The Political Economy of Call-Centers: Understanding the Intersections between Capitalism, De-Culturalization, and Information Technology-Driven Globalization

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Contemporary globalization processes are continuously redefining the ways we live and communicate. In making this statement, I employ a liberal interpretation of the term *globalization* "as fostering international economic integration and as a mechanism for promoting global liberal capitalism" (Thussu 2006). This interpretation identifies an international division of labor, a heightened role of markets and transnational corporations as imperatives of the globalization processes, often at the cost of nation-states and indigenous communities (Thussu 2006).

It is generally agreed that giant leaps in information communications technology (ICT) are propelling global dynamism by accelerating greater intra-regional connectivity (Thussu and Sarikakis 2006; Mujahid 2002; Bettig 1996). The consequent trends are the "expansion of an information economy and the convergence of technologies" (Bettig 1996). Additionally, technology as the "new means of production in the virtual age of speed and freedom is associated with borderlessness of capitalist globalized markets" (Thussu and Sarikakis 2006). ICT is hence construed as a "key enabler of globalization" (Mujahid 2002).

One pronounced impact of these trends is the growth of ICT-enabled outsourcing of goods and services from the developed to the developing countries of the world (Mujahid 2002; Duening 2007). In this paper I explore the ICT-enabled call center sector which, despite their offshore locations, provide *virtual* remote-office functions to numerous U.S. companies and offers sales, service and support options to their customers (Johnson 2007; Duening 2007; Ueltschy, Herremans, Ryans 2006; Thomas and Wilkinson 2006).

In the first part of the paper, I present an overview of the impact of ICT-steered globalization processes on global business practices. In the second part of the paper, I discuss the call-center sector, and explore its structure and operations. Though such centers operate for almost all Western countries and also for Japan, I restrict this analysis only to the U.S. outsourcing operations. In the third, and the focal part of the paper, I employ a critical political economist approach to examine this multi-layered phenomenon. In this inter-disciplinary investigation, I integrate historical, cultural, sociological and economic perspectives to recognize the underpinning of call-centers. Taking a holistic approach, I identify overt elements of economic exploitation and de-culturalization, and argue that neoliberal capitalist trends to outsource back-office functions need to be understood beyond their simplistic economic perspectives.

Part One: ICT-Driven Globalization and Global Business Practices

The ICT is undergoing a massive revolution in terms of its capabilities, reach and affordability. The technological convergence between computing and telecommunications sciences is its most pronounced manifestation. Some milestones of this synergy are the transition from analog to digital; the creation of the hypertext language and World Wide Web; the capability to digitally convert text and audio files; and the incessant innovations in internet, making it a "network of all networks" (Thussu and Sarikakis 2006). The upgrade in internet connectivity through digital subscriber lines (DSL), cable modems and wireless options, coupled with wider conventional and cellular telephone services, which extensively use digital GSM and TDMA technologies, has made ICT more accessible and affordable. The growth in fiber-optic telephone exchange and the privatized local-loop systems has further broadened and subsidized telephone density around the world (Thussu and Sarikakis 2006; PSEB 2005; Albarran 2004; Mujahid 2002).

The consequent economies of scale have lowered costs of high-speed international private leased circuits, bandwidth, and satellite-based telecommunication networks. At the same time, wider and subsidized access to DHCP-enabled router technology and voice over internet protocol (VOIP) is accelerating the volumes of high-speed transfer of voice and data across the globe (Slay 2005; Mujahid 2002). Technological leaps like these have made it possible to "transmit information at unprecedented speed and volume across the globe", thereby accelerating the pace of global interconnectedness (Thussu and Sarikakis 2006). The ensuing intersections between information superhighways, digital networks, and transnational communications are aptly described as the rise of an international informational economy (Thussu and Sarikakis 2006).

The globalized informational economic networks have given impetus to innovations in business practices. "In today's highly competitive global marketplace", (Ueltschy et al 2006) contemporary international business practices emphasize on relentless economic search for the lowest costs, 'a race to the bottom' (*The Economist* 7/26/2007), maximum profits and highest returns on investments. It is universally accepted that cost savings are still the "principal motivation to outsource" (*Economist* 7/26/2007; Johnson 2007; Duening 2007; *Newsweek* 5/11/2003).

These objectives are being met through outsourcing and off shoring jobs and production processes by contracting-out work to outside firms and geographical shift of work abroad (Ueltschy et al 2006; Thomas and Wilkinson 2006; Johnson 2007). The terms *Business Processing Office* (BPO) and also *Business Service Providers* (BSP) are synonymously used with the voice-based *call-center sector*, to describe the transferring of business processes to external service providers (Duening 2007; PSEB 2005). These include tele-marketing, customer services, technical support, and assorted back-office jobs, etc. (Duening 2007; PSEB 2005; *Newsweek* 5/11/2003).

Globally, the total volume of outsourced business practices was estimated in 2002 at U.S. $ 773 billion, which rose to more than U.S. $ one trillion in 2006. U.S. corporations stand as a major contributor to this trend. U.S. companies outsourced business processes of U.S. $ 484 billion in 2002, which rose to U.S. $ 647 billion in 2006 (PSEB 2005). Interestingly, it is reported that around two-thirds of U.S. banks have already outsourced one or more back-office functions by the year 2006. It is projected that by the year 2015, approximately 3.3 million service jobs, equivalent to 7.5% of all U.S. jobs, will shift overseas (PSEB 2005). Further, around 85% of U.S. companies, equivalent to U.S. $45 billion, will be outsourcing their human resource jobs overseas by the year 2105 (Duening 2007).

These statistics express that a substantial dynamism is in the offing in global business practices. At the same time however, it is imperative to comprehend the type of jobs that are being outsourced. A sizeable volume of these are ancillary functions which are being relocated offshore to external agencies (Duening 2007). The outsourced jobs of back-office and non-core in nature, are increasingly being handled through off-shore ICT-enabled locations, (Shi 2007) in order to "to offload activities they declared to be non-core to cut costs and improve strategic focus" (Duening 2007; Linger 2004). Outsourcing facilitates U.S. corporations to "slash costs and sharpen their focus on core competencies" (Johnson 2007). This reflects the business strategy to sustain undiluted attention to the core activities of the company.

Additionally, it is helpful to identify the geographical locations of such ICT-enabled outsourced jobs. I refer to Kearney's Global Service Location Index, (GSLI) which evaluates annual outsourcing trends, and classifies 50 countries on the basis of three parameters: (a) financial attractiveness, (b) availability of skilled workers, (c) business environment. According to the 2007 GSLI, India, China, and Malaysia rank as the top three outsourcing

choices for US companies for their back-office operations. The GSLI reports that due to "lower wage, infrastructure and regulatory costs", India has an edge over China, and the rest of the countries (*Economist* 8/30/2007).

Part Two: ICT-Enabled Call-Centers

For the purposes of clarity, it is useful to formally define a call center work environment. It is described as:

A work environment in which the main business is mediated by computer and telephone-based technologies that enable the efficient distribution of calls (or allocation of outgoing calls) to available staff, and permits customers-employee interaction to occur simultaneously with the use of display screen equipment and the instant access to, and inputting of, information (Holman 2005:111).

The establishment of a call center workplace requires initial investment in basic infrastructure like location, reliable electricity supply with back-up options in case of possible interruptions, sophisticated telephony and internet networks, and the requisite hardware and software installations. Many call center setting-up manuals, describe the process as being a straightforward technology-intensive investment, which is operated by computer-trained and English speaking workers. One such manual describes it as a simple venture in terms of technological infrastructure. "It requires a set of local area network (LAN) based switches; a VOIP solution such as virtual phone line that connects multiple telephone lines with high-speed internet; client/server software systems and open phone systems. These are installed in individual workstations for the employees, with one personal computer, a telephone set (or headset) hooked into a large telecom switch, and one or more supervisor stations" (Slay 2006). It is reported that a call center hosting about 68 phone lines at 30 Kbps per phone line, can be set up with a minimum of about 2 MB of bandwidth (Slay 2006). This apparent simplicity is attributed towards the immense growth of such workplaces around the world. Additionally, another factor is the broadened and subsidized VOIP technology which makes it possible to set up a call center at any location in any time zone where ever internet is available (Duening 2007; Slay 2006).

Corresponding to the rising trends to outsource jobs and processes, almost all major U.S. companies are utilizing voice-based call centers, which run on the toll-free 1-800 numbers or domestic virtual phone numbers, to sell products, services and solutions that are needed by anyone anywhere in the world. These include data processing, customer services and technical support (Duening 2007). Interestingly, this range includes such diverse services as taking pizza delivery orders; selling home delivery of newspapers; processing medical insurance claims; selling credit cards, insurance policies and mortgages; making travel itineraries, and responding to classified advertisements, etc (Duening 2007; Slay 2006).

With the rise of such technology-driven workplaces, their geographical distance from U.S. customers has been rendered irrelevant (Duening 2007). According to *Newsweek* (5/11/2003), "more than half of Fortune 500 companies are outsourcing jobs to these voice-based call centers," including business giants like American Express, Dell, General Electric, IBM, Microsoft, etc. Such innovative global business practices have confidently off-loaded their ancillary functions to off-shore external agencies on premise which is aptly summarized in these words:

A customer does not care what a call-center is nor where a call-center is located. What truly matters is how well the call-center representative treats the customer. It can be located anywhere where communication infrastructure is available (PSEB 2005).

These call center representatives, (often referred to as telemarketers); their supervisors and managers are employed by local third-party firms, which operate these remote offices for U.S. business corporations. As official employers of these workers, these local firms or service-providers carry entire obligations towards the financial and non-financial remuneration and training of these workers. This status clarifies that there is no employer–employee relationship between the US outsourcing companies and these workers (Willcocks, Feeny and Lacity 2005).

A noteworthy advantage of the growing global tendencies to outsource is its cost-saving remuneration structure. According to estimates provided in a government of Pakistan publication (PSEB 2005), an agent working for a call center can be employed for an average annual salary of U.S. $ 2504, equivalent to U.S. $ 209 per month. Likewise, in Pakistan, a call center supervisor and a manager are paid an average annual salary of U.S. $ 4591 (U.S. $ 383 per month) and U.S. $ 6,260 (U.S. $ 522 per month) respectively. These rates are evidently and

comparatively lower to the remuneration levels of similarly qualified human resource in the U.S. This cost-saving feature is further exemplified in the comparable annual remuneration of similarly qualified agents in: Hong Kong (U.S. $16, 4380), China (U.S. $2,804), India (U.S. $1,989); and Pakistan (U.S. $2,504) (PSEB 2005). This observation is recognized by a *Newsweek* report (5/11/2003) which in unequivocal terms which states that the obvious advantage of "shifting of grunt work to India" is cost-saving: "an entry-level recruit in an Indian call-center is hired for $3650 per annum, which is one-fifth of what an American employee can anticipate to get in the same level."

However for the purposes of neutrality, it is important to point out that these remuneration structures represent mutually-beneficial situations for both the local work force and the outsourcing corporations. Despite low salary levels, lower than the minimum wage in the U.S., these reflect the standard, and in some instances, fair rates according to the local human resource markets. This explains the tremendous growth of call centers in many countries, for instance in India where an estimated 1.2 million Indians, more than one percent of total population, are working in these remote-office BPOs and voice-based call centers. According to an estimate, the Indian call center sector is predicted to gross U.S. $ 21 billion by the year 2008 (Newsweek 5/11/2003).

Summing up, the innovative and ICT-driven call centers are generating bilateral and multiple benefits for US business concerns and the host countries through (a) creating employment opportunities for English-speaking and computer-literate work force, (b) spread of information technology, and (c) poverty alleviation, at least in the short term. In a wider perspective, this trend is accelerating globalization processes by enabling the lesser developed economies to integrate into the larger transnational global business networks.

Part Three: Political Economy of Call Centers

The preceding analyses implicitly identify the various structural forces which having pioneered this innovation stand as its principal users and beneficiaries. The following section utilizes these preliminary findings to build a holistic analysis of the ICT-enabled call center work environment. To develop some critical perspectives, I seek to uncover this multi-layered phenomenon, identify the major players in this sector, and evaluate the self-serving

mechanisms which modify global economic systems. In short, this section deals with the *political economy* of ICT-enabled call centers.

Vincent Mosco defines political economy as "the study of the social relations particularly power relations, that mutually constitutes the production, distribution, and consumption of resources" (Mosco 1996:25). This perspectives debate the presumed rationality of "a social power called capitalism" (Calabrese 2003), in assessing the general wellbeing levels of the actors in an economic system. The political economy perspective also "emphasizes power relations, resource allocation and issues of justice and policy reforms. It interrogates the systems of ownership and control and seeks to deepen understanding of the economic and political elites in their global and local interactions" (Dunn 2005).

With these standpoints in view, I identify intersections of dominant social powers which hold sway over the political economy of call centers. These are (a) neo-liberal capitalism, and (b) processes of de-culturalization. The innovative call center environment apparently serves to further consolidate the existing global power structures where capitalism functions "as a system of social production" (Wasko 2004). By bringing these critical "issues of ideology, power and domination to the fore" (Bettig 1996), I argue that the rise of the digitally-driven outsourcing initiatives needs to be evaluated from a political economy perspective.

(a) Neoliberal Capitalism

Innovations in contemporary global business practices represent capitalist behavior of U.S. transnational corporations, which function on the doctrine of "primacy of profits" (McChesney 2004). Ingrained in the capitalist ideology, these transnational corporations are in a continuous competition for lowest costs, cheapest inputs, maximum return on investments, and a relentless extension and consolidation of national and international market share. The growing trends to outsource dead-end jobs to offshore locations vividly illustrate this capitalist strategy in action. Western economies follow neoliberalism with the belief that "market can do no wrong" (McChesney 2004). This belief requires a critical appraisal. Neoliberal capitalism considers that *rationality,* as a cardinal feature of capitalist markets, empowers it to make rational decisions for common good. I dispute this assertion. It is problematic to accept this presupposed notion of market rationality when winners and losers are arbitrarily determined. In context of the digitally-driven call center sector, the US transnational companies are

undisputed winners in terms of profit levels, market reach, corporate convenience, and heightened strategic focus on core functions. The distant workforce that makes all this possible does not share benefits in the same magnitude.

The most pronounced implication of this scenario is that the ICT revolution has "reinvigorated the spirit of capitalism" (Calbrese 2003), through its stronghold on the industries of computing, telephony and allied information technologies. The present-day globalization processes are serving to foster "international economic integration and as a mechanism for promoting global liberal capitalism" (Thussu 2006). The emergent remote office outsourcing trends amplify that the "logic of capital has resulted in the concentration of ownership and control of communication systems in the hands of the richest members of the capitalist class" (Bettig 1996).

It is this "logic of capital", that utilizes ICT through sophisticated digital and voice-based networks, to best serve the U.S. transnational corporations by overcoming the spatial and temporal differences. The 12-hour time-zone difference between the U.S. and the overseas markets has been rendered irrelevant by ICT. The synergy between computing and information technology has revolutionized the global workplace by enabling the voice-based call centers work round the clock on 24:7:365 scales (Duening 2007; PSEB 2005). According to a *Newsweek* report, call centers operate in 24 time zones to provide uninterrupted sales, service, and other solutions to U.S. customers and vendors (*Newsweek* 5/11/2003). This capitalist mode of production has innovatively designed a digital work environment that never sleeps and evidently gives more to the neoliberal capitalist economies than what it receives in exchange.

(b) Anglophone Countries

I am of the view that the above-stated perspectives signify the implicit resurgence of an imperialistic mode in the neoliberal capitalist powers that govern the contemporary global economic system. Such imperialistic tendencies are verified by the hegemony of the English language and English speaking societies in the global business networks. I quote Thussu and Sarikakis who observe that "the language of British imperialism is now the lingua franca of U.S. hegemony, which dominates global international traffic" (2006).

English is *the* language of information technology, including the World Wide Web, software design, internet communication, and all other forms of communication patterns. This

supremacy distinctly divides the world into English and non-English speaking linguistic blocs. This split is reflected in the contemporary outsourcing trends. To support this viewpoint, I explore the job eligibility criteria for call center workforce.

The local third-party firms, which operate remote offices for U.S. business corporations recruit representatives on three criteria: (a) good English speaking ability and listening comprehension, (b) basic skills in computers and internet such as e-mail, chat-programs, and web browsing, and (c) polite and confident telephony skills. (Slay 2005; Dunn 2005; PSEB 2005; *Newsweek* 5/11/2003) I argue that these prerequisites for acquiring jobs as a lowly-paid back-office worker in an off-shore call center are a manifestation of an imperialistic design.

In order to establish this argument, I unpack this apparently simple wish-list. Firstly, acquiring computer skills requires at least working knowledge of English. Secondly, acquiring polite telephone skills to function as a sales representative, customer support worker, or a telemarketer demands that such a worker is reasonably conversant in the English language. Thirdly, a telemarketer can be *confident* only with good English speaking and understanding skills, since being off-shore in another country and hooked on to a voice-based communication system, makes him or her a worker in *absentia.* Being a call center worker implies that he or she is denied other forms of communication options such as facial expressions, body language or genial social mannerism. Thus it is imperative for a call center worker to possess superior English language ability, in order to acquire and retain a job in such a voice-based remote office.

Thus, it is unsurprising that majority of call centers today are based in English-speaking regions of the world, which are generally referred to as "Anglophone countries." Here, I refer again to Kearney's Global Service Location Index, (GSLI), according to which India, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Ireland, and Pakistan are ranked as preferred outsourcing choices for U.S. companies for their back-office operations. Excluding China which is preferred for product and manufacturing outsourcing, these countries have either been former British colonies, or have been exposed to English-speaking influences for long period of time, such as the south East Asian countries. Ireland likewise is an English speaking segment of the Great Britain. With large English-speaking and youthful labor force, these countries have emerged as a hub of U.S. outsourced activities.

Further, it is "useful to examine the residual effects of colonialism" (Dunn 2005). English language is undoubtedly the principal colonial legacy. This fact is affirmed from the vast stock of 'how to set-up a call center' manuals that are prepared by both the privately-run local third-party firms and the public sector which is eager to attract foreign investments into the country. I refer to two such public sources from Anglophone countries.

The government of Pakistan (PSEB 2005) in a bid to draw more U.S. outsourcing projects in the country assertively claims that English is the second or third language in Pakistan, which is taught in schools, even in the rural areas (PSEB 2005). Similarly, the government of Philippines expresses its interest in the BPO sector by claiming that "the country now boasts of an expansive telecommunications network and a highly productive and English-proficient Filipino workforce" (http://www.gov.ph/news/?i=18981).

Likewise, the government of India boasts of its large reservoir of English-speaking work force that makes it the world leader in this sector. Thussu and Sarikakis have summarized this fact in this observation: "one of the fastest growing industries in India is that of call centers--the uncharitable phrase 'electronic coolies': a 21st century version of indentured labor during British colonialism sums up the phenomenon rather well" (Thussu and Sarikakis 2006).

(c) Processes of De-Culturalization

Despite the immense savings in costs to U.S. transnational corporations, they face some indigenous challenges to their outsourcing initiative. The first one is economic in nature: there is widespread public resentment to the loss of U.S. jobs to overseas workers, since it is shrinking the local labor market and, is simultaneously making it more competitive. This dislike is confirmed in a *Newsweek* analysis which reports the "threat that cheap labor in India and in other low-wage countries posed a threat to costlier workers in the developed world was a central theme of America's 2004 presidential campaign" (*Economist* 7/26/2007).

The second challenge is cultural: some U.S. customers, associates or vendors of these companies, dislike talking to non-English agents or to those who speak English with foreign accents. This aversion has grown in reaction to a host of factors, particularly due to public concerns about loss of employment opportunities in the U.S., and also due discomfort with non-U.S. citizens in the backdrop of security concerns and terrorism threats. Despite this cultural anxiety, there is little that such U.S. customers can do. Most customer service

representatives or technical support agents responding on a 1-800 toll free number are in fact operating from an off-shore English-speaking country.

However, the *rationality* of markets and the *'logic of capital'* have resolved this cultural resistance through renewed innovations in their business systems. Firstly, the U.S. companies have augmented training standards in terms of lingual proficiency of the teleworkers, and vigilantly follow stringent quality control parameters. Secondly, the U.S. outsourced jobs are assigned only to those local operating firms which recruit teleworkers with adequate training in accent-free English skills and orientation of the U.S. society and way of life. (*Economist* 7/26/2007; Slay 2005; *Newsweek* 5/11/2003)

In response to these issues, and in order to remain sufficiently competitive for U.S. firms, the training programs are significantly improvised to make them more U.S.-specific. To illustrate this aspect, I refer to a training manual which instructs on 'how to set up a call center' (Slay 2005). It advises on adopting a two-pronged training strategy for the teleworkers in: (a) English-speaking skills, and (b) understanding of American idioms, dialects, and colloquialisms (Slay 2005). In addition to these job requirements, the teleworkers are not allowed to reveal their geographical locations to their customers. If asked about their whereabouts, the workers are instructed to politely state that due to security reasons, their exact geographical locations cannot be disclosed. Any deviation from this format is rare since all telephone calls are recorded for reasons of quality assurance or for the purposes of employees' evaluation.

This stress on the national anonymity of this back office workforce is an evidence of de-personalization and de-culturalization processes. I am of the view that these processes occur by default since the anonymity of teleworkers is inbuilt with in the design of these voice-based call centers. Due to their use of 1-800 toll-free or US domestic telephone numbers, a U.S. caller is usually not aware that the company's representative is located overseas. This unawareness in fact is desirable since these remote workplaces are designed to function as *virtual* U.S. workplace. The physical or geographic location is irrelevant. The emphasis is to ensure that US customers get round the clock efficient access and response.

Such business practices indicate that global neoliberalism is increasingly functioning "as an instrument of imperialist domination" (Tabb 2007). The doctrine of rationality and logic of market which the U.S. corporations follow in their dealings with regional business associates

can alternatively be interpreted as a reinvention of imperialism. This system requires that confidentiality of geographic locations be maintained and stringent U.S. and English intensive training be imparted to the distant workers.

Historically, the conventional structures of imperialist systems required territorial invasion of weaker regions of the world and exploitation of their abundant resources, including natural or human wealth. The institution of slavery is an extreme example of such systems. In contemporary time, the imperialist systems being cyber in form are non-territorial and invisible yet more invasive. The abundant human resources continue to be under-valued and exploited for neoliberal corporate ends. Hence the processes of capital accumulation are continually being accelerated on a global scale through convergent technologies.

(d) Assuming Pseudo-identities

It is evident that the success of the neoliberal business entities is contingent upon the de-culturalization of the local workforce. Their cultural detachment in the form of accent-neutrality is a prerequisite to the continuance of their employment. Further, the imperialist work doctrines require that an Asian or Irish or south American worker assume a pseudo-American identity.

To ensure that such an ICT-enabled workplace performs effectively, it the U.S. corporations require that the teleworkers are generally aware about the U.S. and its people. Thus besides intensive training in lingual skills, these non-U.S. teleworkers are trained in general facts about the U.S., including its music, history and politics, popular foods and festivals, etc. Interestingly, depending on the nature of tele-work, some call centers agents are also given orientation on such diverse topics as popular toys, video games, typical bedtime stories of American children (Slay 2005).

I refer to a *Newsweek* report on U.S. outsourcing experience (5/11/2003) which states that certain India-based call centers require their teleworkers to undergo "28 hours of crash courses" in learning about a variety of areas concerning American lifestyle, such as U.S. baseball and basketball teams, popular television shows like 'Friends' and personalities like Jerry Bruckheimer, etc. This orientation also includes essential knowledge about U.S. states and famous cities, so that a telemarketer or solution-provider is able to answer such unexpected questions as "where is New England?" (*Newsweek* 5/11/2003).

It is apparent that America-focused training regimes like these are intended to create an illusion of an American workplace in the minds of the disgruntled customers of U.S. business concerns. Hence, for offshore teleworkers "acting like a typical American is a part of his job" (ibid). Similar training strategy is adopted by local outsourcing firms in New Delhi which train "Indian grads to adopt American personas and drudge through back-office work for corporations on the other side of the world" (ibid).

It is for such strategic reasons that training manual on 'how to set up a call center' stresses on acquiring a U.S.-based infrastructure, which in reality is only virtual in nature. I refer to the contents of one such manual which stresses that:

"Be virtually in America ….You have to be *virtually* in the U.S.A….Get a virtual phone line on the web at www.mysuperphone.com…. Use a domestic U.S.A. number or the toll-free number 1-800 numbers… Get a virtual Manhattan office or any major U.S.A. city virtual office….You should have a Yahoo Ticker telling them the weather in Manhattan….Set the clocks on computers to Manhattan time….You must know the culture of the city of your virtual office…..Use ICQ with Manhattan residents" (Slay 2005).

Yielding to the capitalist pressures to remain anonymous about their geographical whereabouts, many call centers create a pseudo-American business configuration in a bid to appear like a localized U.S. customer service center. Thus some local outsourcing firms incorporate their business in the U.S.; acquire legal tax status by applying for a W-9 and a tax identification number; use U.S. voice mail and fax numbers, and use U.S. email addresses such as by subscribing one from http://mail.yahoo.com. (Slay 2005).

Conclusion

In the analyses presented above, I have adopted a holistic approach to understand the political economy of voice-based call centers. To prepare the ground for such an exploration, I have tried to widen the perspectives associated with globalization processes and their synergy with developments in information and communications technology. This dimension clarifies the structural forces that dominate the confluence between ICT-enabled globalization and innovations in global business practices. I reiterate that the ICT revolution has "reinvigorated the spirit of capitalism" (Calabrese 2003), through its stronghold on the industries of computing, telephony and allied information technologies.

I have employed an illustrative example of voice-based call centers to demonstrate that this innovation mode of outsourcing of dead-end jobs is a multilayered phenomenon, with significant intersections from neoliberal capitalism, imperialistic tendencies, colonial legacy and the hegemonic sway of the English language and English speaking societies. By bringing such critical "issues of ideology, power and domination to the fore" (Bettig 1996), I conclude that the advantages accruing from these call-centers are asymmetrically shared between the outsourcing corporations and the remote workforce. More importantly, this exploitative system is fiercely de-culturalizing the societies of lesser-developed regions.

Since this is a technology-driven sector, some predict its fate to be similar to the dot.com bubble (*Newsweek* 5/12/2003). Though this may not necessarily happen, the fragility of this sector does raise some questions: What will happen when these call centers have outlived their utility, or when a more cost-effective option becomes available to the U.S. and western transnational companies? What about legitimate rights of these teleworkers, (such as job security, insurance and or medical coverage, and post-retirement benefits) incase the sector is abandoned for more efficient options? **"**What's the long-term impact of high-tech outsourcing? How will innovation be managed in the future?" (Popkin and Iyengar 2007). I am of the view that such, and in fact many more justified questions emerge from the above-presented critical perspectives. I bring them up with the belief that the main function of a "critical approach is to challenge the legitimacy of debate if it fails to serve the interests of the broader public" (McChesney 2004).

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