourse and extend it to the entire political class. While identifying some immediate benefit for himself, Ivan remarks, “the whole situation that brought [Computer Central to Serbia] that was bad but the fact that along with everything else that happened it's good for me.” When I ask Ivan about the current government’s use of subsidies to attract foreign direct investment he replies “I don't know I guess it was a part of some shady agreement so just like standard corrupt politician stuff.”

While agents are aware of their status as outsourced and subsidized labor, which they associate with corruption, their wages have a positive impact on their lives. The contradiction workers face between the use of government funding to attract foreign direct investment, and the above average rate of pay they receive as a result breeds cynicism, which is especially evident in their views toward domestic politics. “ There's a saying in Serbia,” Rade recalls to me, when I inquired about his interest in politics, “'who plays with shit his hand stink.’ I don't play with shit. [Politics] is just a show.” Respondents who did not plan to abstain completely from the upcoming 2016 snap election called for by Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić explained to me that they would pick a candidate randomly from the list, or simply invalidate their ballot by drawing circles on it.

### 3.4.3 *Class identity – a contradictory middle class*

Despite their awareness of outsourcing's implications in terms of capital mobility, few of my respondents seemed genuinely worried that their jobs would soon leave Serbia, or that their company would be downsized. "[Computer Central] has been here long enough," Ivan argues, "Serbia has the best rate when you're comparing the level of education and low prices ... When things start getting better here I might start fearing for the job." When I ask Branko what he will do if Computer Central does not renew his contract, he seems untroubled, claiming "I'll worry about that when I get there." Only Mladen mentions that he and his coworkers are concerned that their jobs will be outsourced again in the future, this time to Macedonia, they assume, where they anticipate costs for Computer Central will be even lower. Nevertheless, Mladen reports that this fails to worry most of his coworkers.

While agents both earn a higher than average wage and are confident in the stability of their employment, my respondents struggled to locate themselves within a framework of social class. Both Ilija and Jovan surmised that they were middle class because of the large televisions they could afford working for Computer Central. Branko, however, is more uncertain: "I would assume middle class?" he guesses, "[I] sure as hell ain't an upper class citizen." Rade remarks, "I cannot call myself middle class ... I wouldn't consider myself a middle class but I'm I manage to rise above the lower classes." The disparity in responses may have to do with workers' life experiences prior to working for a call center. Rade is the only one of my respondents who claims to have suffered from poverty prior to working at Computer Central.

Questions about class designation produced similarly quizzical responses from my other respondents; however, information about their lifestyles put agents' social class into greater perspective. While the majority of my respondents were without a higher education degree, all



but two were actively pursuing either a tertiary degree or additional technical certification. Ljilja, a 24-year-old agent employed for a partially privatized airline, plans to pursue a master's degree in the social sciences, and works at her call center because it allows her part-time hours while she attends school. Ivan and Mladen both express to me that they possessed a car and disposable income prior to working for Computer Central. Mladen in particular explains that he largely uses the money he earns from his job is to subsidize travel expenditures, and to purchase audiovisual equipment as well as musical instruments.

Even so, seven out of my nine respondents live with their parents or with family friends, alleviating them from the full responsibility of bill and rent payments associated with financial independence. A report published in 2015 by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation and the SeConS Development Initiative Group, which surveyed 1200 Serbian young people ranging in age from 18-29, found that nearly 75% live with their families often due to financial restrictions (Tomanović and Stanojević 2015:44–45). While agents' wages are well above the national average, the Global Property Guide reports that in 2014 the lowest price in rent for a 35-40 square meter apartment in Belgrade was no less than €244 a month, while the crowd-sourced database Numbeo (2016) lists the current average price for a one bedroom apartment in the city center at nearly €270.

In terms of measuring what Lloyd (2013) describes as “a working class culture” (150) one could conclude that no such culture exists among my respondents. Ilija and Jovan mentioned to me that they were both required to sign non-union agreements when they were first hired. None of my respondents were confident that unions would be able to successfully improve their working conditions, and were consequently indifferent to the prospect of joining one. “It's not going to change,” Mladen opines, “they're not going to change. The supervisors, the team leaders,

the people above them ... that kind of company, that big of company, they're not going to change." For many Serbians, a so-called working class culture associated with unions is still associated with socialism, corruption, and the maligned Milošević government (Grdešić 2015:65–69). Atanasija claims that those who look for work in the public sector to gain union protection and better benefits are delusional: "it's a lie, it was maybe in socialism. Maybe then it worked, it's a different time ... It's just a little picture from the past."

Given these contingencies, can my respondents be reasonably placed within the global or even Serbian middle class? Like call center agents from India, my respondents are "multiply classed subjects" (Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Pérez 2013:76), often making an income higher than their parents, employed in stable work conditions, and engaged in consumptive lifestyles, yet unable to transition into financial independence. Agents do not regard their work as a professionalized job in an industry that matches their educational qualifications and they often are not owners of property (Lazic and Cvejic 2010:4). Unlike Murphy's (2011) Indian agents, my respondents are not committed to their jobs, do not report seeing themselves as cosmopolitan, and do not identify explicitly with American culture.

As previously stated, in terms of labor security, my respondents lack many of the characteristics associated with the precariat, especially in comparison to their public sector counterparts, like Mihailo, where restructuring has made his job prospects increasingly precarious. According to the National Intelligence Council's (NIC) purchasing power framework, agents can certainly be placed into their prophesied growing international middle class spending more than \$1.25 a day. Yet, from the standpoint of status and social reproduction, agents only possess some of the trappings of Serbian middle class life, and few of the characteristics of the emerging global middle class theorized by Murphy (2011).

Serbian agents therefore come to represent a new paradoxical manifestation of the middle class. Structured through the uneven processes of global capitalism and local manifestations of neoliberalism, call center agents' class identities fail to reflect the middle class identity their consumption profile would suggest. While in a local context, their earnings allow them to embody some characteristics of the middle class, their transitional work counterposes them in a set of relationships against different global manifestations of the working class. Rather than occupying a specific class position, as either precariat or middle class, my respondents exemplify a blurring of class boundaries, embodying the contradictions of an emergent global middle class; albeit one that shares less of a habitus with the middle classes of Western countries than with other outsourced workers caught within the globalized capital flows that have called their occupational statuses into being.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Returning to new capitalism, as I have shown, agents in outsourced Serbian call centers do not exhibit the consequences of a supposed global convergence toward the precarity and flexibility hypothesized by Standing (2011), despite being both “globalisation’s child” (5) and the product of neoliberal restructuring. Call centers within the Serbian ICT sector are neither entirely electronic sweatshops, nor precarious zones bereft of labor security, for agents see Computer Central as a consistently stable way of making a living. Rather than a global trend toward precarization, Serbia’s call centers expose a selective and uneven form of precarity. What Serbian call center work shows is a set of “exploitative, extractive, uneven and constantly transformative relational antagonisms” (Kalb 2015:14) that have simultaneously destabilized public sector work while solidifying the ground on which the ICT sector continues to reproduce itself.

These incongruities draw attention to the ahistorical fashion with which discourses of precarity and neoliberalism in new capitalism are often deployed. Contrary to a unilateral, often Western European, understanding of neoliberalism as “the utopia of the self-regulating market, fear of state intervention, and glorification of individual liberties” (Matos 2012:240), the neoliberalization of the Serbian economy continues to take place within set of particular historical circumstances and structures, which have constituted precarity unequally across the labor market. In her ethnography on precarity in Portugal’s call centers, Patrícia Matos (2012) has argued similarly, showing that the Portuguese precariat has not arisen only from a regime of flexible capitalism induced from without by international financial organizations, but is “also a reflection of economic and historical national traditions [that] determine the appropriation of global processes” (222).

Theorists of new capitalism advance their accounts of unilateral labor flexibility by contrasting precarity with a set of benefits that a portion of the British and American working classes enjoyed in “a particular historical and geographical moment” (Matos 2012:239), while emphasizing that neoliberalism and globalization occur across a smooth space, free of local contingencies. What my findings suggest instead, by giving an account of what Mirchandani (2004) has referred to “the practices of globalization,” is that precarity is composed of inconsistencies, or “cracks” (357), as opposed to a totalizing force that robs workers of their agency in navigating the local effects of these large-scale processes. Crucial to this, and an aspect with which I have dealt marginally in this thesis, is investigating how “actual local outcomes [and] global processes” link together discursively “via particular national arenas and local histories” (Kalb 2011:12) to reinforce the neoliberal bolstering of the ICT sector within Serbian society at the expense of the public sector.<sup>2</sup>

I have also shown that contrary to the formation of a fractured class structure, Serbian neoliberalism and the forces of globalized capitalism have fostered a contradictory manifestation of the middle class. Rather than producing the precariat, Serbia’s bolstered transnational ICT sector evidences a synchronous process of repossession and dispossession. Despite wide-spread unemployment, call centers provide young workers with good paying jobs, albeit without the benefits of public sector employment; at the same time, the ICT sector promises work in creative industries, presenting the middle class carrot of professionalized and fulfilling labor, only to provide miserable, heavily disciplined, deskilled jobs in call centers.

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<sup>2</sup> Mikuš (2015a, 2015b) taken up these questions in his work on the NGO sector in Serbia.

Don Kalb (2014) argues that this contradictory middle class formation is an international process, and has its origins in the decline of the urban working classes. As a profitability crisis emerged in the Western world in 1970s, the early 20th century laborite alliances of capital, labor, and the state began to fall apart. Urban revolts across Europe demanding allowances traditionally afforded to middle class property holders, including more validating work, more education, and social rights, were met with a capitalism that was increasingly neoliberalized, unable to meet their desires (Kalb 2015:166-167). Capital, seeking a spatial fix (Harvey 2001), globalized proliferating what has been described as the so-called global middle class, yet providing wages that facilitate a purchasing power of as low as \$2 a day (Kalb 2015:157-159). Transnational work performed in call centers has been particularly apt in propagating this classification, as higher incomes, and the necessity to be able to relate with Western customers' cultural identities has helped to reproduce a middle class habitus that is linked with this emerging global middle class (Murphy 2011).

As I have shown, however, if my respondents employed in Serbia's call centers are a part of the burgeoning global middle class, this identity belies contradictions. Despite their high incomes and consumptive practices, Serbian call center agents are at once also wage earners composing Belgrade's heterogeneous urban working class. Yet, as Kalb (2014) notes, to classify these agents as middle class in the face of their contradictory status can also be understood as an attempt at neutralizing class struggle in the hopes of interrupting insurrectionary activities, perhaps even of the sort that saw the ousting of Milošević in 2000. Has the discourse of the global middle class quelled struggle, and particularly urban class struggle, among call center agents and other liminal middle classes in Belgrade? Following my respondents on Facebook after my fieldwork period, I noticed that in May of 2016 many of them began to share pictures of

themselves attending the protests of Ne davimo Beograd. “Don’t drown Belgrade,” a nascent urban protest movement, is focused on contesting the Vučić government’s gentrification, funded by Dubai oil money, of the city’s Savamala district (Eror 2015). Their attendance at these protests perhaps provides one possible answer to this question, as it evidences their yearning for a more fulfilling life may concretize into collective action and a shedding of their apathy toward the politics that actively shape their futures.

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